



## THE PUBLIC REPORT



# SHATTER PROOF PAINE

by Michael Foot

## COMMON SENSE

ADDRESSED TO THE

INHABITANTS

OF

A M E R I

On the following interesting



According to reasonably respectable sources, Napoleon Bonaparte once sought a meeting with Thomas Paine in the Paris garret where he was living, and the encounter was for sure a strange, romantic affair.

Napoleon at the time had just been appointed, or rather self-appointed, First Consul; he was barely thirty years old; he had taken little more than the first steps up the ladder to immortal fame. Thomas Paine by that time was a near-forgotten, dishevelled, allegedly drunken Englishman in exile.

Yet Napoleon knew his man. He said that he slept with Thomas Paine's famous book "Rights of Man" under his pillow. (Almost certainly a lie; at least Josephine, the real love of his life, never noticed). And then he added, to drive the tribute home, with just the touch of Napoleonic charm and flattery which makes the words ring true: "A statue of gold ought to be erected to you in every city of the universe."

But Napoleon's advice went unheeded. It was not until more than one hundred and fifty years after Paine's death that a statue was erected to him in his native town in Suffolk, a proposition which a Thetford Conservative councillor of the day had condemned: "A monument to Thomas Paine in the Market Place would be an insult to the town."

The topsy-turvy reputation of Thomas Paine in the years since his death is a tale hardly less instructive than the way his contemporaries in two continents found it difficult to

gauge his true greatness. A few good writers, but only a few, have written about him. He speaks to us in a modern voice, so much more truly prophetic than most others of his time. But to clinch the case, the bare facts must be retraced.

When he died in New York on June 8, 1809, no one took much notice. A Quaker watchmaker, an old Frenchwoman alleged (falsely, as far as we know) to be Paine's mistress, her two little boys and two negro pallbearers were the only people at the graveside. Next day the leading New York newspaper supplied an epitaph: "Paine had lived long (he was seventy-two), done some good and much harm."

Few of his legion of enemies spoke in so temperate a tone. Since his return to America in 1802 he had been denounced from the pulpits as the most wanton of blasphemers. Shortly after his death a full-length biography appeared in which accusations of drunkenness, lechery and dirtiness in all his personal habits were added to the charge-sheet. "He had no country in the world, and it may truly be said that he had not a friend. Was ever a man so wretched? Was ever enormous sinner so justly punished."

Three years before his death he was stopped at the polling booth when he went to cast his vote; the men in power chose to deny his claim to be a citizen of the Republic — he who had first dared to use those thrilling words "the United States of America". So he died in contempt, poverty and squalor.

It has taken generations to wipe away the mud. For years, on both sides of the Atlantic, publishers went to prison for attempting to reprint his books. By some inscrutable Stalinite censorship, whole histories of the American Revolution were written without mentioning the American Trotsky.

A century after his death Theodore Roosevelt could still dismiss him as a "fifthly little atheist," (altering the charge "atheist" to "deist", by the way, when he discovered the facts, but never mitigating the rest of the indictment.) Even now he is sometimes written down as a crank, a busybody, a third-rate taproom philosopher.

And yet, judged by the test of his impact on his own generation and many since, Thomas Paine was the most far-seeing Englishman of the eighteenth century. He was the greatest exile ever driven from these shores. In the teeth of all the slanders and the libels, he remains the major prophet of democracy and representative government, the much-vaunted creed of our Western world. Today, Presidents and Prime Ministers, even Queens on Christmas Day, make obeisance before the central theory of Thomas Paine, the English outlaw and the outcast in the land of his adoption.

Finally, the greatest American of the age never wavered in his opinion. Thomas Jefferson always paid honor to Thomas Paine. He knew how Paine had shaped and captured — and refused to betray — the spirit of 1776. That was his supreme moment. Paine was not the very first to use the word but he more than any other had made Americans unafraid to declare their independence.

"The debate is ended," he insisted; America must fight. It was as if in the Britain of 1940 the Churchill resistance speeches had been made not by a national leader but by an unknown journalist who suddenly forced his way to the center of the stage.

Indeed, in another sense, it was so much more difficult for Paine to give the summons to battle. It was not merely that he made Americans see the prize of independence as something within their grasp; not merely that he personified their frustrations in his picture of George III, the "Royal Brute of England," the "hardened, sullen tempered Pharaoh." He had also to persuade the aristocratic experts and

fainthearts that an upstart pamphleteer understood the English political system better than they.

