

Citizen of the world: a brief survey of the life and times of Thomas Paine (1737-1809)

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The lecture below by World Socialist Web Site correspondent Ann Talbot was presented on September 24 to a meeting in Britain organised by the Rotherham Metropolitan District Local History Council, as part of the Rotherham Arts Festival.

In the winter of 1788, a small team of men were building a bridge across the river Don in Rotherham. The fact that before Christmas a stream of distinguished visitors had been to see the construction was an indication that this was no ordinary bridge and its designer was no ordinary engineer. Leading the project was Thomas Paine, author of *Common Sense* and *The American Crisis*, which had been read to Washington's soldiers before the Battle of Trenton on Christmas Day 1776.

"These are the times that try men's souls," it began, "The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands it *now*, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph." This was Tom Paine, the friend of Washington and Jefferson, Tom Paine, citizen of the world.

The bridge he was building was hardly less revolutionary than the man; it was an iron bridge. An iron bridge had been made at Coalbrookdale in 1779 and they were being discussed in France, but they were still a new concept. The full potential of the new material had scarcely been exploited.

With the backing of Walker's of Rotherham, a company that had a capital value of £200,000, it seemed that Paine was on the brink of winning financial success and settling down to a prosperous retirement. But the times that had tried Tom Paine's soul were not yet over. Within three years, his bridge-building projects were laid aside, with the latest model rusting in a London pub yard, and Paine was back in politics.

Working by candle light late into the night at the Angel Inn, Islington, he was putting the finishing touches to the *Rights of Man*, the book that would answer Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the French Revolution*—the book in which Burke had condemned the French revolution, social equality and the universal rights of man. These two books redefined the shape of politics in Britain and beyond. Edmund Burke was a personal friend; he had been among the Whig worthies that had made their way to Masborough to see work on the bridge in progress. But their conceptions of the French revolution were entirely at odds.

The old relationships of the Whig party in which men of many classes had been united behind an amorphous political creed would not bear the weight of the political events in France or the social and economic developments in Britain. Burke very correctly saw in the French revolution a threat to the existing property relations. It was a threat that was soon to find expression on the streets of Sheffield and neighbouring towns as working people marched in support of the French revolution. In those years, Britain came closer to revolution than is often thought. Had revolution succeeded in Britain, three progressive democratic republics would have shaped the modern world in a very different way.

"A share in two revolutions is living to some purpose!" Thomas Paine wrote to George Washington in 1789. Two was perhaps an underestimate. Paine participated in three revolutions—the American Revolution, the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution. He helped to form the world in which we live. This lecture will trace the continuing political contribution of this remarkable man.

So who was Thomas Paine?

The bare facts of his biography are simple, if sketchy in places. They have been rehearsed in many books since 1892, when the first authoritative life of Paine appeared. *The Life of Thomas Paine* by Moncure Conway remains the standard work of biography. An abolitionist and supporter of Abraham Lincoln, Conway was a sympathetic chronicler, although sometimes wrong in detail. He was the first president of the Thomas Paine National Historical Society, which has preserved Paine's house in New Rochelle. More modern works of scholarship may be more accurate but have often dealt with only certain aspects of Paine's life—usually the American years or the French experience—but have seldom brought the two together. Most notable among these is Eric Foner's *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*. The best recent study to deal with the whole of Paine's life is John Keane's *Tom Paine: a political life*.

Paine's life story reflects the experience of a new social type: self-educated men from poor backgrounds who were making their way in industry, science and, in Paine's case, politics. He was the most brilliant example of this new phenomenon.

He was born in Thetford, East Anglia, on January 29, 1737, the son of a Quaker stay maker, Joseph Pain, and Frances Cocke, who was an Anglican. Like his sister, who died in infancy, Paine was probably baptised into the Church of England, but no record survives. He inherited neither his mother's Anglicanism nor his father's Quaker beliefs, but a biblical robustness of language is evidence of his early upbringing.

He was educated at Thetford Grammar School. As a freeman of the town, his father could send the boy to the Grammar School without paying the 10s fee levied on those who lived outside the borough, but they still had to find the money for his paper, quills and ink, which was a struggle.

Like many boys of his background, Paine left school at the age of 12 to become an apprentice. In Paine's case, he was apprenticed to his father as a stay maker. Bored with this profession, or aware that it was a declining industry, Paine left home and shipped aboard a privateer in 1756. Fortunately, his father rushed to London and dissuaded him, because the ship he had chosen, *The Terrible*, was captured by a rival French privateer on that voyage and only 17 of its crew survived.

