

## PAINE IN THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

BY LESLIE STEPHEN

**W**HAT was the real value and significance of Paine's work? Paine, of course, more than anyone else, represents for Englishmen the principles of 1789; and in particular the connection of those principles with the War of Independence in America. What, then, were his antecedents and his achievements?

Paine, in the first place, was the son of a poor Quaker in Thetford. The Quaker spirit undoubtedly had much to do with his development. He was, like Franklin, a Quaker minus the orthodox creed, as in later years Carlyle was a Calvinist who had dropped the dogma. With the mysticism, indeed, which distinguished the earlier members of the sect, Paine had no sympathy. It was replaced in him as in Franklin by the metaphysical Deism of the Eighteenth Century. But he certainly imbibed the practical sentiment which made Quakers take so honorable and conspicuous a part in all the philanthropic movements of his time, and shared their aversion to all forms and ecclesiastical institutions.

## WRITINGS OF THOMAS PAINE

The Quaker religion, he declared in the "Age of Reason," was that which approached most nearly to true Deism. A contempt for the pomps and vanities of the world, an enthusiasm for the brotherhood of mankind, and a reverence for the rights of individual consciences, may be expressed in terms of George Fox as of Thomas Paine. For the "inner light" we have only to substitute a metaphysical dogmatism, less emotional but equally imperative.

Paine, however, from his youth must have hung very lightly to any religious sect. There are vague indications that he preached, but his sermons, if any, are with the snows of last year. Nor is there the least proof that he was specially affected by the sight of the evils of the day. A lad of nine years old was probably more pleased by the drums of the regiments returning from the Highlands—if, indeed, any of them passed through Thetford—than shocked by the blood-stained uniforms of the instruments of Cumberland's vengeance.

Certainly at the age of eighteen or nineteen he became for a short time a privateersman, which would hardly be the choice of a premature philanthropist. His career as a staymaker and afterwards as an exciseman is naturally obscure.

## LIFE AND APPRECIATIONS

We can see dimly by that he had ambitions and that he neglected his business. He was a member of a jovial political club at Lewes, wrote songs and comic poems, and argued with great vivacity on behalf (it seems) of Wilkes and liberty.

English radicalism was slowly stirring to life after the profound calm of the middle of the century. Paine, we may guess, read the English translations of Rousseau's "Social Contract" and discourse on the "Inequality of Mankind," which were the prophetic utterances of the new-born spirit. If he did not read them he learned their formulæ.

He became conspicuous enough among his fellows to be put forward as their spokesman in an agitation for an increase of salaries. The position was dangerous, for of all classes of men, excisemen were the last who could count upon popular sympathy, and a request for more money rarely conciliates superiors. It is not surprising that Paine soon found himself an exciseman out of place. He had one resource. Paine's intellectual temper was that of a mathematician, and he had at some period acquired a knowledge of science. He got some teaching from two self-educated men, Benjamin Martin

## WRITINGS OF THOMAS PAINE

and the well-known astronomer, Thomas Ferguson, who both gave lectures in London.

It was possibly through them that he became known to Franklin, already famous for having snatched the lightning from heaven, and soon to snatch the scepter from kings. Armed with a letter of introduction from Franklin, Paine sailed to Philadelphia toward the end of 1774, intending to set up a school. He became editor of a magazine at the humble salary of £50 a year; but within a few months found much livelier occupation.

When Paine reached America a Congress was already sitting in Philadelphia. The skirmish at Lexington (nineteenth April, 1775) and the Battle of Bunker Hill (seventeenth June) were followed by the choice of Washington to be Commander-in-chief of the provincial armies. Paine during the autumn wrote his "Common Sense," which appeared in January, 1776, and made him famous at a blow. In three months 120,000 copies were sold, and it became the recognized manifesto of the Revolutionary party; an exciseman with such training only as was to be had at Thetford had become the spokesman of a nation in which hardly a year before he had been almost a foreigner. What was the secret

## LIFE AND APPRECIATIONS

of his success? In the first place, it was that Paine was endowed with the most valuable instinct that a journalist can possess.

Americans had up to the last moment been declaring that they had no wish for separation. Franklin asserted that he had heard no such desire expressed by "any person, drunk or sober." Paine says much the same elsewhere, but in the pamphlet he also says that he never met a man in England or America who did not expect that separation would come sooner or later.

A newspaper, it is said, has thriven by saying a little better what everybody is already saying. It is a still greater triumph to say what everybody is going to say to-morrow, but does not quite dare to say to-day.

A quaint illustration of the obvious principle occurs in Coleridge's "Literary Remains." When reading Leighton, he says, he seems to be "only thinking his own thoughts over again." On the next page he expresses the same opinion by saying that he almost believes Leighton to have been actually an inspired writer. Nothing is so impressive as revelation of our own thoughts.

When armed resistance had actually begun, when the colonists had formed a league and

## WRITINGS OF THOMAS PAINE

chosen a commander-in-chief, it must, one would suppose, have been hard for any man to keep up the pretense of disavowing a wish for independence. It could be merely a way of throwing the responsibility upon the mother country; and the time for such special pleading passed with the first outbreak of war. What was needed then was a clear, distinctive unveiling of the hitherto masked conviction.

Paine, in a literary sense, was the man who "belled the cat." He had an audience ready to hail him as a prophet because he was an echo, not of their words, but of their thoughts. But he also put the case with a clearness and vigor which is the more remarkable from his entire want of literary experience. His method is characteristic. There is less than one might expect of such rhetoric as is called inflammatory. A native American would probably have dwelt more upon specific grievances, but Paine had no special personal knowledge of such things.

