THOMAS PAINE.

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THOMAS PAINÉ.

By

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FEW great writers have lived so adventurously as Tom Paine. His great books, "Common Sense," "The Rights of Man," and "The Age of Reason," were only incidental to his career as an active revolutionist. The first made him a leader of the American Revolution, the second, the chief spokesman of the French Revolution, and, by the third, he brought to the working classes the new scientific outlook which had up till then been the preserve of the upper classes in England and France. He is one of the greatest English pamphleteers. Few men have so possessed the faculty for summarising in an unforgettable phrase the thought for which other men were groping, or been able so convincingly to reveal to their contemporaries the relation between the immediate issue and the general march of events. With him a general philosophy was always coupled with a practical activity, and to share his revolutionary enthusiasm was to be led to battle in the glorious certainty that the cause of the revolution was "the cause of all mankind." This is the reason why Paine was a greater man than his younger contemporary, Cobbett. For Cobbett fought always for a past which could not, in any case, be retained. Paine, with a truer, though too optimistic vision, was also conscious of the evils which resulted from the industrial and democratic upheaval of his age, but looked for help not to the dying forces of the past, but to the creative elements in the chaotic present. Thus, while Cobbett declaimed against the corruption of ministers and the immorality and obstructionism of George IV., Paine argued that these were the necessary results of aristocracy and hereditary monarchy.

While Cobbett deplored bad landlordism and the degradation of the labourer through machinery, Paine declared himself for land taxes, motherhood endowment, and old age pensions, and looked forward to a time when machinery would bring wealth and not misery to the workers. While Cobbett hated the parsons who neglected and fleeced their flocks, Paine taught the workers to ridicule the superstitious doctrines of the Church, and to demand popular education, and a civilisation based on the knowledge which science could bring. Cobbett, as Mr. Cole has said, was a survival, even
though a great one. Paine was a prophet. Both Cobbett and Paine were persecuted during their lives, but while most of Cobbett’s writing died with him and the England he fought to preserve, Paine’s works lived on. If we may judge by their enormous sale in cheap editions and the persecution which the upper classes thought it worth while to enforce against those who circulated them, Paine’s influence over the working classes grew steadily after his death, and was perhaps, on the whole, greater than that of any other single revolutionary writer in nineteenth century England.

I.—Obscurity and Failure, 1737-1774.

No one could have prophesied a great future for Paine when he arrived in America in 1774. He was already 37 years old, and his career had been singular but not promising. He had ventured upon many professions. He had been a sailor, a maker of ladies’ stays, an exciseman, a schoolmaster; he had tried his hand at the evangelical novelty of lay preaching, and appears to have been prevented from taking holy orders only by his ignorance of Latin. He had been a shopkeeper and had gone bankrupt, and had lost one wife and unsuccessfully married another. His parents were small Quaker folk, who lived in the little town of Thetford in Norfolk. Paine does not seem to have enjoyed his mother’s society or his father’s trade of staymaking, and at seventeen escaped to sea on a privateer to fight against the French. Of his adventures as a sailor we know nothing. He seems soon to have returned, got married, and found employment as a staymaker in London. His spare time was devoted to science. He purchased a “pair of globes, and attended the philosophic lectures of Martin and Ferguson,” made the acquaintance of Dr. Bevis, the astronomer, and followed the proceedings of the Royal Society. In 1760, however, his wife died, and Paine abandoned staymaking and procured a position as exciseman. He was soon dismissed for a species of negligence which was probably commonly practised by excise officials, but after an interval in which he starved as a teacher in Kensington, he obtained reappointment as excise officer, this time at Lewes. In 1771 he married a second time, and joined with his wife and her widowed mother in keeping a small shop and “tobacco-mill.” He spent much of his time in the White Hart Tavern with a group of friends, with whom he composed humorous verses and patriotic songs. For the first time his ability seems to have been discovered, and he was chosen by his fellow excisemen to act as their spokesman in an agitation for higher wages and an improved status. In 1772 he wrote and presented to the Government an elaborate memorandum setting forth their grievances.

Whilst ineffectively pressing his suit in London, his shop and work were both neglected, and on his return he was finally dismissed from the Excise. The year 1774 saw the climax of his misfortunes;
not only was he once more without employment, but he was separated from his wife, with whom he had never been more than formally married, and he found it necessary to sell all his goods to avoid arrest from debt. Thus, already nearly middle aged, Paine found himself penniless and alone. He had, however, one asset—the acquaintance of Benjamin Franklin, who was then in London and at the height of his fame. Franklin had watched with interest Paine's efforts on behalf of the excisemen, and agreed with him in detesting the personal rule of George III. and the corruption of aristocratic politics. He suggested to Paine that he should seek his fortune in America, and supplied him with an introduction to his son-in-law in Philadelphia, to whom he described Paine as an "ingenious, worthy young man," who would do well "as a clerk or assistant tutor in a school or assistant surveyor."

II.—The American Revolution, 1774-1787.

