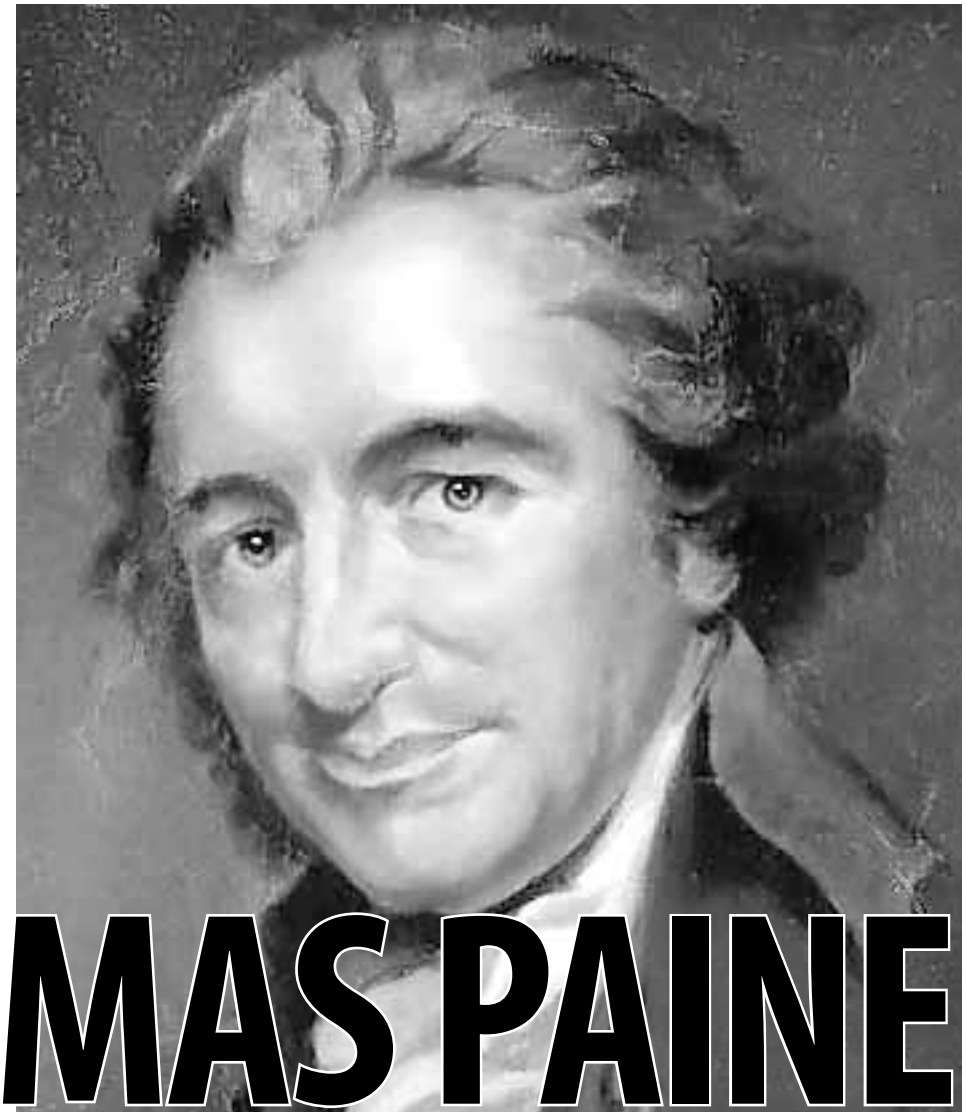
Thomas Paine was a radical writer whose ideas grew out of the revolutionary times through which he lived and whose importance lay in his ability to move public opinion by reaching a readership beyond traditional elite politics. **Edward Royle** examines his impact on Liberalism and liberal thought.



THOMAS PAINE

Thomas Paine (1737–1809)

Paine was born into an artisan family in Thetford, Norfolk, on 29 January 1737. His father, a stay-maker and a Quaker, sent his son to the local grammar school where he was well educated in English but not in Latin, for his father did not approve of the pagan classics. Thus spared learning the classical forms of rhetoric which were then conventional among the educated, Paine's later written style appeared to his contemporaries as fresh, direct and open to the less well-educated public. Its cadences and imagery remain remarkably accessible to the modern reader. Following the early death in 1760 of his first wife, the daughter of an excise officer, he applied to join the Excise Service and in 1764 was appointed to the Grantham district. He was, however, soon dismissed for allegedly neglecting his duties. Four years later, after a short period working as a teacher in London, he was reappointed in Lewes where he married his landlady's daughter and helped run their tobacconist's shop. Bankruptcy, the breakdown of his marriage, and a second dismissal from the Excise then led him to emigrate to Philadelphia in 1774.

