

# Paine in Prison: Perspectives of the Press

by Mariam Touba

*This article is the third in a series of three by Mariam Touba. The first, "Paine in the Luxembourg: the Whys and Wherefores of His Imprisonment", appeared in volume 16, number 3, and the second, "Paine and Danton", in volume 16, number 4.*

Thomas Paine's imprisonment during the French Revolution and his narrow escape from death during its Reign of Terror is certainly a key element in his personal biography. The episode is full of extraordinary ironies as well: Paine's imprisonment by the French Committees for being an English subject while he was, in fact, outlawed in his native land for his writings in support of the French Revolution, or, the failure of the American government to claim him as a citizen of the United States, while he had done so much not only to win its independence but also, with his writings, to create an American identity. But the French Revolution was altogether a dramatic time for everyone—"it was the best of times, it was the worst of times," as Charles Dickens aptly put it—and so Paine's unusual situation could command only so much of the public's attention.

How much of Paine's imprisonment and dilemma could be known to interested parties outside of France? Digital technology now makes it easier to search the newspapers of the day and to provide some samples of the press coverage. It is helpful to keep in mind that newspapers of the 18th century looked quite different from today's tabloids and broadsheets: there were no headlines or pictures, and each issue usually contained only four pages, with the most crucial news on the second and third pages, jumbled together in long columns. Much of the news was repeated from other papers or contained the reports of anonymous letter writers—literally, "correspondents"—on the scene. Readers, however, were used to combing through this fine print and they pored over newspapers avidly.

## The News Reaches America

Thomas Paine was arrested and committed to the Luxembourg Prison on December 28, 1793. His biographers sometimes suggest that the American government could have only imperfect knowledge of his imprisonment in Paris due to the delays in transatlantic travel, the reluctance of the United States minister in Paris, Gouverneur Morris, to give a proper account of Paine's imprisonment, and the transition at the head of the State Department from Thomas Jefferson to Edmond Randolph. The newspaper evidence makes clear, however, that Americans could read of Paine's imprisonment by the third week of March 1794. One can speculate that the news first came into port in Boston, since the New England newspapers were reporting it on March 19 and 20. That news reached New York and Philadelphia (the nation's capital at the time) on March 24. The reports were brief, taken directly from London newspapers, and, as was common, not played up or emphasized in any way. The most accurate of them read:

Paris, Dec. 31. Anacharsis Cloots and Thomas Paine, rendered incapable, by the decree against foreigners, of sitting in the Convention, have been arrested, and seals put upon their papers.<sup>1</sup>

Other reports were less on-target and somewhat more alarming. A few were misdated December 19:

Mr. Thomas Paine, was arrested, and ordered to be tried before the Revolutionary Tribunal.

Anacarsis [sic] Cloots, and Thomas Paine were arrested as suspected persons.

A foreshadowing of this event appeared in American newspapers in late January, reprinting from the London papers of November 13:

A gentleman lately arrived from Paris, and who has been several times in company with T. Paine, the Outlaw,

declares that he is in daily expectation of terminating his career by the guillotine, to which he has made up his mind. His voting to send Louis XVI to America, is the cause assigned, which renders him a suspicious character there." *Dunlap's American Daily Advertiser* [Philadelphia] January 30, 1794

This was widely reprinted in the U.S. at the same time as a false rumor that Paine had sailed for America.

## Speculation in the London Press

The London papers, by their proximity, had much more rapid news of Paris, and actually appeared to take more interest in Thomas Paine's fate:

Thomas Paine, and all foreigners, have been expelled from the French Convention. He is considered as a Brissotine<sup>2</sup>, and a traitor lurking in some obscure corner. *London Packet or New Lloyd's Evening Post*, January 1-3, 1794

News of his imprisonment began appearing in England on January 7, 1794, and this particular news item proved to be remarkably accurate:

Anacharsis Cloots, it is said, will be tried before the Revolutionary Tribunal. With respect to Thomas Paine, it is generally believed that nothing will be done against him for the present. *Whitehall Evening Post*, January 11, 1794, dated Paris, January 4

As Paine was not immediately brought to trial, the London newspapers began to speculate on whether or why he would be spared. The point of view varied greatly, even within the same newspaper, indicating that curiosity, rather than politics, may have been the overriding editorial concern:

TOM PAINE—It will wound the delicacy of this REFORMER, should he escape the *Guillotine* only through Jacobin *contempt*. *Oracle*, January 7, 1794

TOM PAINE certainly owes his present existence to his *poverty*... *Oracle*, January 9, 1794

Tom Paine, who in England, is looked upon as a man deserving of hanging for his violence, in Paris, it is thought, will be Guillotined for his *moderation*. *Morning Post*, January 10, 1794

THOMAS PAINE'S fate appears now determined. One of his late Friends transmitted to us last night the following extract of a letter from Paris dated Dec. 31—"He who gave *Common Sense* to America, and presented the *Rights of Man* to England, will soon pass from this world to that which is to come! He is accused of no crime but an honourable attachment to the BRISSOTINS, whose principles he generally avowed.