"It was the cause of America," Paine once wrote, "which made me an author." He had already learned to condemn the Government of England, which had so signally failed to utilise his ability. In America he found anger against England already uncontrollable, and he immediately set to work to gather together the forces of the New World to pit them against the Old. Europe was decadent: America offered hope and opportunity. Dr. Franklin's introduction immediately obtained him work as a journalist, and in 1775 he became editor of a new paper called the "Pennsylvania Magazine." "Probably," says Mr. Moncure Cown, "there never was an equal amount of good literary work done on a salary of £50 a year." "America," he wrote in the first number, "yet inherits a large portion of her first imported virtue: Degeneracy is here almost a useless word. Those who are conversant with Europe would be tempted to believe that even the air of the Atlantic disagrees with the constitution of foreign vices; if they survive the voyage they either expire on their arrival, or linger away in an incurable consumption. There is a happy something in the climate of America which disarms them of all their power both of infection and attraction." In one instance, however, he saw that a foreign vice had survived and even thriven on the passage to America, and he opened with a denunciation of the slave trade, and suggested practical means of abolishing slavery where it was already established. Five weeks later the first American Anti-slavery society was formed in Philadelphia. Paine's other articles were equally before their time. His "Occasional Letter on the Female Sex" and his article on "Unhappy Marriages" were among the earliest expressions of the modern feminist movement. Paine here anticipated in many ways the "Rights of Woman" which Mary Wollstonecraft, later to be his friend in Paris, published in 1792. He went on to expose the absurdity of duelling, to pleading for humane treatment of animals,
and to advocate international arbitration as a means of preventing war. Most important, however, was his support of the American cause against England. He believed from the beginning that separation was inevitable, and, while Americans were still strongly royalist, he wrote, "Call it independence or what you will . . . if it is the cause of God and humanity it will go on." After the skirmish of Lexington he had no more doubts: it was the cause of God and humanity.

In January, 1776, he published "Common Sense." It is one of the world's great political pamphlets, and Paine's friends and enemies have agreed in ascribing to it an extraordinary influence. Cheetham, Paine's most hostile biographer, admits that "Common Sense," by "speaking a language which the colonists had felt but not thought," had a "popularity which was unexampled in the history of the Press, and terrible in its consequences to the parent country."

To understand its effects we must remember that even after Lexington few Americans had faced the idea of separation. Jefferson was still writing to ask John Randolph in London if he could help towards a reconciliation with England. Washington declared that if ever he was heard talking of separation he might be put down as "everything wicked." Americans had grown accustomed to the idea of armed resistance against bad government. Paine forced them to realise that this meant separation or ignominy. Reconciliation was an "agreeable dream" which had necessarily passed away. England, said Paine prophetically, offered "protection not from friendship but from self-interest. She would have defended Turkey from the same motive, viz., the sake of trade and dominion." Protection of this kind was no longer of any service to America. All Europe was waiting to trade with her when English interference was removed. Moreover, it was time America realised her maturity, and slipped the leading strings of the Mother Country. "A greater absurdity cannot be conceived of than three millions of people running to their seacoast every time a ship arrives from London to know what portion of liberty they should enjoy. . . The sun never shone on a cause of greater worth. . . It is not the affairs of a city, a county, a province or a kingdom but a continent; not the concern of a day, a year or an age: posterity are involved in the contest, and will be more or less affected even to the end of time. Now is the seed time of continental union, faith and honour. The least fracture now will be like a name engraved with the point of a pin on the tender rind of a young oak: the wound will enlarge with the tree, and posterity read it in full-grown characters."
In this plea for independence Paine carried with him the majority of Americans. Many loyalists, it is true, remained, but the choice had to be made, and the cause of revolution triumphed. "Common Sense," however, had a second message to convey. The war to Paine was not merely a war against George III., but also one against monarchy: not only against a corrupt oligarchic government, but against all attempts by a privileged few to govern the majority. He made the cause of the American revolution also the cause of democracy and republicanism.

In this second part of his message Paine was not uniting Americans but dividing them. For the moment they could agree on the issue of separation. But there were many who were willing to repudiate the government of England over America and yet continued to believe in the principles on which the constitution of that government rested. In opposition to these Paine may be said to have founded and led the Jeffersonian party. John Adams and those leaders who were afterwards to be known as Federalists, although united with Paine in the struggle with England, were at heart bitterly opposed to his principles. They believed in the English type of government portrayed in the writings of Montesquieu and Blackstone. They were, in fact, fighting to substitute an American President for an English King, not to overthrow aristocracy and establish democracy in its stead.

Paine, on the other hand, knew that English government was not as Blackstone painted it. Moreover, he was an admirer of Rousseau rather than Montesquieu. But he found one grave defect in Rousseau. By repudiating the principle of representation he refused the only mechanism which could have made democracy possible in the eighteenth century. "We find," Paine wrote later, "in the writings of Rousseau and the Abbé Raynal a loveliness of sentiment in favour of liberty that excites respect and elevates the human faculties, but having raised this animation they do not direct its operations, and leave the mind in love with an object without describing the means of possessing it."