Briefly, Paine worked as a stay maker in London, but the following year he joined the crew of another privateer—*The King of Prussia*—and this time his father did not stop him from sailing. This was the period of the Seven Years War with France. After six months, Paine was back on shore with about £30 in his pocket.

Rather than making a second voyage, he used what must have been to

him a vast fortune to acquire an education in science and philosophy at public lectures in London. At a time when large sections of society were excluded from a university education, this was the form that higher education took for many. For Paine it was a life-changing experience, as he was later to testify. At this period in his life, Paine was not interested in politics. The world of official politics was corrupt. It alienated him. Science was his way into politics. Many of those with whom he associated held advanced political and social ideas. It was a short step from applying rational thought to the universe to applying it to the organisation of society.

But Paine still had to earn a living and soon settled as a stay maker in Kent. Here he married a local girl, but she died in childbirth. Now a widower, Paine decided to become an exciseman. He no doubt hoped that this minor branch of the civil service would provide him with secure employment. This was not to be. Within a few years he was sacked, probably because of a senior officer's dishonesty.

Out of work, Paine had to go to London and petition for reinstatement. The following year, he was reinstated but still had to wait for a post. In the meantime, he made a living teaching for less than a labourer's pay. His stay in London allowed him to mix in scientific circles again. Among those he met was Benjamin Franklin. It was a meeting that was to prove very fruitful for both men and for posterity.

Finally, an excise post turned up in Lewes, Sussex. Here, something of the mature Paine begins to emerge for the first time. Married once more, he began to campaign for higher pay for excisemen and became involved in local politics.

He became a member of the Society of Twelve that elected town officials such as the constable and the pinder. He also participated in Vestry meetings that organised local poor relief, road repair and street lighting. Lewes was no Venice, but the experience was useful to Paine in giving him practical experience of politics of a distinctly republican kind.

He was also a member of the Headstrong Club, which met at the White Hart to discuss local, national and international politics, and in the process consume a good deal of ale and oysters. It was here that Paine probably first became acquainted with the issues involved in the conflict between Britain and its American colonies.

The local paper, whose editor was a member of the Headstrong Club, reprinted American pamphlets attacking the British government and was a supporter of John Wilkes, who received a triumphal welcome to Lewes in August 1770. Wilkes's commitment to radical politics proved short-lived, but this was Paine's first experience of a popular political movement against privilege and tyranny.

Paine's time in Lewes was brought to an end by bankruptcy and separation from his second wife. In 1774, approaching middle age, with no settled employment, he did what many others had done before him, and many were to do after him—he sailed to America. He arrived better equipped than many emigrants, however, since he had in his pocket a letter of introduction from Benjamin Franklin.

In Philadelphia, the unemployed exciseman found himself the editor of a new journal, *The Pennsylvania Magazine*. If Lewes had been his introduction to politics, this was his introduction to journalism. Paine's journalistic career began as the conflict between Britain and her colonies was reaching its climax.

Paine's articles during this period were often critical of British policy towards the colonies, but he did not yet advocate independence. Almost no one did. Americans thought of themselves as British. They objected to their treatment at the hands of the colonial authorities because they thought their rights as Englishmen were being infringed. All this changed on April 19, 1775, when Major John Pitcairn ordered British troops to open fire on a group of American militiamen outside the Lexington meeting house. The battle of Lexington, as it became known, was a turning point in Anglo-American relations.

Congress issued a call to arms and put George Washington in charge of its forces. Despite the resort to arms, many Americans still thought a settlement was possible and did not openly speak of independence. It was Paine who dared put the thought into words in his pamphlet *Common Sense*, which appeared in January 1776.

The first edition sold out in two weeks and pirate editions appeared. It caught the mood not only in America but all over Europe. Editions were even published in Russia.

People had called for American independence before. Paine was not the first. What was important about Paine's call was the timing and his conception of what an independent America should be.

Paine succeeded in crystallising a still-amorphous idea. He gave political expression to a conception that was only just beginning to emerge. In doing so, he set the terms of the debate in the country at large and in Congress.

He ridiculed the very idea of monarchy and turned the political debate in a decisively republican direction. Until Paine wrote *Common Sense*, no one had really thought that it was possible to maintain a republican form of government on a large scale. Until then, republics had been restricted to city-states like Venice or, at the largest, the cantons of Switzerland. But from the beginning, Paine was clear that he was talking about a federal republic embracing the entire nation. This had never been done before. Paine can be said to have significantly shaped the world in which we still live in the twenty-first century because he envisaged America in terms of a modern transcontinental republic.