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"This difference of opinion, added to his declaration for the life of the late Louis, will soon precipitate him from the Scaffold to the Shades; and, by your next information from this abominable Capital—whence I fervently pray I could make my escape—you may have the particulars of the last moments of a Man whose Political Writings have rendered him precious to Posterity. He will no doubt die by the hands of *Barbarians*, but he will live in the hearts of rational *Freemen*." *Oracle*, January 10, 1794

As time went on without news of his fate, the newspapers began to assert (perhaps with justification) that Paine was preserved not by "lenity" or fear of offending America—"which must be indifferent about it"—but by the wish of the sans-culottes not to give satisfaction to the English government (*Oracle* on January 18) "Tom Paine would have been executed long since, if Robespierre were not sensible how obnoxious he is to the *English* Government, to whose vengeance in this respect he does not wish to administer." *Oracle and Public Advertiser*, May 16, 1794

Honest TOM PAINE yet remains in *durance vile*. The French will not put him to death, because it would please the Combined Powers [Britain and its Continental allies], and they keep him in a state of torturing suspense, because it pleases *themselves!* *St. James Chronicle or, British Evening Post*, April 26, 1794

A rather interesting speculation is that Paine's punishment in England, had he remained, would not have been as dire (hanging or extended imprisonment) as many of his biographers speculate:

Had Tom Paine been convicted in this country of being the author of "The Rights of Man," the worst consequence he had to apprehend was a temporary imprisonment, and perhaps putting his neck into the pillory. But Tom, in making what he calls his escape to France, has changed his berth from the frying-pan to the fire. He has been already a considerable time in prison, and should he once get his *neck* into any of their machines, he cannot get it out again without leaving his *head* behind him. *Oracle and Public Advertiser*, April 7, 1794

### Paine's Prison Experience

Paine's appeals for help are reported in the failure of a delegation of Americans in Paris to effect his release and, additionally, in this appeal to the political club to which Georges Jacques Danton had belonged:

"Thomas Paine has written to the Society of the Cordeliers, from his prison, to request their interference; but the only answer he received was the speech he made in favor of the King." *Lloyd's Evening Post*, March 3, 1794, and several other London papers

Some news of Thomas Paine's life in the Luxembourg reached English readers, as well. The papers did report "Thomas Paine, in his prison here, is determined not to remain idle. A production of his has just made its appearance in English, and bears the title: 'The Age of Reason'." Continuing in a positive light from the radical-leaning *Morning Chronicle*, "This production displays in full force all the qualities that characterize Mr. Paine's other



A part of the Paine statue sculpted by Gutzon Borglum, funded by public subscription organized by Joseph Lewis, and dedicated in 1947 at Montsouris Parc, Paris  
Photo by Robert N. Walsh

writings, and proves that his mind is neither impaired nor embarrassed by the events passing around him, or by what he himself may have suffered." (May 5, 1794)

And, of his friendly relations with the British prisoners of war whom Paine later thanks in his preface to the second part of *The Age of Reason*: "Thomas PAINE and General O'HARA live in the same convent in Paris; they eat together, and are very social companions." *Oracle and Public Advertiser*, April 7, 1794. These British soldiers were brought in to the Luxembourg in mid-January and were identified at that time in the press as General Charles O'Hara, physician William Graham, and surgeon Andrew Bond.<sup>3</sup> These newspapers help preserve the first names of the medical men that are otherwise lost in the telling of Paine's life story. In this and other ways, the newspapers give us the additional insight such primary sources can provide.

1 Paine's papers were examined at the time of his arrest, nothing suspicious was found, and they were not sealed. Anacharsis Cloots was a radical Prussian nobleman who was guillotined in March 1794.

2 The name assigned to the Girondin party, most of whose delegates to the Convention had already been tried and guillotined or were in hiding.

3 Bond and Graham are never fully identified in other published sources by and about Paine. Paine's friend and early biographer, Thomas "Clio" Rickman relates Bond's recollections of his time in the Luxembourg, "Mr. Paine while hourly expecting to die, read to me parts of his 'Age of Reason'; and every night when I left him to be separately locked up, and expected not to see him alive in the morning, he always expressed his belief in the principles of that book, and begged I would tell the world such were his dying opinions." Bond did not agree with Paine's political or theological opinions, but "Mr. Bond's frequent observation when speaking of Mr. Paine was, that he was the most conscientious man he ever knew." Thomas Clio Rickman, *The Life of Thomas Paine*, (London, T.C. Rickman, 1819) p. 104.

*Mariam Touba, a TPF member, is reference librarian at the New-York Historical Society. She was curator of the Thomas Paine exhibit there in 2005. She has written several articles for the Bulletin.*