For himself he saw no difficulty in achieving liberty. He was uninterested in Rousseau's argument that the general will could only be found in the city state. Majority government was the necessary political practice, and representation must take the place of the direct vote of the market place. In his account of the origin of society he closely follows the picture painted by Rousseau in the "Origin of Inequality," and does not try, as Rousseau tried in the "Social Contract," to found a society in which all men surrender their rights and yet retain their liberty unimpaired. "Society," he wrote, "is produced by our wants, government by our wickedness." The manifold advantages of co-operative life had irresistibly led men to form societies. But government, "like dress, is the badge of lost innocence; the palaces of kings are built on
the ruins of the bowers of paradise. For were the impulses of conscience clear, uniform and irresistibly obeyed man would need no other lawgiver: that not being the case, he finds it necessary to surrender a part of his property to furnish means for the protection of the rest." Government, therefore, is a necessary evil, whose sole justification is the protection of the rights of individuals. If it fails to fulfil this function they have the right to institute a different one. Tried by this democratic test, the English government will not stand analysis. What is wanted in a government, if it is to safeguard the welfare of the people, is wisdom and responsibility. Hereditary monarchy and aristocratic government have neither of these qualifications. "There is something exceedingly ridiculous," he tells us, "in the composition of monarchy." It first excludes a man from the means of information, and then empowers him to act in cases where the highest judgment is required. "The state of a king shuts him from the world, yet the business of a king requires him to know it thoroughly." But if monarchy is bad, hereditary monarchy is the last of absurdities. "The idea of hereditary legislators," he wrote later, "is as absurd as an hereditary mathematician, or an hereditary wise man; and as ridiculous as an hereditary poet-laureate." Any wisdom that exists in the English monarchy or House of Lords is therefore purely accidental. And if wisdom is unlikely to exist, the second important attribute of government—responsibility—is wholly absent from the British Constitution. It is so complex that no one can say who is accountable for anything. Montesquieu's view that liberty was the result of a "separation of powers," and the praise which Blackstone and De Lolme bestowed upon a system of "checks and balances" seemed to Paine therefore wholly absurd. A mechanism in which every part was invented to check another must surely be a farce. If the people did not trust their king, why did they have him at all? If they had representatives, ought these not to have the power to govern unhampered by a House of Lords, and responsible only to those who have elected them? Why disguise it any longer? The only glorious part of the British Constitution was the democratic part, the right which the people had, in some measure at least, of electing their own House of Commons. Paine, therefore, advocated a single democratic chamber, with a plural executive responsible to no one except the representatives of the people. The American Constitution of 1789, therefore, although embodying some of Paine's principles, displeased him by the autocratic and lonely position of the President as well as by the existence of the Senate. The Constitutions of many of the States were, however, exactly founded on Paine's model.

The identity of "Common Sense" was not hidden, and Dr. William Smith, the President of the University of Philadelphia, attacked Paine's writings as the "foul pages of interested writers and strangers intermeddling in our affairs." Paine answered with a bitter
assault upon the Tories, but he did not then mention that he had
given the copyright and all profits from "Common Sense" to the
cause of Independence. Dr. Smith's sneer was certainly unfortunate,
for no one was ever more disinterested than Paine. Within three
months a hundred and twenty thousand copies of "Common Sense"
were sold at two shillings each, and the sale probably reached about
half a million copies in all, so that Paine, who had never yet had
enough to live upon and who remained a poor man to the end of his
life, had made and given away a fortune for the cause he loved.

Less than a year after the appearance of "Common Sense" its
principles were incorporated in the Declaration of Independence.
It appears to have been the work of Thomas Jefferson, who had
become a friend of Paine's, and one paragraph, devoted to condem-
nation of the slave-trade, was, perhaps, composed by Paine himself.
But most Americans held that liberty, as James Russell Lowell re-
marked, was "a kind of thing that don't agree with niggers," and the
paragraph was cut out. By this time, however, Paine had given up
his paper and joined the ragged and disjointed ranks of the revolu-
tionary army.

Fighting by day did not prevent Paine writing by night. During
the critical days when Washington was struggling, in the face of
State jealousies and Congressional incompetency to keep the cause
of America alive, nothing so effectively inspired the army as the
pamphlets which Paine wrote night after night by the camp-fire.
The exhilaration of valiant struggle against odds never leaves Paine's
pages. "These are the times that try men's souls," the "Crisis"
begins. "I love the man who can smile at trouble, that can gather
strength from distress and grow brave from reflection." He knew
all the tricks of war propaganda. There is always the assumption
that America must win, coupled with the reminder that the enemy,
though feeble, can only be defeated by their best efforts. English
"atrocities" are described, and Lord Howe reminded that England
is used to winning in battle only because she is usually opposed by
mercenary armies, not by a nation in arms. "After all," he adds,
"Englishmen always travel for knowledge, and your lordship, I hope,
will return, if you return at all, much wiser than you came." But
Paine's best abuse is reserved for the Americans who stood aside in
the struggle. Perhaps it was because he was himself brought up as
a Quaker, and had, until now, believed himself a pacifist that he
found it so difficult to be just to the non-resister, and so readily
assumed that he was a coward or a traitor. Refusal to join the
American cause he declared to be disloyalty, and the Quakers, who
claimed the virtue of consistency when they remained pacifists in
war-time, were "like antiquated virgins who see not the havoc
deformity has made upon them, but pleasantly mistaking wrinkles
for dimples, conceive themselves yet lovely, and wonder at the stupid
world for not admiring them"
Ability to write like this was rare, and Paine was called from the ranks to help the government more directly. He continued to write the “Crisis” and, in addition, became in effect Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. He was sent on various missions, including one to France, and was in part responsible for the negotiation of the French loan. At a most critical moment, when money was urgently needed, he opened a private subscription list with a gift of £100 himself and obtained from others a sum sufficient to tide over the emergency. After the establishment of peace Paine’s services were not forgotten, though it seemed for some months as if a somewhat indiscreet though zealous watching over American interests which led to his losing favour in Congress, would prevent his obtaining due recognition. In the end, however, he was voted considerable sums of money and presented with a farm at New Rochelle, which remained his small but sufficient source of income for the rest of his life.