That would have been no mean achievement, but Paine went further: he identified the struggle of the American colonists against the British monarchy as an international question. "The cause of America is the cause of mankind," he wrote. He identified it with the struggle against colonial oppression in Asia and Africa and against domestic tyranny in Europe. America was to be an asylum for mankind.

Paine's hopes might have come to nothing if the revolutionary forces had been defeated in those first months. And there was every appearance that they would be. Ill-trained, ill-equipped and with their morale plummeting at every defeat, the odds were against them. But Paine's writing played a vital role in steadying the nerve of the army by defining what they were fighting for.

In a series of pamphlets called the *American Crisis*, he was instrumental in raising the political consciousness of ordinary soldiers in a way that had never been attempted since the English Civil War.

The first *American Crisis* was read to Washington's soldiers assembling at Trenton, preparing to face highly trained Hessian mercenaries. The American victory that followed did not end the war, but it proved that British power was not invincible. The war continued for another six years, but just as Paine had defined the struggle with Britain as a struggle for independence, so he defined how the ensuing war should be fought.

It was to be a war of citizens who thought of themselves as political beings and, above all, equals. These were dangerous ideas for the *ancien regimes* of Europe.

With the end of the revolutionary war in America, Paine was temporarily able to return to his first love—science. He threw himself into projects to build bridges, to set up lightening rods, and to investigate natural phenomena. For Paine this was in no way separate from his political life. He saw science as a universal civilising force that was capable of creating a prosperous, peaceful world.

Settled in New York, he began to develop a scheme for bridging the Harlem River. He needed two things—technical support and a sponsor. The first he got from John Hall, a self-educated Englishman who had worked for Boulton and Watt, John Wilkinson, Banks and Onions, and Walker's of Rotherham.

It was in this period that Paine began to develop plans for an iron bridge and exhibited a model of one at the Pennsylvania state house. But it was

questionable whether the American iron industry could supply him with what he needed. Europe, where the iron industry was more developed, and large trees in short supply, was the place to be. In 1787, Paine left for Paris where he presented his model and plans at the Academy of Sciences. It was met with enthusiasm, but this was a bad time for building bridges in Paris since the government was virtually bankrupt. Every scheme put forward at this time fell through. Paine's was no exception.

He returned to England—looking for “practical Iron men.” And the most practical—certainly the best capitalised—was Walker's of Rotherham. The firm sent representatives to London to view the design. By October 1788, Paine was at work on a large-scale model at Masborough. He was to erect a bridge across the River Don near the house of the local MP, Francis Foljambe. This project never came to completion, but Paine, still with the backing of Walker's, decided to exhibit the bridge in London with a larger project in mind—bridging the Thames itself.

I am sure there are many here who know more about building bridges and iron making and about the history of the Walker's iron company than I do, but the question I intend to address is:

Why was a “practical Iron man” like Walker working with Paine, who so lately had been leading a revolution against the government of his country?

To understand this, we must understand the political and social relations of the period. The American War of Independence had been enormously popular among wide sections of the British population at all levels of society. They had identified with the struggle of the American colonists against a government that they recognised as corrupt and oppressive. Paine could discuss politics frankly with Walker, as their correspondence shows.

The Working Class Movement Library in Salford contains a copy of *The Trial of Thomas Paine* inscribed to Thomas Walker, in which Walker himself has written:

“How instinctively conscious the supporters of despotism are that the whole system is fraud—wrong and error—if they were conscious that it was right they would court enquiry.”

Paine had little more than \$1,000 to his name, but men of capital were prepared to support his engineering schemes and sympathised with his political ideals. The spread of industry and a more equitable political system were understood to be mutually reinforcing. Men and women of different social backgrounds and fortunes could regard themselves as united in a common Whig cause. Not a party in the modern sense, since it did not have specific programme or organisation, the Whigs reflected a broadly based political outlook.

All that changed in the space of a few months as Paine was exhibiting his bridge in London. The events in France during the summer of 1789 did not immediately cause alarm in Britain. In June, the Third Estate resisted the king. In July, the population of Paris seized arms and captured the Bastille. In August, the National Assembly abolished serfdom and began to draw up a Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizens based on the American model. Whigs in England welcomed these changes.

