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Paine's *Rights of Man* and Age of Reason

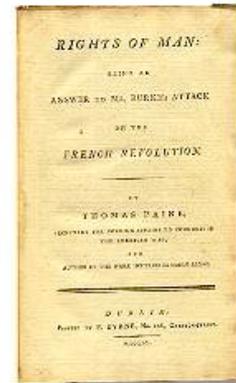
TOM Paine was born in Thetford, Norfolk, in 1737, the son of a Quaker corset-maker. He attended Thetford grammar school but left at thirteen and was apprenticed to his father. In late adolescence he enlisted and briefly served as a privateer. On return, he eventually became a master corset-maker and set up a shop in Sandwich, Kent. In 1759, at the age of 22, he married Mary Lambert, but a year later the business collapsed and his wife died in childbirth, with the baby.

Paine then drifted from job to job before becoming a schoolteacher in London, then an excise officer in Lewes, Sussex, where he met and married Elizabeth Olive, his landlord's daughter. He became involved in local politics, serving on the town council and establishing a debating club in a local tavern. Three years later, in 1774, he separated from Elizabeth and moved back to London. Here he was introduced to Benjamin Franklin, who suggested he emigrate to the more congenial surroundings of America. He arrived in Philadelphia in November 1774, where he settled as a journalist, editing the *Pennsylvania Magazine* in which, inter alia, he advocated the abolition of slavery.

America was then in the throes of revolutionary turmoil, and Paine was on fire with a missionary zeal. In early 1776 he published, anonymously as 'written by an Englishman', a seditious pamphlet called *Common Sense*, which called for independence six months before the Declaration. It sold 120,000 copies within three months and became the 'war-cry' of the revolutionary movement. "The cause of America is in a great measure the cause of all mankind", he wrote; it is the providentially chosen asylum for liberty while Europe is crumbling into despotism.

"Society", he announces, "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". The best state protects freedom and security by taking a representative and republican form. The worst states are monarchical and aristocratic tyrannies which are wholly incompatible with the preservation of freedom. Government by kings runs counter to the natural equality of man, and when America gains its independence, in contrast to Europe, it will be a land where 'the law is king'. Paine himself joined up, but was described as "not a soldier, he always kept out of danger". He was also a brilliant, morale-boosting war correspondent and even travelled to France in 1781 to raise money for the American cause.

Paine played no major role in American government after independence. As a mere clerk in the Pennsylvania Assembly with a love of alcohol, he was invariably hard-pressed for money and had to rely on his American friends. In 1785 he was given \$3,000 by the U.S. Congress in recognition of his service to the nation, but he eventually became restless again and in 1787 he returned to Europe where, for the next four years, he divided his time between Britain and France. In November 1790 the Whig MP Edmund Burke, who had spoken out for Americans, Irish Catholics and slaves, published a pamphlet entitled *Reflections on the Revolution in France*,



in which he defended the ancien regime and argued that the revolution would end disastrously.

Burke maintained that the revolutionaries, with their abstract principles, ignored the complexities of human nature and the importance of private property, tradition and 'prejudice', with its adherence to values regardless of their rational basis which 'renders a man's virtue his habit'. He advocated gradual, constitutional reform, stressing that a political doctrine founded on abstractions such as *liberty* and the *rights of man* could be easily abused to justify tyranny. He predicted, with almost supernatural prescience, that the Revolution's concomitant disorder would make the army 'mutinous and full of faction', and then a 'popular general', commanding the soldiery's allegiance, would become 'master of your assembly, the master of your whole republic'.

In Burke's view, the British constitution, established 'for ever' by the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688, was a balanced combination of rule by the king, the nobility and the common people: "We are resolved to keep... an established monarchy, an established aristocracy, and an established democracy, each in the degree it exists, and in no greater". For Burke, society was a sacred contract, "a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born. Each contract of each particular state is but a clause in the great primeval contract of eternal society".

In one of the most famous passages, Burke lamented the rough treatment meted out to Marie Antoinette in October 1789. He speaks of the 'decent drapery of life' being 'rudely torn off'. After a paean to the French Queen, 'glittering like the morning-star, full of life, and splendour, and joy', he announces: "The age of chivalry is gone. That of sophisters, economists and calculators has succeeded; and the glory of Europe is extinguished for ever".

Paine decided to write a reply, and *Rights of Man* was the result, published in two parts in 1791 and 1792. He declares: "I am contending for the rights of the living, and against their being willed away, and controlled and contracted for, by the manuscript assumed authority of the dead; and Mr. Burke is contending for the authority of the dead over the rights and freedom of the living". In reply to the image of the 'decent drapery of life', he remarks that Burke "pities the plumage, but forgets the dying bird". ↪

He is taken in by pretty pictures and ignores the anonymous victims of a despotic government who have been dragging out their lives in the Bastille. Nothing can save the French regime from its inherent corruption, and he totally rejects Burke's notion that the plumage, which was a containment as well as a cover of corruption, made possible restoration and growth.