III.—The French Revolution.

In 1787 Paine returned to Europe. During his last months in America he had been much occupied with a new kind of invention—an iron suspension bridge. He seems to have been anxious to get the approval of French and English authorities for his invention, and he came also with a diplomatic mission. His bridge was exhibited at Hammersmith, its principles much praised, and, with improvements, generally adopted. His diplomatic mission brought him into contact with the leaders of the Whig opposition, and amongst other visits he spent a week with Edmund Burke. Of English politicians Burke stood highest in Paine’s opinion: his American speeches had seemed to Paine incomparably fine. But though they had been at one about stamp duties, no two men could really have been farther apart. Writing to Jefferson at this time, Paine remarked that democratic changes were coming to pass, and that these might involve some disturbances. Rulers, he added, ought not to fear these for “the creation we enjoy arose out of chaos.” The rulers of eighteenth century Europe, however, were satisfied with things as they were, and were not prepared to welcome the element of creation discernible in the French Revolution. Paine himself was so interested that he left the fascinating pursuit of bridge-building to visit Paris. In November, 1790, he returned in time for the publication of Burke’s “Reflections on the French Revolution.” It was a magnificent piece of rhetoric, exactly calculated to rouse the aristocracies of Europe to the dangers of the democratic principles which had been implicit in his own “Speeches on America.” “The forms of a free and the ends of an arbitrary government are things not altogether compatible,” he had written. Could the Revolution then stop at establishing the forms of a free government? Burke still thought not, but whereas in the case of America this was an argument for reform,
in France, it seemed, repression was the only alternative to chaos. The strength of Burke's appeal did not lie in its argument. It was obviously inconsistent to denounce Dr. Price for declaring that the people of England by once choosing their own governors, "cashiering them for misconduct," and "framing a government for themselves" had forever forfeited their right to do so again. To claim finality for the "Contract" of 1689 was as absurd as Hobbes' effort to bind posterity to a monarch because our forefathers once accepted one. In such cases Paine's question, "Who is to decide, the living or the dead?" is a final answer. But Burke's appeal was an emotional one. He drew a picture of the young Queen of France, whose beauty had so enchanted him on a visit to France some years before, and her kindly and well-intentioned husband now helpless in the hands of revengeful and ignorant sansculottes: he prophesied that extreme would follow extreme till France was destroyed, and, through their example, drag other countries down to their own degradation. Such a picture could only rouse anger and horror in the minds of men who were ignorant of the actual conditions of France and were accustomed to identify a nation with its rulers. In the "Rights of Man" Paine answered on behalf of those who had in mind the common people of France. Burke, indeed, knew little of France, and, as Paine remarked, "When the tongue or the pen is let loose in a frenzy of passion, it is the man and not the subject that becomes exhausted." It was Paine's business to paint a different picture also incomplete, no doubt, but at least founded on some knowledge of the situation. "When Mr. Burke cast his eyes over the map of Europe and saw a chasm that once was France, he talked like a dreamer of dreams." The reality was very different. All the essential parts of France were still there—her people and her natural resources were unimpaired, indeed strengthened by the destruction of an arbitrary and corrupt government. To talk of indignity to the Queen of France was surely irrelevant. It was, as Paine said in perhaps the greatest of the phrases which give him immortality, "to pity the plumage and forget the dying bird." Burke's sympathy was concentrated on the plight of one foolish woman. Paine's mind was set on the age-long suffering of a misgoverned and tortured people. Under these circumstances there could be no argument between them, for they could not agree on the essential facts of the situation.

Early in 1791 Paine again crossed to France, leaving the publication of the first part of the "Rights of Man" in the hands of his radical friends, Godwin, Holcroft, and Hollis. He was disappointed to hear that the Parisians had thought it worth while to bring back Louis XVI, when once he had sought safety in flight. In America Paine had been the first to demand the proclamation of a Republic. In the same way Paris was still monarchist in sentiment when Paine arrived there, and begun his career as a French Revolutionist by placarding the streets and even the door
of the National Assembly with a manifesto declaring that, while France could not “stoop to degrade herself by a spirit of revenge,” she would do well to repudiate “Louis Capet” as soon as possible. Paine never changed his view about this. He was later to engage in controversy with Sieyès, who argued that, though illogical, an hereditary monarchy worked better than an elected one. Paine could see no reason for accepting this choice of evils. Why have any kind of monarch?