By spring of the following year, opinion was sharply polarised. The catalyst in this change was a book—Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the French Revolution*. Edmund Burke was a Whig politician and political propagandist. He was a personal friend of Paine's. Paine had often dined with him and wrote to him enthusiastically while on a brief trip to France. Burke had spent most of his political life on what would be thought of, in modern terms, as the left of politics. If he had died at 60, history would have remembered him as a radical who supported enfranchising Catholics and dissenters, wanted home rule for Ireland, opposed slavery, impeached Warren Hastings for plundering India, favoured Parliamentary reform, attacked governmental corruption, tried to curb the power of the monarchy, and backed the American Revolution. But in the course of his 61st year, Burke wrote *Reflections on the French Revolution*, the book on

which his reputation rests, and in which he denounced every principle of the revolution and the Enlightenment, especially social equality. He particularly feared its internationalism.

He would, he said, “abandon his best friends and join with his worst enemies,” to prevent the contagion of French ideas spreading to Britain. And this was exactly what he did. He split the Whigs and broke with the friends of a lifetime who continued to support the French Revolution. Paine was one of them.

What had appeared initially as a personal quarrel was a political turning point that realigned British politics. Burke recognised that Whig politics as it had grown out of resistance to the Stuarts in the seventeenth century was at an end. From the English Civil War onwards, it had been possible to maintain an alliance between artisans and labourers on the one hand and landed aristocrats, City oligarchs and, later, industrialists on the other. Even in the course of the eighteenth century, Whig magnates had felt able to use the economic grievances of the labouring classes in extra-parliamentary protests for their own political purposes. The French Revolution, and perhaps more fundamentally, the Industrial Revolution, brought that period to a close because the Industrial Revolution had created a working class and the French Revolution had shown what the urban masses could do. It is Burke's distinction to have been first to recognise this political shift. With Burke's *Reflections*, we are on the threshold of modern British class politics.

The last seven years of Burke's life were spent in campaigning to redirect British foreign and domestic policy. He succeeded in doing so. William Pitt, “the Younger,” publicly aligned himself with Burke and waged a relentless war against France while mercilessly repressing any sign of resistance at home.

This turn of events was the more remarkable since there was not a single person of talent and enlightenment who did not sympathise with the revolution. Poets, scientists, industrialists and politicians were among its most illustrious supporters, but there were also masses of ordinary people who formed political societies throughout Britain in solidarity with the French Revolution. Burke's *Reflections* sold 19,000 copies, but *The Rights of Man*, Paine's reply to it, sold 200,000. No pamphlet war like it had been seen since the 1640s.

During the American Revolution, it was still possible for Burke's conservative brand of Whiggism to support the revolution, since many Americans thought of themselves as Englishmen fighting to preserve their rights under the ancient constitution dating back to Magna Carta and enshrined in common law. Burke stood for a set of historically defined political rights that were specific to a certain group of people, but the Declaration of Independence had set out an entirely different perspective—the universal rights of man—liberty, equality and the pursuit of happiness.

The two perspectives were incompatible, but that was not immediately evident. It only became evident to Burke under the impact of the French Revolution and the emergence of the working class in Britain.

To Burke, the working people who set up political societies modeled on the Jacobins were “the swinish multitude” or the “unwashed masses.” They responded in kind. When 5,000 workers marched through Sheffield to celebrate the victory of the French army at Valmy in November 1792, they carried an effigy of Burke riding on a pig. One fifth of the electorate, he told Parliament, and the majority of the unenfranchised were “pure Jacobins; utterly incapable of amendment; objects of eternal vigilance.” Burke's lobbying set in motion a sequence of repression—newspapers were banned, meetings outlawed, organisations proscribed, political activists arrested, deported and executed—that culminated in the Peterloo Massacre of August 1819.

When compared to the French political theorists of his day, Burke does not rank highly. The eloquence of his pen outstripped his intellect. But *Reflections* had a global impact, since Britain became the paymaster of the

most reactionary regimes in Europe as they waged war on revolutionary France. France stood alone surrounded by enemies. The only other progressive republic that might have come to its aid could not do so. Washington, wary of embroiling his new country in a war that might provoke conservative elements at home, remained neutral despite Jefferson's advice to support France. Without that protracted war, which was to continue with only a brief cessation from 1793 to 1815, involved most parts of the world at one time or another, and reduced the French population by a third, according to some estimates, the course of the revolution would have been different. The experience tilted the historical scales towards the war profiteers and the army's most successful commander—Napoleon Bonaparte. It is easy with hindsight to underestimate how close Britain was to revolution, especially in the near-famine conditions of 1795. For a brief historical moment, a prospect hung in the air of three progressive bourgeois republics together harnessing the most advanced industrial and commercial resources of the age. This was very much Paine's vision.