Paine mocks Burke's idea that the Glorious Revolution established a constitution 'for ever': "There never did, there never will, and there can never exist a parliament, or any description of men, or any generation of men, in any country, possessed of the right or the power of binding and controlling posterity to the end of time... every age and generation must be as free to act for itself, in all cases, as the ages and generations which preceded it. The vanity and presumption of governing beyond the grave is the most ridiculous and insolent of tyrannies".

He also mocks the hereditary principle: it is 'as absurd as an hereditary mathematician, an hereditary wise man, and as ridiculous as an hereditary poet laureate'. He writes in contempt of the monarchy and governmental system of Britain. "I have always considered monarchy to be a silly, contemptible thing. I compare it to something kept behind a curtain, about which there is a great deal of bustle and fuss, and a wonderful air of seeming solemnity, but when, by any accident, the curtain happens to open, and the company see what it is, they burst into laughter".

In the first part of *Rights of Man* Paine defends the French Revolution's legitimacy against Burke's attacks. In the second part he sets out a defence of democratic republicanism in which all over 21 should be given the vote, and outlines a blueprint for a welfare state, including old age pensions, maternity grants, funeral grants, provision of work for the deserving poor and progressive income tax. So *Rights of Man* is not only one of the strongest and clearest defences of human rights, liberty and equality ever written; it is also one of the first expressions of the duty of government to take care of its less fortunate citizens.

Rights of Man, which became the bestselling book of the 18th century, caused uproar in Britain. The book was banned and the government launched a prosecution for seditious libel. Paine was persuaded by friends to leave the country. He fled to France, having been threatened with stoning by a crowd at Dover. Arriving in Calais in September 1792, 'Citizen Paine' was immediately offered French citizenship and elected as the town's representative in the National Convention.

There he sided with the moderate Girondins and courageously defied the dominant Jacobins by arguing that Louis XVI should not be executed but exiled to the United States. As the Revolution began to devour its own children and most of his friends went to the guillotine, Paine was imprisoned without trial for ten months in 1794 and was saved from death by luck and the fall of Robespierre. He was particularly upset that Washington, whom he had befriended in America, had been prepared to leave him to his fate – indeed, he was convinced that he had connived at his imprisonment.

Just before being jailed in the closing days of 1793 he completed the first part of *The Age of Reason* (the second

part was written on his release). It is this work that was responsible for the hostility with which Paine was subsequently treated, being an uncompromising attack on Christianity and all formal religions, though written by someone who was not an atheist but a deist (or pantheist) seeking to combat the growing atheism of the time.

Paine opens with a statement of his own creed: "I believe in one God, and no more; and I hope for happiness beyond this life. I believe in the equality of man, and I believe that religious duties consist in doing justice, loving mercy, and endeavouring to make our fellow creatures happy". But, on the other hand: "All national institutions of churches, whether Jewish, Christian, or Turkish, appear to me no other than human inventions set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolise power and profit".

Paine pulls no punches in denouncing the Bible: "Whenever we read the obscene stories, the voluptuous debaucheries, the unrelenting vindictiveness, with which more than half the Bible is filled, it would be more consistent that we called it the word of a demon than the word of God". It is nothing but "a book of lies, wickedness and blasphemy; for what can be greater blasphemy than to

ascribe the wickedness of man to the orders of the Almighty". He reserves most contempt for the central tenet of Christianity, the morally hideous concept of scapegoating or 'vicarious atonement': "Moral justice cannot take the innocent for the guilty even if the innocent would offer itself". In short, to place your sins upon another, especially if this

entails a human sacrifice, is a grotesque evasion of moral and individual responsibility.

Paine returned to America in 1802 at the invitation of Thomas Jefferson, who had become President. Jefferson remained loyal to him, but most Americans could not forgive him for his opposition to slavery, his *Age of Reason* and his public attack on Washington. He spent his last 7 years in drunkenness, loneliness and ill health, regretting that he had ever returned to America.

In an essay on *The Fate of Thomas Paine*, written in 1934, Bertrand Russell said that it was his fate to be always honoured by opposition and hated by government. It was for his virtues that he was hated and successfully calumniated. For example, as Russell indicates, from first to last he was consistently opposed to every form of cruelty, whether practised by his party or by his opponents. In England he advocated reform as the cure for the ruthless exploitation of the poor and had to fly for his life. In France, for opposing unnecessary bloodshed he was thrown into prison and narrowly escaped death. In America, for opposing slavery and upholding the principles of the Declaration of Independence, he was abandoned by the government. And of course *The Age of Reason* offended every major religion of the day. Even the Quakers refused his request for burial in their cemetery.

We might indeed say that Paine was a prophet not with honour, but in his own three countries. Yet in the long run his memory endures as a great crusader for humanity with an honesty, clarity of mind and critical intelligence that is a model for us all. His motto, expressed in *Rights of Man*, is a rallying cry for modern Humanists: "My country is the world, and my religion is to do good". □

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