This visit to France was also short; he returned to England with Horne Tooke and other English radicals, and proceeded to organise meetings in favour of Republican principles and social reform. In 1792 the second part of the “Rights of Man” appeared. It was an elaboration and expansion of the principles laid down in Part I. Men’s rights were of two kinds: some of them, such as the right to free thought and its expression, ought never to be interfered with in any way; others, such as the right to the property whose value a man has enhanced by his labour, can only be secured by government regulation. Government, therefore, is an organisation for the control and security of those rights which men cannot secure for themselves without regulation. All governments except democratic republics are in the interests of a few and the new American Constitution, though not altogether to Paine’s liking, supplied Europe with a pattern of a democratic system. Having explained the value of a written Constitution which guarantees the permanent security of rights with which government may not attempt to interfere, Paine proceeded to an amazingly bold series of practical suggestions for a peaceful English revolution. Spence and Ogilvie had already put forward schemes of land nationalisation. Paine was less socialistic but perhaps more practical, and he did not consider the landowner the only source of social evil.

He computed the population of England at about seven millions, and believed that, if the Poor Law was abolished, the four million pounds thus saved would be sufficient for a grant of £4 per head to each child under fourteen, and a pension, beginning at £6 per annum for workers after the age of fifty. The residue of the money saved would be spent in a grant for education, a maternity benefit of £1 at the birth of each child, and the setting up of government work for the unemployed. This, however, was only a beginning. The abolition of sinecure offices and ultimately of kings and their courts would bring further revenue. Most productive of all, however, would be a graded estate-duty, which, beginning with an annual tax of three pence per pound on estates worth £500 a year, would rise on each thousand pounds till it reached twenty shillings in the pound for all annual revenue over £23,000 a year. Thus an estate which brought in this sum annually would be taxed £10,630, and any annual increment beyond this would, in fact, be confiscated by the State. Taxation of this kind would make indirect taxes
unnecessary, and ensure the prosperity of the people. Finally, he hoped that reforms of this kind could be accomplished peacefully; that France, England and Holland would see the folly of rival armaments, and when they had formed an alliance and agreed to accept arbitration, be able to abolish their army and navy. What possible arguments, he asks, could his opponents bring against him? Would they dare to say that to “provide against all the misfortunes to which human life is subject” by devoting the national revenue to their prevention “is not a good thing?” Europe, in any case, had reached the end of aristocratic government, which alone stood in the way of reform. But “reason and discussion will soon bring things right, however wrong they may begin,” and “if the good to be obtained be worthy of a passive, rational and costless Revolution, it would be bad policy to prefer waiting for a calamity that should force a violent one.”

The book was an immediate success. Cheap editions were demanded by working class societies all over the country. Paine was burnt in effigy by upper class mobs in Plymouth, Warrington, and other places. The “Rights of Man” was at once translated into French, and so enthusiastically acclaimed that Paine was included in a special vote whereby Washington, Hamilton, Kosciusko, Pestalozzi, Mackintosh, Clarkson, Wilberforce, Bentham and Priestley were made eligible for membership of the National Assembly. He was at once elected as Deputy for four Departments. In England Pitt took alarm and decided to prosecute. Paine appeared and pleaded not guilty at the first summons, but prompted, it is said, by William Blake, who had heard a rumour of his impending arrest, did not wait his trial and fled to France. A letter from Washington amongst his papers induced the Customs Officer to allow him to leave England just before orders for his detention reached Dover. Although defended by Erskine in his absence, Paine was pronounced guilty by a jury which did not even wait to hear the judge sum up against him. Paine was never again able to visit England. This was the first of many trials in which the “Rights of Man” was to appear. It was also the beginning of the Reign of Terror in England which followed the outbreak of war with France.

Outlawed from England, Paine received a triumphant welcome in France. Everywhere he was feted, and one of his companions wrote home that he seemed “in good spirits though rather fatigued by the kissing.” On his arrival in Paris he was asked by Lafayette if he would act as intermediary in the presentation of the key of the Bastille to Washington. It was the proudest moment of Paine’s life: he was the acknowledged link between the revolutions in the Old and New Worlds. He became for a time the unofficial ambassador of England in France, and extraordinary stories are told of the almost quixotic generosity he displayed in championing
suspects whom he thought unjustly treated, even at the risk of his own life. He was intimately associated with a party of the Girondists, aided Condorcet in drawing up the abortive Constitution of 1793, and found good friends in Madame Roland, Mary Wollstonecraft, Captain Imlay, and others of the more moderate revolutionaries. His first act in the National Convention was singularly courageous, and made him suspect in the eyes of Marat, Robespierre, and the party of the Mountain. He was well known as a Republican, but he did all in his power in the Convention as well as outside it to save the life of Louis XVI. Paine was a determined opponent of capital punishment, and his dislike of bloodshed was as sincere and unwavering as his belief in republicanism. His disappointment when Louis was executed changed to a feeling of despair as he watched the growing violence of the Revolution which seemed to be fulfilling Burke's most gloomy prophecies. As the power of the Girondists weakened and the power of Robespierre increased Paine's influence vanished. In any case, he knew no French, and could carry little weight in the Assembly. He devoted himself to writing "The Age of Reason." The revolution at which Paine aimed was always primarily a mental one, and when he saw that the passions and the follies of men could survive a change of their institutions he felt, as Robert Owen felt thirty years later, that until men could be released from the bonds of religious superstition they were likely to remain subject to political chicanery.

