

EXCERPTS FROM *THOMAS PAINE* BY ROBERT GREEN INGERSOLL

Selections by Irwin Spiegelman

The Thomas Paine Society (UK) is to be strongly applauded for reprinting in its *Journal of Radical History*, volume 12, number 3 (2014), this speech/essay, entitled *Thomas Paine*, dating from 1870, by Robert Green Ingersoll (1833- 1899), America's *Great Agnostic*. Here are some extended excerpts in praise of Thomas Paine, deist, humanist and fighter for universal human rights. More about Ingersoll in a future issue.

With His Name Left Out, the History of Liberty Cannot Be Written



...Through all the centuries gone, the mind of man has been beleaguered by the mailed hosts of superstition. Slowly and painfully has advanced the army of deliverance. Hated by those they wished to rescue, despised by those they were dying to save, these grand soldiers, these immortal deliverers, have fought without thanks, labored without applause, suffered without pity, and they have died execrated and abhorred. For the good of mankind they accepted isolation, poverty, and calumny. They gave up all, sacrificed all, lost all but truth and self-respect.

One of the bravest soldiers in this army was Thomas Paine; and for one, I feel indebted to him for the liberty we are enjoying this day.

...Poverty was his mother- Necessity his master.

He had more brains than books, more sense than education, more courage than politeness, more strength than polish. He had no veneration for old mistakes – no admiration for ancient lies. He loved the truth for the truth's sake, and for man's sake. He saw oppression on every hand; injustice everywhere, hypocrisy at the altar, venality on the bench, tyranny on the throne; and with splendid courage he espoused the cause of the weak against the strong – of the enslaved many against the titled few.

...Upon his arrival in this country, he found himself possessed of a letter of introduction, signed by another infidel, the illustrious Franklin.

...Paine gave to the world his *COMMON SENSE*. It was the first argument for separation, the first assault upon the British *form* of government, the first blow for a republic, and it a roused our fathers like a trumpet blast.

...No other pamphlet ever accomplished such wonderful results. It was filled with argument, reason, persuasion, and unanswerable logic. It opened a new world. It filled the present with hope and the future with honor. Everywhere the people responded, and in a few months the Continental Congress declared the colonies free and independent States.

A new nation was born. It is simple justice to say that Paine did more to cause the Declaration of Independence than any other man. Neither should it be forgotten that his attacks on Great Britain were also attacks on monarchy, and while he convinced the people that the colonies ought to separate from the mother country, he also proved to them that a free government is the best that can be instituted among men.

In my judgment, Thomas Paine was the best political writer that ever lived. "What he wrote was pure nature and his soul and his pen ever went together."

...The writings of Paine fairly glitter with simple, compact, logical statements, that carry conviction to the dullest and most prejudiced. He had the happiest possible way of putting the case; in asking questions in such a way that they answered themselves, and in stating his premises so clearly that the deduction could not be avoided.

...He had never relinquished his intention of pointing out to his countrymen the defects, absurdities and abuses of the English government. For this purpose he composed and published his greatest political work, *RIGHTS OF MAN*. This work should be read by every man and woman. It is concise, accurate, natural, convincing and unanswerable. It shows great thought, an intimate knowledge of the various forms of government, deep insight into the very springs of human action, and a courage that compels respect and admiration.

...There is in all the utterances of the world no grander, no sublimer sentiment. There is no creed that can be compared with it for a moment. It should be wrought in gold adorned with jewels, and impressed upon every human heart: "The world is my country, and to do good my religion."

...Paine was filled with real love of mankind. His philanthropy was boundless. He wished to destroy monarchy – not the monarch. He voted for the destruction of tyranny, and against the death of the king. He wished to establish a government on a new basis; one that would forget the past; one that would give privileges to none, and protection to all.

...He had spent his life thus far in destroying the power of kings, and now he turned his attention to the priests. He knew that every abuse had been embalmed in Scripture – that every outrage was in partnership with some holy text. He knew that the throne skulked behind the altar, and both behind a pretended revelation of God.

