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To Know Paine, Read Him ~ Florence Stapleton, Thomas Paine Chronicler



Thomas Paine and the Clarion Call for American Independence



Review: 'The Man Who Lit the Fuse'

Commentary by Adam Rowe, in *The Wall Street Journal*, on the book,

Thomas Paine and the Clarion Call for American Independence, by Harlow Giles Unger, 2019, Hachette Books

[This article was sent to the *Bulletin* by Edward Dodson.]

American colonists began fighting George III long before they resolved to rid themselves of him. Thomas Paine transformed their resistance into a revolution with *Common Sense*, published in January 1776. Unlike other writers of the time, Paine didn't adopt the gentlemanly style of a statesman. He appealed to his readers' rawest passions without insulting even the most rarified intelligence. Nothing could be more absurd, he wrote, than supposing "a continent to be perpetually governed by an island." If monarchy were truly a divine institution, surely God wouldn't have so often given mankind "an ass for a lion." Any American who favored reconciliation, he insisted, has "the heart of a coward and the spirit of a sycophant."

Common Sense did more than anything else to push the colonies toward a complete separation from the British Empire, and yet, as Harlow Giles Unger laments in "Thomas Paine and the Clarion Call for American Independence"—a brisk and spirited biography—Paine has never been admitted into the Founders' pantheon. Mr. Unger, a prolific historian of the early Republic, offers a passionate brief for Paine's legacy as the "Father of all Founding Fathers" but also, unwittingly, an argument for Paine's status as a wrecking ball rather than an architect.

Born in 1737 in Thetford, a town in eastern England, Paine became well acquainted with the grim ways of the Old World before embarking, in middle age, for the New. Thetford in Paine's youth was known for its festival of public hangings during Lent and Paine's primary school was only yards from the gallows. Despite obvious talents, Paine would not or could not learn Latin, the prerequisite for a professional career and he spent his early years drifting from one failure to another.

He arrived in Philadelphia in the fall of 1774, penniless and unknown but with an introduction from Benjamin Franklin, whom Paine had impressed in London when Franklin was an agent there for the colonies. He found modest success as editor for the *Pennsylvania Magazine*, more than doubling its circulation in less than a year. Then came *Common Sense* and instant fame.

Having "inspired tens of thousands of Americans to take up arms," Mr. Unger writes, Paine also kept "them from throwing down their arms" in despair. He served in Washington's army during its retreat across New Jersey in the winter of 1776. Along the way he wrote his great essay, the one beginning "These are the times that try men's souls." Washington had these stirring words read aloud to his troops just hours before they crossed the Delaware for Trenton—and victory.

After independence, Paine's views fit squarely within the Federalist tradition of Washington and Hamilton. He defended the rights of property against the caprices of legislatures and supported a national bank. By the late 1780s, he had diverted his talents... to designing bridges. It was to promote a bridge design that he returned to Europe in 1787, stumbling again into world-historical events. "A share in two revolutions is living to some purpose," Paine soon wrote happily to Washington.

Rights of Man, Paine's defense of the French Revolution, was an even greater success than his American pamphlet. More elaborate than *Common Sense*, *Rights of Man* was a brilliant attack on hereditary privilege, though vague and blithely utopian about the challenges of building stable institutions on democratic foundations.

Paine had been hurt at not being chosen as a delegate to America's Constitutional Convention, but the French elected him to the National Assembly in 1792, despite his incomprehension of their language. It was a high point of Paine's public career. The fall was dizzyingly swift. Within a year he was imprisoned as an enemy of the revolution, and only blind luck—Robespierre fell from power just before his orders condemning Paine were carried out—kept him from the guillotine.

Mr. Unger's ardent admiration for his subject enlivens his narrative, but his sympathy is so total that it gradually becomes indistinguishable from Paine's own overweening vanity. He

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*Independence Is My Happiness...
My Country Is The World,
My Religion Is To Do Good*
Rights of Man, part 2, 1792

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...Review: Man Who Lit the Fuse, from page 7

overstates Paine's influence on everything from the Bill of Rights to Robert Fulton's steamboat. The many reports of Paine's drinking and slovenly habits Mr. Unger acknowledges only as malicious or jealous lies. By contrast, he describes Thomas Jefferson, clumsily and tastelessly, as "out of touch with the French people . . . with a teenaged Virginia slave-girl to feed his erotic needs and her older brother, a chef, to feed the rest of his body." At least Jefferson, who served as minister to France at the outbreak of the Revolution, spoke French.

Embittered from his imprisonment during the Terror, Paine remained committed to the cause that had nearly killed him. His literary powers, more venomous than ever, focused instead on two unlikely targets: George Washington and organized Christianity. Were he trying to alienate the lingering affections of his adopted countrymen in America, he couldn't have chosen his targets more wisely. Paine began writing *The Age of Reason*, his attack on Christianity, as mobs desecrated French cathedrals. And he somehow convinced himself that President Washington could have freed him from jail in an instant, if he had only lifted a finger to do so. "The world will be puzzled to decide," Paine wrote in an open

letter to Washington, ". . . whether you have abandoned good principles or whether you ever had any." When Napoleon proclaimed himself emperor, by contrast, Paine warmly praised him from the safety of America (having returned, after a 15-year absence, in 1802). Mr. Unger scrupulously relates these facts without realizing how much they undermine his subject's claim to be an Olympian champion of liberal democracy.

Still, with books as with men, genuine virtues are too rare to be overshadowed by common shortcomings. Passionate, occasionally careless and often eloquent, Mr. Unger's biography has the strengths and weaknesses of its subject. It truly soars in recounting that bleak winter of 1776, when the polemicist who only knew how to attack inspired an army that had only known how to retreat.

Mr. Rowe is a teaching fellow at the University of Chicago.
Wall Street Journal website, <https://www.wsj.com>

[Comments, anyone? Mr. Rowe's review abounds with errors and sly jibes; maybe because he is unfamiliar with the many in-depth books on Paine and his times?]



"Camp Thomas Paine"

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, many out-of-work, out-of-housing men and women---mostly men---constructed shelters, huts and lean-tos, out of whatever materials they could put their hands on. This photo is of *Camp Thomas Paine* on littered land along the Hudson River in New York City.