

Paine or Pain?

By Jim Wahl

The strong views and eloquent writings of Thomas Paine have engendered numerous tokens with political motifs, both pro and con. Paine's writing of *Common Sense* in America, and the *Rights of Man* in England had a great influence on public opinion in his time and therefore on subsequent events. My interest has been to study various aspects of his life to try to understand how he was able to have such a large impact on public opinion and how that had an effect on events of the time.

Before discussing any tokens it is necessary to give some background to Paine's life as to how he became a writer of such influence. It is not my intention to dwell upon the content of his writings. The *Rights of Man* was published in two lengthy volumes; for the purposes of this article it is to be noted that his views were very radical for his times.

Many of the ideas expressed in Paine's writings were not completely new, but Paine was an original thinker in expanding and expressing his opinions. When he wrote he was subjective in that all his expressed opinions were his own. His writing style was forceful, straightforward, and written in language people could understand, rapidly convincing his readers to believe that what he wrote was just what they had been thinking. He must have had what would now be called a photographic memory. Later when he wrote the *Age of Reason* in France he was able to quote long passages from the Bible without having reference to a copy, and which he had probably not read since his schooling before he was thirteen years old.

Paine had a long and eventful life, including some narrow escapes from a premature death. He was born January 29, 1737, in Thetford, Norfolk, a town of 2000 inhabitants. His father, Joseph, was a corset and staymaker. He attended a grammar school until he was thirteen, then was apprenticed to his father as a staymaker. He ran away in 1756 to join the crew of a privateer ship, the *Terrible*, captained by the ironically named William Death, in the war against France. His father came to get him off the ship, fortunately for Paine, as in its first battle with a French privateer, the *Vengeance*, all the officers and 90 percent of the crew were killed. He signed on with another privateer, the *King of Prussia*, which had a successful run of about fifteen months, earning some prize money for crew members.

Paine married in 1759, opening his own shop which soon failed, and his wife died in 1760. He was appointed to customs service in 1762 but had to wait for a vacancy before assuming his post in 1764. He was fired in 1765 for failing to adequately check goods passing through customs. Paine was again appointed to customs in 1768 at Lewes in Suffolk. His landlord was Samuel Ollive, who had a tobacco shop. He died in 1769 leaving the shop to his widow who was not able to adequately manage the shop. Paine tried to help by taking part ownership which was also unsuccessful and resulted in considerable debt to him. He married Elizabeth Ollive, Samuel Ollive's daughter, in 1771. He spent the winter of 1771-72 in London lobbying for an increase in customs officers pay. Paine's own pay was only 50 pounds per year, and he had the expense of keeping his own horse to carry out his duties. He was again fired from customs service for being absent without leave. Creditors seized all of Paine's assets and he and his wife separated. Paine never did remarry.

During this period while he was at Lewes, he met with a group called the White Hart Evening Club which discussed economics and politics. He became interested in politics and was known as skilled in debating and presenting his arguments, achieving some local fame. He also knew Benjamin Franklin somewhere about this time, probably during the winter he spent in London.. When he had all his financial and employment problems in 1774, Franklin urged him to go to America and provided him with letters of introduction to use in Philadelphia. Paine arrived

in Philadelphia very ill in November 1774. From his connection with Franklin he was appointed editor of the Pennsylvania Magazine where he had free reign to hone his writing skills in writing many articles and tracts.

At this point Paine was almost 38 years of age, and events of his whole life up to then were those of a young man trying to make his way in the world, without much success, and having had many failures. His outlook on the world was shaped by his background and experiences to that time. In Thetford where he was born, his father was in the lower middle class, without enough property to be an eligible voter. Thetford had only 31 people eligible to vote, of a population of 2000, with two representatives in Parliament, the same as Bristol, a thriving and growing port city. In England only 5 percent of the people were eligible to vote, and 5000 voters elected one-half of the Parliament members. His father was a Quaker, making him ineligible to hold any sort of public office, and Quakers were also considered to be non-conformists and dissidents. Part of his later success in influencing public opinion was his firm belief in equal rights for all, undoubtedly forged by the conditions of his life to that time.