He takes them for granted rather than expatiates upon them. He speaks like a man insisting upon an absolutely demonstrable scientific truth. The thesis which he had to establish is simply, "It is time to part"; and the proof is drawn from the obvious designs of Providence as

## LIFE AND APPRECIATIONS

manifested in geography. It is absurd to suppose that a continent can be perpetually governed by an island. Nature does not make a satellite bigger than its primary planet.

When the quarrel has once broken out, compromise becomes obviously absurd. Such differences cannot be patched up by any settlement. To come to terms for the moment could only be to leave the quarrel to the next generation. England is small, America a vast continent; therefore English rule of America is in a position of unstable equilibrium. Once upset it, and you can never again balance the pyramid on its apex. That is the substance of an argument which undoubtedly deserves, too, the title of "Common Sense." It rests upon broad, undeniable facts and is, of course, backed up by sufficient reference to the abominations of the British Government. But Paine also provides his argument with certain prolegomena which supersede any reference to expediency. Sir Henry Maine has traced the social contract theory from its sources in Roman jurisprudence to its transfiguration by Rousseau.

Rousseau, he says, transmitted it to Jefferson. It appears, therefore, in the Declaration of Independence, upon which Paine had, perhaps, some

## WRITINGS OF THOMAS PAINE

influence. He had expounded it fully in "Common Sense." Starting from the natural equality of man and the regular hypothesis of a small body of men meeting "in some sequestered part of the earth," and making a bargain as to their rights, we get at once a clean-cut theory of government and a demonstration of the gross absurdity of kings and aristocrats. It is plainly impossible to prove the value of the British Constitution by *a priori* reasoning.

To Paine, therefore, the American Revolution was already the promulgation of the "rights of man" in the most absolute form. The colonies revolted, according to him, not because charters had been infringed or specific injuries inflicted upon merchants; but in virtue of principles as true as the propositions of Euclid, and applicable not only to Englishmen or Americans, but to man as man.

So long as all patriots were agreed to turn out George III, it mattered little what metaphysical principles they chose to postulate as the ground of their claims; whether they fought in the name of the great charter or of the rights of man. The more sweeping the principle announced the more effective the war-cry.

Paine's doctrine covered claims enough, and

## LIFE AND APPRECIATIONS

if it covered rather too many, that was for the moment unimportant. He could speak as if his enemies were not only wanting in prudence but denying the plainest dictates of pure reason.

Paine, it must be added, acted in the spirit of his doctrines through the war. At intervals he published the series of pamphlets called, collectively, the "Crisis," which, though of such various degrees of merit, show the same characteristic quality.

If overweening confidence in one's opinions is a doubtful merit in a philosopher, it is undoubtedly valuable in the supporter of a precarious enterprise. "These are the times that try men's souls" was the opening—it became proverbial of the most famous of these productions.

It was written at a time when the cause was apparently in great danger, and it was followed by an unexpected success. Washington, it is said, had the paper distributed to be read throughout his army, and in that sign they conquered. The secret of Paine's power is given in a phrase from the same paper. "My own line of reasoning is to myself as straight and clear as a ray of light."

Paine himself took part in active service until he was appointed secretary to a committee of

## WRITINGS OF THOMAS PAINE

Congress; and his words have not unfrequently the genuine ring as of one speaking actually under fire. The unanimous opinion of his companions, and especially Washington's declarations, leave no doubt that they did more than any other pamphlets to rouse the American spirit. Paine, with the calm self-complacency pardonable, perhaps, in a man who had thus suddenly sprung into fame, held in later years that his own pen had done as much service as Washington's sword. He might fairly claim whatever credit belongs to the man who throws himself unflinchingly into the defense of a great cause. He had got into certain difficulties in his official character which showed at worst that a desire to expose a dishonest transaction had led him to disregard diplomatic proprieties.

He had blurted out a statement about French help to the colonies previous to the declaration of war, which had to be disavowed, and which forced him to resign his post. But he had staked his fortunes unreservedly on the issue of the war and deserved reward the more that he had gained nothing by his pamphlets.

He had given up the copyright of his publications to increase their circulation; and the reward which he ultimately received was certainly

## LIFE AND APPRECIATIONS

not extravagant. New York generously presented him with an estate which it took from a Tory, and Pennsylvania gave him £500.

When the plain issue of the war was finally settled, Paine's occupation was gone. Work had to be done in which mathematical demonstrations of the rights of man were irrelevant. To form the separate colonies into a nation, to reconcile their jealousies and make such compromises as would practically work, was a task for men of very different qualities. The *Federalist*, now the most famous literary record of the guiding principles of that achievement, belongs to another order of thought. The writers follow the lead of Montesquieu instead of Rousseau; and any comparison with Paine's work would be absurd. His merit is to have raised a war-cry.

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The main secret of Paine's strength is, I think, the same throughout. Like other men who have made a remarkable success, he combined qualities not often found together. He was an idealist, endowed with a strong view of common sense. He was by nature a man of science, who imagines the method of Euclid to be applicable to all topics of speculation, and so falls in love with a good mathematical axiom that

## WRITINGS OF THOMAS PAINE

he despises the trifling difficulty of applying it to concrete facts. The facts have to bend or be ignored. The type is common enough in the French theorists of the revolutionary movement, but there is something generally uncongenial about it to our rougher English minds. We rather hate symmetry, and our suspicions are roused by any appearance of logic.