In the "Age of Reason" Paine attacked Christianity and the accepted interpretation of the Bible in a manner scarcely less trenchant than that of Voltaire. His book did, in fact, for the working classes of nineteenth century England what Voltaire had done for the aristocracy of eighteenth century France. Like Voltaire, too, he believed in God, but his faith was far more fervent and less opportunistic than Voltaire's. Neither was his purpose any less serious. He wanted not so much to attack Christianity as to usher in the "Age of Reason," when science and critical habits of thought should overcome political and social prejudices. At the end of 1793 he had just completed the first part of his work when the time came for him to follow his friends to prison.

Paine was not released until November of the next year. As an American citizen he expected the immediate intervention of Washington, who had been his friend in America. The American ambassador, however, was Governor Morris, who disliked Paine and his opinions. He seems to have kept Washington in partial ignorance of the situation, but it is probable that, in any case, Washington, who was at that time seeking to make friends with the English government, was not anxious to offend them by interceding for Paine. For this Paine never forgave him, and his later attacks on Washington's politics were envenomed by a personal contempt for what he regarded as a betrayal of their friendship. It was not until
Monroe had taken Morris’ place and Robespierre’s power was at an end that Paine was released. According to the story Paine was once actually sentenced to the guillotine, and only escaped through the mistake of a warder, who placed the fatal chalk mark on the inner side of his cell door so that in the night when the condemned were taken out to death Paine’s door was missed.

One pleasing incident occurred during Paine’s imprisonment. His life had so far been romantic in action not in sentiment. But as he lay in prison letters full of hope and friendship reached him in an unknown handwriting. They were signed “The Little Corner of the World.” He answered in verse. Later, he discovered that the writer had been Lady Smythe, whose husband he had tried to befriend when he was in danger, and the friendship thus formed continued and grew deeper after his release from prison. Paine was an arrogant man, willing enough to speak of himself and his public services. But he was a lonely man, and except in his letters to Lady Smythe and in one letter to an old friend in America, in which he speaks wistfully of “marriage as the harbour of human life” which he had missed, we have few records of his more intimate desires and regrets.

After his release from prison Paine stayed eighteen months in Monroe’s house. Though broken in health he seems to have found a new happiness in friendship, and lost little time in beginning again to write. He composed the second Part of the “Age of Reason,” wrote his “Agrarian Justice” and his famous pamphlet on the “Decline and Fall of the English System of Finance.” Paine saw at once that the Revolution, made possible by the workers of Paris, was being used only in the interests of the middle-classes. In “Agrarian Justice,” published immediately after the failure of Babeuf’s insurrection, he declared that God did not, as the Bishop of Llandaff had said, make “rich and poor,” but only “male and female, and gave them the earth for their inheritance.” Since, however, he deemed it impossible for the land to be shared equally by all, he suggested that a tax should be levied on inheritances. This money was to be expended on money grants of £15 to all citizens when they came of age, and on annuities of £10 for all who reached the age of fifty. In his currency pamphlet he prophesied the suspension of gold payments by the Bank of England, which followed the next year, and declared that inflation was a method of robbing the people in the interests of government bondholders. It was this pamphlet which afterwards changed Cobbett from Paine’s enemy to his enthusiastic admirer.

Paine remained in France till 1802. Of his many activities the most curious was his discussion with Napoleon as to the best way of invading England. Paine regarded England as the stumbling-block to the universal establishment of a European Republic, and he was so willing to help to defeat her that he actually went to Belgium
to watch the collecting of two hundred and fifty gunboats destined for the English invasion. Patriotism was never one of Paine’s faults. Napoleon, however, without, so far as we know, thinking any apologies due to Paine for his trouble, preferred a descent upon Egypt. Paine returned to Paris to lead an interesting little movement which resembled a pre-Comtist Positivism. The Society of “Theophilanthropists” met together to worship God through his works in the simplest manner possible. It aimed at popular education through lectures upon natural science and “the religion of humanity.” In 1801 Theophilanthropy was suppressed, and in 1802 Paine knew that the Revolution was over.

He decided to return to America. The Revolution in England still tarried, and for France he prophesied that Napoleon would make himself Emperor, and “by his intemperate use of power and thirst of dominion cause the people to wish for their old kings, forgetting what beasts they were.” “This is no country for an honest man,” he said to a friend, “they do not understand anything at all of the principles of free government. I know of no republic in the world, except America, which is the only country for men such as you and I.” “Ah, France! thou hast ruined the character of the Revolution virtuously begun, and destroyed those who produced it. I might almost say like Job’s servant, ‘I only am escaped!’”

