The Real Thomas Paine
—a review, by Martha Spiegelman

The late JOSEPH M. HENTZ, author of this book, was a TPF member who had written articles for the Bulletin. He died in January 2011.

An apt subtitle to this book could be: The Founder. Chiefly, here, Paine is the author not only of Common Sense, but also of the Declaration of Independence. The Real Thomas Paine1 concerns Paine's role in the creation of the new nation with its written constitution, and reviews Common Sense, where is found the "blueprint." A valuable section, also, is the summary of The American Crisis, the 16 papers that supported the cause of independence throughout the war. Hentz claims Paine's primacy in establishing independence, forming a democratic republic, promoting equal and human rights, and giving confidence to the ordinary person to self-govern. Hentz asserts that not one of the other founders, not even Benjamin Franklin, played the initiating and sustaining part that belongs only to Paine. In chapter 4, "The Plan to Create the United States," we find 16 elements of the Common Sense plan, which can be combined to form the three indispensables: 1. independence (separation, independence, a declaration); 2. self-government (eliminate royalty/aristocracy, freedom, democracy, equality); 3. a republic (written constitution, representative government). Years later Paine wrote that independence and a democratic form of government based on widest suffrage were always his object in writing Common Sense. It is, indeed, all there in his pamphlet.

Hentz starts off with an important two-page Paine article, "A Serious Thought" signed by HUMANUS (Pennsylvania Journal, October 18, 1775). "When I reflect on these*, I hesitate not for a moment to believe that the Almighty will finally separate America from Britain. Call it independence or what you will, if it is the cause of God and humanity it will go on." ["Britain's atrocities in the East Indies and the African slave trade] William Van der Weyde, editor of The Patriot's edition of Paine's writings2, calls this article "the very first suggestion of Independence." Alfred Young, historian of the American Revolution, notes that 1765-75 was a period of political resistance and an awakening of interest and class-specific consciousness among the "people-out-of-doors", but independence was not proposed, at least not in writing among and for the "ordinary people".3 Hentz notes that separation and independence were discussed, but largely in negative terms, "...to disavow, or avoid, or oppose, or shun, or repudiate, or refrain from, or as hobgoblins." (p. 21)

Hentz quotes from Common Sense, "Let a continental conference be held...let their business be to frame a continental charter or Charter of the United Colonies", and thus Paine was first to propose a constitution. "None of the so-called founding fathers was calling for a constitution which would effect the unification of the thirteen separate colonies." (p. 25)

During the period between Common Sense and the Declaration, Hentz presents some interesting information. --- Paine's Forester's Letters, written in April and May of 1776, reply to attacks and loyalist appeals (April, Pennsylvania Gazette) by Cato (the Rev. Dr. William Smith) on the ideas in Common Sense. Paine roundly answered all of Cato's quarrels, and importantly, "...held fast to the principle that when a new country is being formed, the mode of government selected is strictly up to the people." (p. 37)

--- Later, Hentz reviews a chronology that seems to bring Paine into a central role (the central role) in the Declaration. June 7: Richard Henry Lee of Virginia proposed Independence in the Continental Congress; the vote was postponed to July 1. June 10: the Congress appointed a committee to draft a Declaration to inform the world of the matter. June 28: the committee presented its draft. July 2: the unanimous vote occurred (after some days of revisions and persuasions). During June: Paine published his "A Dialogue between the Ghost of General Montgomery just arrived from the Elysian Fields; and an American Delegate, in a Wood near Philadelphia". (Van der Weyde says it was printed as a pamphlet just before Congress appointed the draft committee.) Montgomery had died in the battle with the British, at Quebec, 1775. He urges the delegate to choose independence.

"Go, then, and awaken the Congress to a sense of their importance; you have no time to lose...The decree is finally gone forth. Britain and America are now distinct empires." Hentz's view is that before or while a draft committee was at work, a Declaration was drafted (The decree is...gone forth), and that draft would have been by Paine. (Hentz, pp. 109-112)

For Hentz, Paine is the "first Founder": he was the leader who proposed the idea while the others were good patriots and "following Founders." Hentz also quotes Alfred Owen Aldridge, "Paine was literally the first to call publicly for the creation of a republic in France as he had previously been the first in America." (Hentz, p. 154) Both Thomas Jefferson and John Adams come in for criticism. Jefferson is called the "reluctant patriot," spending most of his time in Virginia until May 1776 tending to personal affairs and writing a constitution for Virginia. According to Hentz, he expressed no wish for separation and up to this time wanted "home rule" and a "commonwealth" status for the colonies, nor did he oppose slavery. (p. 89) As for Adams, he is depicted as an eventual supporter of independence for a country that would be governed by property-owning elites.

While we know of nothing direct that will turn Paine into the actual drafter of the Declaration, several other writers have presented indirect evidence that Paine at least had a role in its composition. The best-known advocate is Joseph Lewis, and Hentz often cites his book4, using the same side-by-side analysis to show matching points in Common Sense and the Declaration (Hentz, pp. 230-268). Another writer, the late Klara Rukshina, historian and Paine expert, and a TPF member and director, was working just before her death on an article to demonstrate the complete relationship between Common Sense and the Declaration. Like Lewis and Hentz, she noted the "anti-slavery clauses" which were in the original draft as presented to Congress but deleted before its adoption. Rukshina has remarked...how could it be possible that exactly (her emphasis) the same arguments, in the same order (as in CS), could appear in the Declaration if it was drafted by a different person (Jefferson) without having CS in front of him? Also, she goes on, how could Jefferson ever have written the anti-slavery clauses?
William Cobbett would finally write, "Whoever wrote the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Paine was its author."
And Benjamin Franklin, in a letter, wrote, "You, Thomas Paine, are more responsible than any other living person on this continent for the creation of what we call the United States of America."

1 Published in 2010, by iUniverse, 305 pages; available at book sellers and at www.amazon.com. Regrettably, the book does not contain an Index.

6 *Bulletin of Thomas Paine Friends*, vol. 13, no. 2, Summer 2012