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...The result of his investigations was given to the world in *THE AGE OF REASON*. From the moment of its publication he became infamous. He was calumniated beyond measure. To slander him was to secure the thanks of the church. All his services were instantly forgotten, disparaged or denied. He was shunned as though he had been a pestilence. Most of his old friends forsook him. He was regarded as a moral plague, and at the bare mention of his name the bloody hands of the church were raised in horror. He was denounced as the most despicable of men.

...He commenced with the assertion, "That any system of religion that has anything in it that shocks the mind of a child cannot be a true system." What a beautiful, what a tender sentiment! No wonder the church began to hate him.

[He] believed in one God, and no more. After this life he hoped for happiness. He believed that true religion consisted in doing justice, loving mercy, in endeavoring to make our fellow-creatures happy, and in offering to God the fruit of the heart. He denied the inspiration of the Scriptures. This was his crime.

...In his time the church believed and taught that every word in the Bible was absolutely true. Since his day it has been proved false in its cosmogony, false in its astronomy, false in its chronology, false in its history, and so far as the Old Testament is concerned, false in almost everything. There are but few, if any, scientific men who apprehend that the Bible is literally true. Who on earth at this day would pretend to settle any scientific question by a text from the Bible?

...Down, forever down, with any religion that requires upon its ignorant altar the sacrifice of the goddess Reason, that compels her to abdicate forever the shining throne of the soul, strips from her form the imperial purple, snatches from her hand the scepter of thought and makes her the bond-woman of a senseless faith.

... So far as I am concerned, I most cheerfully admit that most Christians are honest and most ministers sincere. We do not attack them; we attack their creed. We accord to them the same rights that we ask for ourselves. We believe that their doctrines are hurtful. We believe that the frightful text, "He that believeth shall be saved and he that believeth not shall be damned," has covered the earth with blood. It has filled the heart with arrogance, cruelty and murder.

... In our country the church was all-powerful, and although divided into many sects, would instantly unite to repel a common foe. Paine struck the first grand blow.

The Age of Reason did more to undermine the power of the Protestant Church than all other books then known. It furnished an immense amount of food for thought. It was written for the average mind, and is a straightforward, honest investigation of the Bible, and of the Christian system.

...Paine denied the authority of bibles and creeds; this was his crime, and for this the world shut the door in his face, and emptied its slops upon him from its windows.

I challenge the world to show that Thomas Paine ever wrote one line, one word in favor of tyranny – in favor of immorality; one line, one word against what he believed to be for the highest and best interest of mankind, one line, one word against justice, charity, or liberty, and yet he has been pursued as though he had been a fiend from hell.

... Can you wonder that we point with pride to the fact that infidelity has ever been found battling for the rights of man, for the liberty of conscience, and for the happiness of all?

... Infidelity is liberty; all religion is slavery. In every creed man is slave of God – women is the slave of man and the sweet children are the slaves of all.

We do not want creeds, we want knowledge – we want happiness.

...All has been accomplished by the heroic few. The men of science have explored heaven and earth, and with infinite patience have furnished the facts. The brave thinkers have used them. The gloomy caverns of superstition have been transformed into temples of thought, and the demons of the past are the angels of today.

... Thomas Paine was one of the intellectual heroes...

...He lived a long, laborious and useful life. The world is better for his having lived. For the sake of truth he accepted hatred and reproach for his portion. He ate the bitter bread of sorrow. His friends were untrue to him because he was true to himself, and true to them. He lost the respect of what is called society, but kept his own. His life is what the world calls failure and what history calls success.

If to love your fellow-men more than self is goodness, Thomas Paine was good.

If to be in advance of your time – to be a pioneer in the direction of right – is greatness, Thomas Paine was great.

If to avow your principles and discharge your duty in the presence of death is heroic, Thomas Paine was a hero.