From this first stage in his life Paine took experiences that shaped his subsequent political thought. As an unenthusiastic member of the hated Excise Service, he knew at first hand the unfairness of the tax burden, and the oppressive power of the eighteenth-century state. This may have predisposed him towards the Americans, whose revolt against Britain was provoked by the imposition of new excise duties. As an artisan and failed shopkeeper he also appreciated the economic insecurities of small tradesmen, particularly the problem of the lack of coinage, so necessary to their livelihoods, and their resentment at the use by the higher classes of paper bills and promissory notes. This fed into his anti-aristocratic politics and his suspicion of paper money. Paine's political ideal was always to be that of the small, independent producer, free from oppression and exploitation from above and from poverty below. He had gained experience of the latter when he served on the vestry at Lewes where, among other things, he had to share in the administration of the poor law. Finally, he took from this first stage of his career experience of organising and expressing protest, having taken up the cause of the excise officers, whose low pay contrasted unfavourably with that of the excise supervisors and collectors. His first pamphlet was *The Case of the Officers of the Excise* (1772) and it was while lobbying for this in London that he met Benjamin Franklin, the colonial

agent for Pennsylvania, who gave him an introduction to his friends in Philadelphia.

The new world that Paine entered in 1774 would have seemed familiar to him, with many of his English experiences replicated in an enhanced form. Philadelphia had a vibrant literary culture of newspapers and coffee houses in which the common issues of the day were discussed much as they had been back in Lewes. Paine quickly grasped the essence and tone of public affairs, and was soon contributing to the *Pennsylvania Magazine*. Then, in January 1776, he wrote the first of his three most significant works: a short pamphlet entitled *Common Sense*, which denounced the oppressive government of George III and demanded an independent America. This was more than all but a minority of Americans would have demanded at this time but it caught the flow of opinion and made Paine a key player in events over the next few years.

Once the war had broken out and was initially going badly for the colonists, their spirit was rallied by the encouraging rhetoric of Paine's *Crisis* papers, first published in the *Pennsylvania Journal* in December 1776. The ringing tones with which the first *Crisis* paper opened – 'These are the times that try men's souls' – ensured that Paine will always have a place at the forefront of modern English political propaganda. But he was not a diplomatic man and, whether from naivety or courageousness, he proved better at making enemies than friends. He failed to appreciate that America, like England, was an unequal society and that the colonial leaders were neither so radical nor so low born as the stay-maker from Norfolk. When he used state papers to expose a corrupt arms deal with the French in 1778–79, he was forced to resign as secretary to the Committee on Foreign Affairs, and when he defended the Bank of Pennsylvania's refusal to issue more paper money, he was accused of forgetting the poor. Perhaps a little weary and disillusioned with the conservatism of the infant United States now it no longer needed – nor, apparently, valued – his support, he returned to Europe to forward his interest in scientific experiments and in particular his plan for an iron bridge.

Political events in France soon created a new opportunity for his literary talents. The revolution of 1789 was widely welcomed in Britain, where friends of the American Revolution saw it as another stage on the way to liberty and progress. But one such friend, Edmund Burke, took a very different view. Sooner than most of his contemporaries, he saw that the French were tearing up tradition and he feared for the consequences of a rootless and theory-based revolution founded on abstract rights. In November 1790 he published these doubts as *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Paine was one of many to rush to refute this work, publishing in February 1791 Part 1 of *Rights of Man*, his second great work of political propaganda. In this work, and especially in Part 2, issued a year later, Paine employed the same logic as he had earlier applied to the American situation. The French were defended but, more importantly, the British system was attacked. With a characteristically pithy aphorism Paine pronounced that 'An hereditary governor is as inconsistent as an hereditary author' and he dismissed Burke's florid rhetoric with the telling image: 'He pities the plumage but forgets the dying bird'. *Rights of Man* became one of the most influential and widely circulated political tracts of the 1790s, with 200,000 copies said to have been sold in the first two years. Though this figure is probably an exaggeration, it is certainly true that the work was widely distributed, reissued, and avidly read and discussed by tradesmen and artisans in radical societies throughout urban Britain. Against the background of the war between Britain and France, and the threat of an Irish rising and a French invasion, Paine's advocacy proved to be both a blessing and a curse for British radicals: a blessing because it focused the argument against Burke and the British constitution and gave it popular expression; a curse because its extremism could be used to tar even moderate reformers (the majority) with the republican brush. Paine's importance, indeed, was written up by the government for its own propagandist purposes. He was convicted of seditious libel in September 1792, and, thereafter, seditious intent could be imputed to any who sold his works or praised his ideas.

By September 1792, Paine had moved on again and was in France where, true to his principles, he supported the abolition of the monarchy but not the execution of the king. As a member of the National Convention, he joined the moderate Girondin faction and so fell foul of the more extreme Jacobins, and for a time he was held in the Luxembourg prison under sentence of death. It was at this time that he composed his third great work, *The Age of Reason*, written in two parts before and during his time in prison and published in 1794–95. In this work he applied to Christianity and the Bible the same remorseless logic and scathing prose with which he had earlier attacked the British monarchy and constitution. Ironically, Paine's motivation was conservative. He was writing from within the British tradition of Natural Theology to support belief in the God of Nature and against the materialistic atheism of philosophers like his friend Condorcet. But his popular language proved a gift to his political opponents and an embarrassment to many of his friends in Britain and America, as his religious iconoclasm was branded atheism and used to discredit still further his republican views. When Paine was released in 1795 and returned to America, he found the country he had helped to shape cold and unfriendly towards him. Only a few loyal friends were there to support him in his declining years, which ended in New York in June 1809.