But the cup of Paine’s disappointment was not yet full. He found that even in America democracy was but partially established, and that its fruits were not so sweet as he had hoped. He could not approve of the Constitution. It was essentially aristocratic; it was English in structure, and its President was only a “fossilised George III.” But democracy disappointed Paine in more momentous ways. He had been among the first advocates of the abolition of negro-slavery, and though his old friend Dr. Franklin was President of the American Anti-Slavery Society, the invention of the cotton gin had made slavery so profitable that he found few supporters. Washington, Madison, even Jefferson evaded the issue, and did nothing to aid the negroes who fled from oppression in Domingo. Finally, Paine found that democracy was not necessarily tolerant. Many who would have welcomed the author of “Common Sense” and “The Rights of Man” were virtuously cold towards the infidel who could write “The Age of Reason.”

Paine, however, found friends, one of the best of whom curiously enough was Mr. Willett Hicks, a member of the Society of Friends, amongst whom Paine had been born, and whom he had at one time so manfully abused. But Paine remained a good infidel till his death in 1809 at the age of seventy-two.\(^1\)

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1 Mr. Moncure Conway thinks that the Theophilanthropists were the originators of this phrase.
IV.—Social Philosophy and Influence.

The American and French revolutions brought into prominence three main types of political philosophy. Their best known exponents in England are Burke, Paine and Bentham. Hatred of the French Revolution led Burke to express in language which has become classic the principles of Conservatism. The essence of his doctrine is that at any time the existing régime, though perhaps capable of certain improvements, contains within itself the concentrated wisdom of the past, and must only be touched, if at all, with extreme reverence. Such institutions as private property, marriage, the Church of England and the British Constitution were therefore to him sacred and assured. If it was not always possible to find justification for them from considerations of immediate utility this was probably the result not of their inadequacy, but of our incapacity to see their true place in the evolution of the social organism. 

"We have," he wrote, "an inheritable crown, an inheritable peerage: a House of Commons and a people inheriting privileges, franchises and liberties from a long line of ancestors. This policy appears to me to be the result of profound reflection; or rather the happy effect of following nature, which is wisdom without reflection and above it. A spirit of innovation is generally...

8 Biographers have often a mistaken affection for the bodies of their heroes, and like to give us details of their funerals and graves. In Paine's case the future career of his bones was so unusual that it must be recorded. In 1819 Cobbett, then in America, struck with remorse for his early slanders on Paine, obtained permission to carry his bones to England. Christian burial had been refused Paine, even the Quakers denying admission to so famous a Deist, and his body had been placed in a corner of his own farm at New Rochelle. Cobbett carried it home to England in triumph, but failed to find anyone to take up his scheme for a mausoleum. Paine's bones remained in the Cobbett family till the bankruptcy of Cobbett's eldest son, when they became, as Mr. Cobden remarks, an "unrealisable asset in the hands of the latter's creditors." After this we lose sight of Paine's bones until Mr. Moncreif Conway discovered some of them later in the course of his indefatigable research for traces of Paine. At the time, however, Cobbett's enterprise was a great opportunity for ridicule. Many stories had already grown up Paine's "death-bed repentance," and the lie that Paine had died in fear of hell fire was the final tribute which outraged Christianity paid to his name. Enemies of Cobbett, who was always a good Churchman, were delighted at the opportunity of bracketing his name with that of Paine not only as a radical, but also as an infidel.

"O rascal, why my name affright
Dost thou lug forth in canting tones?
The worms content were with my flesh:
But thou hast robbed me of my bones,"
said the ghost of Paine in one rhyme.

Byron, too, commented on the situation in a verse which he sent to Tom Moore but did not publish, since he did not wish to aid in the clamour against reform.

"For digging up your bones, Tom Paine,
Will Cobbett has done well;
You'll visit him on earth again,
He'll visit you in hell."

(Vide Cole, Life of William Cobbett, pp. 235-236.)
the result of a selfish temper and confined views. People will not look forward to posterity who never look backward to their ancestors." Existing institutions, therefore, have a sanctity which necessarily contains an element of the mysterious, and when the individual finds himself in conflict with them he must learn to bow his reason before the embodied wisdom of the ages.

Against this view Paine opposed the conception of individual rights. The British Constitution did not seem to him either "the result of profound wisdom" or of the "happy effect of following nature." He thought it merely a device by which an aristocracy could enjoy leisure at the expense of the people's rights. To Burke the organic flow of social unity was the important affair: to Paine the freedom of the individual in society. Freedom meant the exercise of certain rights which he called natural. According to the bad habit of the eighteenth century, he was apt at times to justify his belief in these rights by reference to a primitive society where they were supposed to have been freely exercised. The introduction of this makeshift support of the golden age and the social contract was unfortunate, because, when the historical fallacy was knocked away, the truth underlying Paine's doctrine was overlooked.

