

Review

Author(s): C. G. Woodson

Review by: C. G. Woodson

Source: *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (Oct., 1938), pp. 487-489

Published by: [Association for the Study of African American Life and History, Inc.](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2714583>

Accessed: 30-05-2015 00:11 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Association for the Study of African American Life and History, Inc. is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Journal of Negro History*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

BOOK REVIEWS

Thomas Paine: America's First Liberal. By S. M. Berthold. (Boston: Meador Publishing Company, 1938. Pp. 260. Price \$2.00.)

The reviewer was a mature man before he ever learned much about Thomas Paine. Against this great man the reviewer had been prejudiced by the orthodox sermons delivered periodically by a highly trained Negro preacher who during his seminary course had learned to belabor all so-called atheists and infidels. Especially were Thomas Paine and Robert G. Ingersoll the objects of his wrath. Becoming interested in history later, the reviewer was surprised that men of this type were ardent advocates of liberty even when it meant the freedom of the Negro. It became clear then that in their exposure of the sham and hypocrisy of the clergy, especially that of the Anglican Church in Paine's day, these lovers of liberty denounced as hypocrites those who preached Christ and Him crucified on Sunday and during the week practiced the devil and him glorified by espousing the cause of the oppressors of the people.

As a worker for freedom Thomas Paine belongs in the class with George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, who also contended that slavery was an evil. George Washington himself once said, "By private letters which I have lately received from Virginia I find that *Common Sense* is working a powerful change there in the minds of many men. Thus his *Common Sense* and many of his *Crisis* were well timed, as none, I believe, who will turn to the epochs at which they were published, will deny." Thomas A. Edison said that Paine was the equal of Washington in making American liberty possible. "Where Washington performed, Paine devised and wrote." John Adams said, "History is to ascribe to Paine the Revolution. Washington's sword would have been wielded in vain, had it not been supported by the pen of Paine." Edmund Burke referred to *Common Sense* as "that celebrated pamphlet which prepared the mind of the people for Independence." Parker Pillsbury said, "Without his *Common Sense*, written in 1775, we should not have had the Declaration of

Independence in 1776." "Some wise men believe Thomas Paine the author of the Declaration of Independence. That probably cannot be proved. But whoever has read *Common Sense* and *Crises* will not doubt that he could have written every word of it. And whoever reads his *Rights of Man* can easily believe that he might have written the Constitution of the United States also! All but its Slavery Compromise, to which he would never have set his hand,—never!" Of him Robert G. Ingersoll said, "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."

But let Thomas Paine speak for himself. In contradistinction to Franklin who said, "Where liberty is, there is my country," Paine said, "Where liberty is not, there is my home." This was his spirit. To this ideal he lived up. When the independence of this country had been won he went to France to assist in the struggle for liberty there. He said, "When in countries that are called civilized, we see age going to the workhouse, and youth to the gallows, something must be wrong in the system of government." "The trade of governing has always been monopolized by the most ignorant and the most rascally individuals of mankind. Despotism supports itself by abject civilization, in which debasement of the human mind, and wretchedness in the mass of the people, are the chief criterions."

Be it said to the credit of Paine that, although he drank brandy freely, he exposed hypocrisy and worked for the triumph of the principles advanced by Jesus of Nazareth. He said, "The people of France were running headlong into Atheism, and I had the work translated in their own language to stop them in that career and fix them in the first article of every man's creed who has any creed at all—I believe in God." "I believe in one God and no more, and I hope for happiness beyond this life—I believe in the equality of man, and I believe that religious duties consist of doing justice, loving mercy, and in endeavoring to make our fellow creatures happy." "And when the Almighty shall have blessed us and made us a people dependent only in Him,

then may our first gratitude be shown by an act of *continental* legislation, which shall put a stop to the importation of Negroes for sale, soften the hard fate of those already here, and in time procure their freedom.”

Thomas Paine was born in England January 29, 1737. He was of Quaker ancestry. He did not adhere to such doctrines, and he never joined any church. Paine served in various capacities. When down and out in England he met Benjamin Franklin whom he favorably impressed. With Franklin he came to Philadelphia in 1774. At first he supported himself there by contributing articles for newspapers. In these articles he advocated the abolition of slavery and the recognition of woman's rights. Next he came out on January 10, 1776, under an assumed name with his *Common Sense* in which he advocated the immediate declaration of independence of this country. In various newspapers he kept up the advocacy and joined the army of patriots.

Paine was appointed by the Continental Congress as the secretary to its Committee on Foreign Affairs, but had to leave the position because of the trouble in the Beaumarchais affair. He then became clerk of the Pennsylvania Assembly, while continuing his newspaper writing, especially through the *Crisis*. Next he went with John Laurens to France. He then alternated between England and France and participated in publicity with respect to the French Revolution. He became a citizen of that country and was elected to the French Assembly. His party was later overthrown by the new faction which got control of the convention, deprived him of his citizenship, and imprisoned him. He was released some time thereafter when claimed by James Monroe as an American citizen.

Returning to this country, he led the life of a friendless man. The religious element whose hypocrisy he had exposed in his *Age of Reason*, branded him everywhere as an infidel and made it difficult for him to find position or friends. He died in New York City June 8, 1809. In spite of all his shortcomings, Paine was a man of great intellect, and he used his powers in behalf of freedom and equality for all. He was really America's first liberal.

C. G. WOODSON