Paine had already begun writing *The Rights of Man* before Burke's *Reflections* appeared, but with its publication, Paine, now back in England, began to fashion his earlier draft into a reply to Burke. *The Rights of Man* represents an entirely new form of political writing for a mass audience. It is in a highly colloquial style. It was directed at precisely the sort of people Burke wanted excluded from politics—men of Paine's own background—ordinary artisans and labouring people. Like *Common Sense*, it became an international best-seller.

The British government, however, took a very dim view of the book. They put Paine on trial for seditious libel. A jury packed against him found Paine guilty. He was now in France. Nevertheless, crowds of supporters greeted his lawyer as he emerged from the court after the verdict and pulled his carriage through the streets of London. Across the Channel, Paine himself was feted as a hero, granted citizenship and made a representative to the National Convention.

The country of which he had become a citizen was menaced from within by aristocratic conspiracies and from without by aggressive neighbours, as intent on furthering their own interests as restoring the *ancien regime*. France was isolated; its economy and currency were collapsing. These facts coloured the history of the revolution. The French revolutionaries were increasingly forced to create an emergency wartime regime and take drastic measures. The Great Terror grew out of the Great Fear.

In September 1792, with the road to Paris open to foreign armies, the *sans culottes*—the poorest elements of the Paris population—rushed to erect barricades to defend the city; and to protect themselves from within, they began to summarily execute aristocratic prisoners. The “arm of the people,” as Jefferson put it, had of necessity been invoked to defend the revolution. It was he said, “a machine which, although not as blind as bullets and bombs, is still somewhat blind.” But the *sans culottes* were to become increasingly important to the defence of the revolution, and the only political group that gave this social force expression were the Jacobins. In the conflict that followed between the Jacobins and the Girondins, Paine found himself under suspicion because of his association with the Girondins.

Socially, there was very little to distinguish the Jacobins and the Girondins. The distinction between them was in the way they responded to the course of the revolution. By 1792, figures that had been among its leaders in the earlier period were becoming hesitant and seeking to hold back the course of events. They saw the emergence of the *sans culottes* as a threat to all property. Some of them were prepared to conspire with monarchists against the revolution. Paine was not one of these. But he did argue against the execution of the king. To some degree, the French Revolution left Paine behind in its headlong course.

But it is worth looking at Paine's attitude in some detail. After the royal family's unsuccessful flight to Varenne in 1791, Paine was one of those

who argued that Louis should be deposed. He was among a small group who formed a Republican Society at that time when republicanism was still not widely accepted. In 1792, he argued in favour of putting Louis on trial for conspiring against his country. He opposed the execution of Louis the following year, not because he had changed his mind, but because he realised that removing Louis would simply allow his brothers to put forward their claims to the throne. In both cases—the question of the trial and the execution—Paine saw the question in European terms. The trial would expose the way in which the other crowned heads of Europe had conspired against France, especially the way in which the British government had financed the war. By keeping Louis in prison, and then after the war exiling him, it would, he thought, be possible to prevent the conspiracy against France from being strengthened. Louis would be alive, but reduced to the rank of an ordinary citizen. In terms of his political assessment of the situation, Paine was probably wrong, but he never diverged from his republican principles or his opposition to monarchy.

In the summer of 1793, the Girondin deputies were arrested. By the end of the year, Paine himself was in prison. He nearly died of fever and only escaped execution by chance. With the fall of Robespierre in July [Thermidor] 1794, Paine was released. James Monroe, the American ambassador, and later president, took Paine to his house to recover his health.

Yet even at this low point, Paine's intellectual faculties did not desert him. His theoretical understanding remained as sharp and as challenging as ever. *The Age of Reason*, written at this time, was one of Paine's last great works. It became a best seller in France, the US, Germany and Britain. It contributed to the rise of the Spinozist critique of religion and materialism in the course of the nineteenth century. He finished the first part shortly before he was imprisoned. The dedication to “My fellow citizens of the United States” was written from the Luxemburg Prison, and the second part was written as he was recovering at the Monroes' house. It is perhaps the closest we have to autobiography. It is a personal testimony of a faith in science and the human ability to understand the structure of the universe by means of reason.

