

## Belfast Monthly Magazine

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Joel Barlow's Account of Thomas Paine

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of those who advised a forbearance of further change till experience had fully ascertained the advantages and defect of the new system. These will be gradually developed in the progress of the experiment; but many years are necessary to its completion. A slight acquaintance with the nature of man and the history of society is sufficient to convince the considerate and dispassionate observer that the full effects of an institution of this kind cannot be felt, nor the trial of its wisdom and efficacy be fairly and satisfactorily made, until after a long and persevering attention to its management and operations.

It is to be lamented, that many good citizens, feeling a just abhorrence at crimes, consulting the suggestions of virtuous indignation, rather than the principles of justice, become impatient that the alteration of the penal code has not yet produced greater and more decided effects, and diminished the number of the guilty. They, sometimes, even express a regret at the change which has been wrought in our laws, and returning to a system of accumulated severity and terror, wish to see every offence against life and property punished with death; as if crimes would cease with the extermination of the criminal. But let such turn their eyes inward upon their own hearts, and analyze the source from whence such wishes arise. Let them consider the effects produced on society and manners by the rapid increase of wealth and luxury, natural population, and emigration, which consequently augment the number of crimes, whether the laws be mild or sanguinary. Let them consult reason, and the experience of the most enlightened nations, which prove beyond all contradiction, that crimes are most frequent where the laws are most rigorous; that pu-

nishments *mild* and *certain* more effectually prevent crimes than those which are sanguinary and severe. Let them at least examine, before they condemn, a system sanctioned by different legislatures, prudent and enlightened, and applauded by the wisest and best men in all civilized countries.

(To be continued.)

For the *Belfast Monthly Magazine*.

JOEL BARLOW'S ACCOUNT OF THOMAS PAINE.

A CORRESPONDENT requests the Proprietors of the *Belfast Monthly Magazine* may insert the following character of Thomas Paine. In ascertaining the character of an individual before the Grand Tribunal of Public Opinion, which although often erroneous in pronouncing hasty judgment on hearing only one side, is generally ultimately in the right, it is but fair to suffer evidence to be adduced both for and against the person at the bar.

An editor of a newspaper in New York, since deceased, shortly after the death of Thomas Paine, published an account of his life replete with many falsehoods and exaggerations to render him odious. The following letters to and from Joel Barlow, with the accompanying remarks are extracted from an American newspaper:

"WHILE collecting materials for that work, Cheetham addressed a letter to Mr. Joel Barlow. This drew from the masterly pen of that writer, the subjoined sketch for the portrait of Paine. A more precise and elegant outline of character has not often been drawn. The strokes are few, but they are exact; faithful to truth; clear, strong, and impartial. How different from the daubing of Chéetham! that miserable man, now no

more, was unknown to Mr. Barlow, who seems to have distrusted his fidelity as well as his talent for the work he had determined to execute. He evidently wishes to dissuade Cheetham from writing; but if he cannot do this, he desires at least to trace out a path for him to pursue, that the world may not be too grossly led astray, and deceived as to the real character of Paine.

We have been obligingly favoured with a copy of Cheetham's letter, and the answer of Mr. Barlow. We submit them both as records of "the passing tidings of the times." The known regard to truth of Mr. Barlow, and his opportunities of knowing Thomas Paine, together with his capacity to judge, and his ability to display his conceptions, unite to give to his letter more interest as a sketch, than any thing which has yet been published on the subject."

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" TO JOEL BARLOW.

*New York, July 31, 1809.*

" Sir—Not having the honour of a personal acquaintance with you, the trouble this note will occasion, will require some apology, and the only one I can offer regards the subject of it, and the readiness with which your character persuades me you will furnish me the information required, as soon as you have leisure to do so.

" I am preparing to write the life of Thomas Paine, author of *Common Sense*, &c. As you were acquainted with him in Paris, and he mentions you in his " *Age of Reason*," your opinions of his manners and habits, the company he kept, &c. would be very acceptable.

He was a great drunkard here, and Mr. M\*\*\*\*\*, a merchant of this city, who lived with him when he was arrested by order of Robespierre, tells me he was intoxicated when that event happened.

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" Did Mr. Paine ever take an oath of allegiance to France? In his letter to the French people in 1792, he thanks them for electing him a member of the convention, and for the additional honour of making him a French citizen. In his speech on the trial of the king, he speaks, he says, as a citizen of France. There is some difference between being a member of a convention to make a constitution, and a member of the same body to try the king, and transact other business. I should imagine that in the latter capacities, an oath of allegiance would be necessary.

" Any other information you would be pleased to communicate, which in your judgment would be useful in illustrating his character, will be gratefully received, and used as you may direct.

" I am, &c.

—  
" JAMES CHEETHAM."

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" TO JAMES CHEETHAM.

*Kalorama, August 11, 1809.*

" Sir—I have received your letter, calling for information relative to the Life of Thomas Paine. It appears to me that this is not the moment to publish the life of that man in this country—His own writings are his best life, and these are not read at present.

" The greater part of readers in the United States, will not be persuaded, as long as their present feelings last, to consider him in any other light than as a drunkard and a deist. The writer of his life who should dwell on these topics, to the exclusion of the great and estimable traits of his real character, might indeed please the rabble of the age who do not know him; the book might sell; but it would only tend to render the truth more obscure for the future biographer, than it was before.