In America, Paine found his natural calling and achieved fame through his authorship of Common Sense. It was also a matter of being in the right place at the right time for Paine. He arrived just before the start of fighting in the American Revolution, and being in Philadelphia, the location of the Continental Congress, he became acquainted with the leading Americans of the day. The American Revolution began as a rebellion against the perceived wrongs of the English government towards the colonies. The idea of actual independence was not new, but Paine's Common Sense, published in early 1776, galvanized public opinion in favor of independence from England. America's population at this time was under 3,000,000, and 120,000 copies of Common Sense sold in the first three months after publication, and 500,000 copies in the first year. He wrote many tracts during the war and also served on the staff of General Greene.

Paine's hobby was mechanics, and he developed a design for a long span iron bridge in 1785. A model of the bridge was built in Philadelphia, attracting much attention, but attempts to have the bridge built over the Schuylkill River in Philadelphia were not successful, as the estimated cost of \$33,000 was considered to be too high. He went back to England and also France in 1787 in an attempt to sell the bridge idea. A model was built in London on which Paine owed considerable money which he could not pay. He gave up his rights to the bridge, which was eventually built by others over the Wear River at Sunderland.

Once again, Paine was in the right place at the right time when the French Revolution began in 1789. Edmund Burke, who had favored the American cause in its dispute with England over taxation and other repressive measures to the American colonies, wrote Reflections on the French Revolution in 1790. Burke's opinion can be summed up in a phrase from the Reflections, "learning will be cast into the mire and under the hoofs of the swinish multitude". Paine took issue with Burke's opinions and caused him to write a refutation of Burke in part 1 of Rights of Man in 1791, and elaboration of his ideas in part 2, published early in 1792. Part 2 was an instant success, quickly selling 100,000 copies at a cost of sixpence. Many other copies were pirated. The government had known Paine was writing the Rights of Man but allowed it to be published thinking that the cost would prevent the common people from buying and reading it.

The Rights of Man electrified the people causing much ferment and some rioting. Both Burke and Paine were burned or hung in effigy by opposing groups. One of Paine's points was that hereditary monarchy was wrong and constituted ruling from the grave. William Pitt decided the Rights of Man was seditious and Paine was indicted on charges of treason in 1792. The French elected him to the National Convention, and Paine narrowly escaped to France because a warrant for his arrest had not yet been issued. Paine was defended at the trial by Thomas Erskine, and was convicted in absentia.

The Government was plainly apprehensive over the possibility of a revolution and took a number of counter measures. There was a Royal Proclamation against sedition, subversion and

riot in May, 1792. Habeus corpus was suspended in 1794, providing that prisoners could be held for an indefinite period without trial, followed by the Treason Act of 1795, and the Seditious Meeting act in 1796. Many were arrested and prosecuted merely for printing or selling Rights of Man.

Paine arrived in Paris September 29, 1792, shortly after a mob massacred over 1,000 prisoners. Charles Dickens uses this event in a climactic part of *A Tale of Two Cities*. Paine was a moderate and argued for banishment of Louis XVI to America and against execution. He was a member of the Jacobin party, which was turning violent under Robespierre. His views earned him the enmity of Robespierre and Marat, who were largely responsible for the Terror; and he was imprisoned December 27, 1793, where he had another narrow escape. Robespierre signed an order for Paine's execution in July, 1794. There is a story, possibly apocryphal, that Paine was scheduled for execution the next day in a group of 160 prisoners. The jailers would go around and put a chalk mark on the cell door of those scheduled for execution. The story is that Paine's cell door was open at that time so the mark got placed on the inside and so, not visible the next morning. The origin of the story is in a letter Paine wrote seeking help while he was in prison.

An illustration in R.C. Bell's *Political and Commemorative Pieces*, page 218, shows how this could possibly happen, providing the French prison was similar to Newgate, the subject of the picture. The cell door is of solid wood opening outward, so the mark would be on the inside when the doors were closed and locked at night, then passed over in the morning. Marat was assassinated and Robespierre deposed July 27, 1794, and promptly executed, removing Paine from any further danger. After intervention of the new American ambassador, James Monroe, he was released late in 1794. He again took his seat in the Convention but had little influence thereafter, although continuing his writing, notably the *Age of Reason*. He did not speak French and never learned the French language. It is known that in this period he actively promoted revolution in Britain against the monarchy. He stayed in France until 1802, as he would not leave before getting a safe passage to America as an American citizen, as he would be arrested if his ship was stopped by the English. He then lived in America until he died in 1809.