“I do not believe,” he wrote, “in the creed professed by the Jewish church, by the Roman church, by the Greek church, by the Turkish church, by the Protestant church, nor by any church that I know of. My own mind is my own church.”

He recalls how as a young man he was attracted to science, and:

“I had no disposition for what is called politics. It presented to my mind no other idea than as contained in the word Jockeyship. When therefore I turned my thoughts toward matters of government, I had to form a system for myself that accorded with the moral and philosophic principles in which I have been educated.”

He makes an historical assessment of his own life—setting his own contribution in a global context:

“I saw, or at least I thought I saw, a vast scene opening itself to the world in the affairs of America, and it appeared to me that unless the Americans changed the plan they were pursuing with respect to the government of England, and declared themselves independent, they would not only involve themselves in a multiplicity of new difficulties, but shut out the prospect that was then offering itself to mankind through their means. It was from these motives that I published the work known by the name of *Common Sense*, which was the first work I ever did publish; and so far as I can judge of myself, I believe I should never have been known in the world as an author, on any subject whatever, had it not been for the affairs of America. I wrote *Common Sense* the latter end of the year 1775, and published it the first of January, 1776. Independence was declared the fourth of July following.”

Aware that he is probably facing his own death, he refuses to be reconciled to Christianity:

“From the time I was capable of conceiving an idea,” he writes, “and

acting upon it by reflection, I either doubted the truth of the Christian system or thought it to be a strange affair; I scarcely knew which it was, but I well remember, when about seven or eight years of age, hearing a sermon read by a relation of mine, who was a great devotee of the Church, upon the subject of what is called redemption by the death of the Son of God. After the sermon was ended, I went into the garden, and as I was going down the garden steps (for I perfectly recollect the spot) I revolted at the recollection of what I had heard, and thought to myself that it was making God Almighty act like a passionate man, that killed his son when he could not revenge himself in any other way, and as I was sure a man would be hanged that did such a thing, I could not see for what purpose they preached such sermons. This was not one of that kind of thoughts that had anything in it of childish levity; it was to me a serious reflection, arising from the idea I had that God was too good to do such an action, and also too almighty to be under any necessity of doing it. I believe in the same manner at this moment; and I moreover believe, that any system of religion that has anything in it that shocks the mind of a child, cannot be a true system.”

Paine was by no means safe, even after the fall of Robespierre. A new danger emerged—and probably a more serious one. The revolution was moving in a reactionary direction. With the coup d’état of the 18th Brumaire 1799, which brought Bonaparte to power, Paine was again under suspicion. The revolution, Napoleon declared, was over. By 1802, Paine was back in America where he was to die seven years later.

How are we to assess Paine’s career?

His career might be looked upon as a failure. The Walkers grew rich making cannon for the British navy. Eighty of the cannon on Nelson’s flagship the *Victory* were made by Walker’s. It used to be a regular outing to walk out into the fields and see the test firings of Walker’s cannons. Paine did not achieve great wealth. The fortune that might have been his as a bridge builder did not materialise. He made almost nothing from his books, donating his earnings to revolutionary causes.

Even politically his achievements seemed to have been eclipsed. As he lay dying, he was harassed by Christian ministers trying to get him to recant his deism. At the time of his death, he was reviled in Britain, France and America. Even Jefferson, his long-time friend, had to be cautious about being publicly associated with the name of Thomas Paine.

But in reality, Paine’s achievements were far more substantial than those of his apparently more successful contemporaries. Paine’s success lay in the part he had played in founding two modern republics. He changed the way in which politics was understood and took place. Before Paine, politics was the preserve of privilege; after Paine, the mass of the population began to find a voice and became political actors.

Paine’s reputation began to revive in the next great revolutionary upsurge—at the time of the American Civil War—and he was one of the political mentors of Chartism. Paine’s memory was revered whenever social equality was put back on the political agenda.

His apparent failures are the failures of someone whose ambitions outstripped the possibilities of the time. His vision of a peaceful global civilisation based on social equality, using the most advanced productive techniques to ensure prosperity for all, was not attainable then, but it remains something worth striving for. Rather than failures, these are the objectives of Paine’s life as yet unfulfilled. Ultimately, we would have to conclude that Paine defined the modern world even more lastingly than did the great manufacturers, and that we still live in many respects in the Age of Paine.



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