Paine's doctrine springs as Rousseau's did, from a passionate Protestantism. By nature and upbringing he felt it intolerable that any authority should stand between the individual and the use of his own reason. Sixteenth century Protestantism began in the same way but failed in courage, and set up the Bible in place of the Pope. Only Anabaptists and Quakers had accepted the whole faith of Protestantism in matters of religion. Paine, following the Encyclopedists, carried the same spirit into all departments of thought. The methods of science were to him, as to them, the only means of obtaining truth. Authority could order, but it could not prove. "Religion," he said, "is a great affair between man and his maker, and no tribunal or third party has a right to interfere between them." "Who then art thou, vain dust and ashes! by whatever name thou art called, whether a King, a Bishop, a Church or a State, a Parliament or anything else that obturdest thine insignificance between the soul of men and its maker? Mind thine own concerns. If he believes not as thou believest, it is a proof that thou believest not as he believest, and there is no earthly power can determine between you."

With this in mind the doctrine of natural rights becomes intelligible. Its evil lay in an a priori mode of expression. But if Paine lacked the historical background of Burke, Burke's method had a corresponding weakness. Burke started no less than Paine from certain a priori assumptions, but while Paine left his bare to the most casual glance, Burke covered his with a generous parade of historical generalisations, which were in reality just as much the
servants of his philosophy as the simple deductions of Paine. Moreover, it is possible to find just as strong a support in history for Paine's view as for Burke's. Paine might profitably have put the matter thus. Society is made up of individuals who have spiritual as well as economic needs. Now it is of the very nature of a spiritual existence that it develop from within, that no outside force can direct it, and that its development will be individual and unpredictable. Thus, there is a large part of the life of every man which must not be regulated by any government. Any society is self-condemned which does not give an opportunity to this spiritual life to develop, and we have the long record of history to show that men are willing to suffer imprisonment and torture, to give up ease and even life itself in pursuit of this freedom. On Burke's own historical grounds, therefore, it is clear that no government can last which fails to recognise and give scope to these fundamental needs of man. In this sense, therefore, natural rights are, as Paine says, in part at least, anterior to the State, since they arise out of the continuous demands of human nature, and, though the content of these demands change and is in part modified by the State, they remain superior to any other interests of the State and their fulfilment is, in fact, the test by which the State must be judged.

Paine's attack on existing institutions is, therefore, essentially, a moral and not a utilitarian one. So far, his philosophy is identical with that of Rousseau. But both were faced by a dilemma. Pressed to its logical conclusion the doctrine of indefensible natural rights leads to anarchy. Yet both were confronted with the fact of government, and knew that without it rights would not obtain any security. Rousseau solved the dialectical problem of accepting government and yet retaining complete liberty for the individual by a metaphysical juggle which opened the way for Hegelian conservatism. By the fiction of the general will, for whose expression he provided no machinery applicable to the eighteenth century, he claimed that popular sovereignty would restore to each individual the liberty which he had given up when he surrendered his personal rights to the community. Paine was more realistic. He saw that some rights needed governmental regulation if any but the strongest were to exercise them, while others could best be realised if left freely to the discretion of the individual. In this latter class the right to free thought and its expression was paramount. He did not claim that toleration was desirable, because the government was as likely as the individual to be wrong, or because truth was best served by the free interchange of ideas. He would have agreed with these utilitarian arguments but, to him, the heart of the matter was simply that no one, priest or king, could be permitted to stand between that individual and his conscience. "Toleration," he said, "is not the opposite of intolerance, but is the counterfeit of it. Both are despotisms. The one assumes to itself the right of with-holding
The failure of the Utilitarians to make Paine's distinction between personal rights and rights which the State should regulate had a further interesting result. The absolute right to the control of private property rested in origin upon the double theory of Locke and the Physiocrats that, by mixing his labour with the soil, the worker had a "natural" right to the produce which resulted from his efforts, and that, without this incentive to labour, industry would languish. Thus the right of private property meant, in fact, the right of the peasant to freedom from feudal dues. It was a theory of peasant proprietorship. When the classical economists, stressing the Utilitarian side of this argument, transferred the right of private property to all forms of ownership, they failed to note that the control of industry involves power of a different kind from that of the peasant proprietor. Soon, in fact, with the advance of the new industrialism, Locke's theory was being used in a manner precisely opposite from that for which it was intended, and it was left to Hodgskin and Marx to argue that, if labour created value and was entitled to the produce of industry, this was a condemnation and not a justification of the rights of capitalist ownership. The most remarkable of all Paine's claims to fame is that he, a man of middle class origin himself, saw the distinction between the old and new form of property, and advocated the rights of private property, not as the Utilitarians in practice did, for the advantage of the new industrial capitalist, but also for the wage earner whose only property now was his labour.  

1 The confusion between the right to own what you make and the right to do what you like with what you happen to own still exists. It would be interesting to know, for instance, whether Lord Leverhulme, in claiming for himself the proceeds of negro labour in Nigeria, does so on the grounds that he has a "natural right" to the labour of other people, or whether he takes the Utilitarian view that the constitution of a negro-labourer is so different from that of a white Capitalist that his industry is stimulated by other persons reaping the fruits of his labour rather than himself.
BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE.

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