Here is a clever poem written by Arthur O'Connor, an Irish patriot. He reportedly distributed the poem on his way to prison in 1798. Being in enough trouble already, he prudently distributed the version below on the left as written, with his true meaning on the right.

The pomp of courts and pride of kings,
I prize above all earthly things;
I love my country; the king,
Above all men his praise I sing:
The royal banners are displayed,
And may success the standard aid.

I would fain banish far from hence,
The Rights of Man and Common Sense;
Confusion to his odious reign,
That foe of princes, Thomas Paine!
Defeat and ruin seize the cause
Of France, its liberties, and laws!

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Because of the great differences of opinion about the Rights of Man many views were represented on the tokens. This is not a check list, and other tokens than those described here could be attributed to some of the different views.

A penny size token in white metal, Middlesex 208, has a well executed bust of Thomas Paine. This is the only token to show a likeness of Paine. The reverse refers to the mountain in labor, a fable attributed to Aesop, (6th century B.C). A book of the complete fables of Aesop in

our local library does not have this fable in it, however the fable was referred to or used by Horace, the Roman poet, c. 65 B.C. The reverse illustrates these words from the fable: "A huge gap appeared in the side of the mountain. At last a tiny mouse came forth." I think this may be a satire on Paine and his membership in the National Convention of France. In the chambers, the Jacobins sat on raised chairs or benches, so they were higher than the other members and were known as the Mountain.

A vitriolic token on the Rights of Man and Paine is Middlesex 209, in white metal and extremely rare. It is attributed to have been issued by Skidmore, who issued a number of anti-Paine tokens, notably the End of Pain series. A somewhat degraded specimen of this token was offered in the Noble sale, and I was fortunate to see a high quality example in the Bobbe's exhibit at the A.N.A. convention in Portland in August.

The End of Pain series is included in the Spence tokens, although mostly made by Skidmore. These are Middlesex 827-835, 836, 1105-1110. The reference to Pain is thought of as a pun, but Paine's original name in England was Pain, as he added the e to his name only after coming to America in 1774. Spence would now be called a socialist and had his own agenda, but he agreed with Paine's opinions as in his "noted advocates for the Rights of Man" series, Middlesex 677, 837, 838, and 1111-1119. One of the three Thomases is Sir Thomas More, who was actually beheaded by King Henry VIII in 1535, and for different reasons.

The trigger inspiring Paine to write the Rights of Man was Edmund Burke's Reflections on the French Revolution. Burke was a respected member of parliament, and a token, Yorkshire 3, was issued in 1798 in memory of his death, July 9, 1797.

In Paine's trial for treason, December, 1792, Paine was defended by Thomas Erskine, but was found guilty. Erskine also successfully defended Thomas Hardy and others from seditious charges, and Home Tooke on treason charges. (Middlesex 1010-1013 and 1044-1047) Daniel Eaton was prosecuted six times for printing Rights of Man and other works between 1793 and 1796. He was acquitted the first five times, until found guilty in 1796. He went to America to escape punishment, but was imprisoned for fifteen months on his return three years later. After his first trial acquittal, the London Corresponding Society had a token issued honoring this event, Middlesex 203, and for Thomas Hardy, Middlesex 204-206. I particularly like Eaton's own trade token, Middlesex 301, showing a cock on a fence crowing over swine in the mire below. Eaton lived in a house he called the Cock and Swine, but I like to think this is Eaton's laugh at authority for prosecuting him.

There were mules of the designs referred to, mostly by Skidmore. Many of the Spence tokens also exhibit themes on rights and unjust laws. One other group of tokens meriting mention are those showing the bridge utilizing Paine's design, Durham 2, 3, 10 and 11. The bridge is over the Wear River at Sunderland, opened in 1796 and used continuously until replaced in 1929.

References	Author	Published
Thomas Paine: Political and Social Thought	Gregory Claeys	1989
Thomas Paine: Apostle of Freedom	Jack Fruchtman	1994
Political and Commemorative Pieces, etc.	R.C. Bell	1987



T. Paine