It was not true that the King was the unwilling prisoner of his Ministers, that a message of magnanimous reprieve and reconciliation would miraculously arrive by the next boat. Paine never had the advantage of studying Namier, but he knew how the structure of politics in the reign of George III really worked.

He explained how the King and his Ministers distributed their "loaves and fishes." He knew the contempt in which "the colonists" were held. He knew, while most Americans would not face it, that America must fight. Jefferson was only nineteen at the time, but he never forgot the man who performed this service to his country.

Thus if the historians malign Paine himself, they are still forced to acknowledge the victory of his opinions. Our modern spacious histories of his times, written with all the advantages of hindsight, portray the American Revolution, the French Revolution, and the movement which led to the English Reform Bill as three parts of the same whole. Each reacted on the other and each is incomprehensible without the other.

A few Englishmen realized that the cause of English freedom was at stake in the American revolt. A few Englishmen realized that English freedom might be forfeited in the war against Revolutionary France. A few Americans realized America's interest in the triumph of the French Revolution. Paine had seen that the same battle was being fought in all three countries. He was the link between the three convulsions.

He, an Englishman (and thus he signed anonymously his great American pamphlet, "Common Sense") was given the key to the Bastille by Lafayette to take across the Atlantic and lay on Washington's table. He wrote:

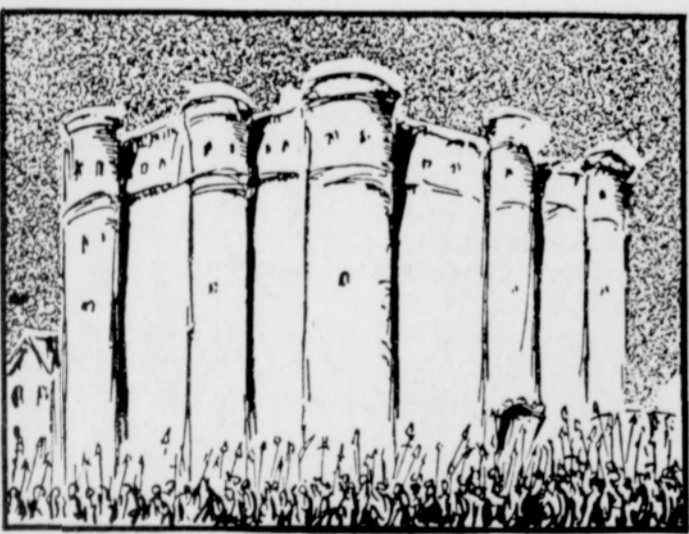
"That the principles of America opened the Bastille is not to be doubted, and therefore the key comes to the right place. I am returned from France to London, and am engaged to return to Paris when the Constitution shall be proclaimed and to carry the American flag in the procession. I have not the least doubt of the final and complete success of the French Revolution. Little ebbs and flowings, for and against, the natural companions of revolution, sometimes appear; but the full current of it is, in my opinion, as fixed as the Gulf Stream."

The England which had denounced Paine as a traitor could not remain immune; it was washed by the same sea. William Blake had helped him to escape from London. William Cobbett, once his most ferocious assailant, admitted:

"At his expiring flambeau I lighted my taper."

All the other English rebels who raised the ferment which led to the Reform Bill pored over his forbidden pages. "Government is for the living not for the dead," had been Paine's reply to Burke in 1791; forty years later, Eng-

Hendrik Willem van Loon



THE BASTILLE

## BASTILLE DAY

Bastille Day, July 14, was French Independence Day and is generally regarded as the beginning of the French Revolution in 1789. The hated symbol of kings and arbitrary rule, the French rebels were determined to attack and destroy the prison. They were joined by the Garde Francaise, which had been sent to stop them. When the Bastille defenders refused to surrender the mob stormed the prison and destroyed it. "That the Bastille was attacked with an enthusiasm of heroism, such only as the highest animation of liberty could inspire," wrote Thomas Paine in "The Rights of Man". "As it is not difficult to perceive, from the enlightened state of mankind, the hereditary Governments are verging to their decline, and that Revolutions on the broad basis of national sovereignty and Government by representation, are making their way in Europe, it would be an act of wisdom to anticipate their approach, and produce Revolution by reason and accommodation, rather than commit them to the issue of convulsions. From what we now see, nothing of reform in the political world ought to be held improbable. It is an age of Revolutions, in which everything may be looked for."

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