" But if the present writer should

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give us Thomas Paine, *complete*, in all his character, as one of the most benevolent and disinterested of mankind, endowed with the clearest perception, an uncommon share of original genius, and the greatest breadth of thought; if this piece of biography should analyze his literary labours, and rank him, as he ought to be ranked, among the brightest and most undeviating luminaries of the age in which he has lived, yet with a mind assailable by flattery, and receiving through that weak side a tincture of vanity, which he was too proud to conceal; with a mind, though strong enough to bear him up, and elastic under the heaviest hand of oppression, yet unable to endure the contempt of his former friends and fellow-labourers, the rulers of the country that had received his first and greatest services—a mind incapable of looking down with serene compassion, as it ought, on the rude scoffs of their imitators, a new generation that knows him not; a mind that shrinks from their society, and unhappily seeks refuge in low company, or looks for consolation in the sordid solitary bottle; till it sinks at last so far below its native elevation, as to lose all respect for itself, and to forfeit that of his best friends, disposing these friends almost to join with his enemies, and wish, though from different motives, that he would hasten to hide himself in the grave—if you are disposed and prepared to write his life *thus entire*, to fill up the picture to which these hasty strokes of outline give but a rude sketch, with great vacuities, your book may be a useful one for another age, but it will not be relished, nor scarcely tolerated in this.

“The biographer of Thomas Paine should not forget his mathematical acquirements, and his mechanical genius—His invention of the *iron bridge*, which led him to Europe in

the year 1787, has procured him a great reputation in that branch of science in France and England, in both which countries his bridge has been adopted in many instances, and is now much in use.

“You ask whether he took an oath of allegiance to France—Doubtless the qualification to be a member of the convention required an oath of fidelity in that country, but involved in it no abjuration of his fidelity to this.—He was made a French citizen by the same decree, with *Washington, Hamilton, Priestley, and Sir James Mackintosh*.

“What Mr. M\*\*\*\* has told you relative to the circumstances of his arrestation by order of Robespierre, is erroneous at least in one point. Paine did not lodge at the house where he was arrested, but had been dining there with some Americans, of whom Mr. M\*\*\* may have been one. I never heard before that Paine was intoxicated that night. Indeed the officers brought him directly to my house, which was two miles from his lodgings, and about as much from the place where he had been dining. He was not intoxicated when they came to me. Their object was to get me to go and assist them to examine Paine's papers. It employed us the rest of that night, and the whole of the next day at Paine's lodgings; and he was not committed to prison till the next evening.

“You ask what company he kept; he always frequented the best, both in England and France, till he became the object of calumny in certain American papers. (*echoes of the English court papers*), for his adherence to what he thought the cause of liberty in France—till he conceived himself neglected and despised by his former friends in the United States. From that moment he gave himself very much to drink, and consequently to companions less worthy of his better days.

“It is said he was always a peevish inmate—This is possible. So was *Lawrence Sterne*, so was *Torquato Tasso*, so was *J. J. Rousseau*—But *Thomas Paine*, as a visiting acquaintance, and as a literary friend, the only points of view in which I knew him, was one of the most instructive men I have ever known. He had a surprising memory, and a brilliant fancy; his mind was a storehouse of facts, and useful observations; he was full of lively anecdote, and of ingenious, original, pertinent remark upon almost every subject.

“He was always charitable to the poor, beyond his means, a sure protector and friend to all Americans in distress, that he found in foreign countries. And he had frequent occasions to exert his influence in protecting them during the revolution in France. His writings will answer for his patriotism, and his entire devotion to what he conceived to be the best interest and happiness of mankind.

“This, sir, is all I have to remark on the subject you mention;—now I have only one request to make, and that would doubtless seem impertinent were you not the Editor of a newspaper; it is, that you will not publish my letter, nor permit a copy of it to be taken.

“I am, Sir, &c.

“(Signed) JOEL BARLOW.”

*For the Belfast Monthly Magazine.*

AT page 469, of the 4th vol. of this magazine, a copy of the Christians' Petition, presented to the house of Commons on June 8th, 1810, was communicated. Another petition was presented from a number of persons, all, with one exception, members of the Church of England. The prayer of both petitions was for the removal of all re-

strictions on the absolute liberty of conscience respecting religion, as the unalienable right of all men, so that disabilities, whether affecting Catholics or Protestant Dissenters of all denominations, should be removed. There has been no further procedure in the business, probably from the consideration that the times are not yet propitious to the further prosecution of this business, or that matters are not in a state of sufficient maturity. The following essay, from the pen of the worthy promoter, and first proposer of this plan, is well deserving of the attention of the friends of religious liberty, as well for the development of the plan of the petitioners, as for the display of sound sentiments on this momentous and highly interesting subject.

AN APOLOGY FOR THE PETITIONERS  
FOR LIBERTY OF CONSCIENCE; BY  
THE REV. CHRISTOPHER WYVILL\*.

THE petitioners for liberty of conscience are aware, that they will have to encounter many inveterate prejudices, and much opposition from men as honest as themselves, against the novelty of their proposition. From the violence of enthusiasts in different quarters; they expect the utmost annoyance of an angry contest; from men addicted to the maxims of a worldly policy, they foresee a more calm and decent, but not a less determined resistance. And from the great authorities in church and state, admitting some most generous exceptions, which justly claim in a peculiar degree their admiration and gratitude, the petitioners fear there is no rational hope of support. On the contrary, their decided hostility

\* The author is a clergyman of the Church of England, well known for his zeal in the cause of civil and religious liberty.