Paine essentially belonged to that growing number of radical free-market economists who derived their ideas from the Scottish Enlightenment and Adam Smith.

Within Paine's political writings, notably *Rights of Man* Part 2 and also the brief *Agrarian Justice* (1796), there is a programme for social and economic action. Paine essentially belonged to that growing number of radical free-market economists who derived their ideas from the Scottish Enlightenment and Adam Smith. His economics, like his politics, were about the liberty of the individual. Government was 'a

Further reading

The work of resurrecting Paine's reputation owed much to the American rationalist preacher, Moncure D. Conway, whose *The Life of Thomas Paine with a history of his literary, political and religious career in America, France, and England*, 2 vols. (1892) and *The Writings of Thomas Paine*, 4 vols. (1894–96) were published by G. P. Putnam in New York.

The fullest modern collection of Paine's writings is Philip S. Foner (ed.), *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, 2 vols. (New York: Citadel Press, 1945), to which should now be added Hazel Burgess (ed.), *Thomas Paine: A collection of unknown writings* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), although the latter was published too late to be consulted for this essay.

Two important studies, which differ in some respects from the interpretation offered here, are Gregory Claeys, *Thomas Paine: Social and Political Thought* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1995) and Mark Philp, *Paine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989). Good recent surveys include John Keane, *Tom Paine. A Political Life* (London: Bloomsbury, 1995) and a collection of articles by Bernard Vincent, published as *The Transatlantic Republican: Thomas Paine and the Age of Revolutions* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005).

necessary evil'. Monopolies were evil and against the public interest, but there was one monopoly – the hereditary interest in land – which pressed particularly hard on the poor. His contribution to the contemporary debate about the poor laws was conventionally radical in that he thought they should be abolished, but he was unconventional in that he wanted them to be replaced by a progressive tax on real estate to provide work for the unemployed, education for children, pensions for the aged, and gifts for all on the occasions of their births, marriages and deaths as compensation for the loss of their birth right in the land.

This was certainly provocatively radical and added to conservative prejudice against his views, but, as Thomas Spence pointed out in *Rights of Infants* (1797), Paine was prepared to sell the birthright of the people for 'poor beggarly stipends' of a few pounds. Unlike Spence, Paine did not assert the inalienable right of the people to common ownership of the land. Perhaps for this reason he left no band of disciples to urge his views on the nineteenth-century land reform movement, which looked instead to Spence for inspiration. Paine's economics were rooted in his politics and he was always an upholder of private property in the liberal tradition of John Locke, whereby the right to private property resided in the added value created by improvement. He was perhaps naive in his expectation that his progressive tax on ground values would destroy the landed classes but he fundamentally thought that, because property underpinned political power, it was essential for private property to remain to underpin democracy. Without property the small man could expect neither independence nor freedom. Paine's ideal, as expressed in *Rights of Man*, was that 'Every man is a proprietor in government, and considers it a necessary part of his business to understand. It concerns his interest, because it affects his property. He examines the cost, and compares it with the advantages.' Here we have political equality expressed in the language of the market and underpinned by utilitarian philosophy. This was the voice of the tax collector and the Lewes vestry man, not the prophet of socialism. In Paine's thought, politics were always primary, all else flowing from that fact. This remained the message of radicalism for a hundred years and more.

The significance of Paine's views has been much debated. His ideas were certainly radical when compared with the mainstream of his times but to see him as a forerunner of modern socialism and a founder of the welfare state is both fanciful and unhistorical. His ideas were the creation of the later eighteenth century and can be understood only in that context. Paine existed at the extreme edge of contemporary opinion: belief in God, but in deism not Christianity; belief in the free market and against monopolies, but an advocate of new taxes on the rich; a constitutional reformer, but one who was not only a democrat but a republican. His extreme reputation was exaggerated by his opponents and the tradition of support for Paine that was passed down to the nineteenth century was sustained – with the notable exception of William Cobbett – only by men and women who were not ashamed to be called republicans and atheists. So although Paine's ideas in the later nineteenth century sat easily on the radical edge of mainstream Liberalism, this was seldom acknowledged because the name of Paine continued to have the whiff of brimstone about it. He remained marginalised until at least the end of the century, after which his reputation was gradually rehabilitated until, at the bicentenary of American Independence, his part in that struggle could at last be recognised, even by a conservative like President Reagan. In Britain, with less justification, the twentieth century witnessed an attempt to adopt Paine for socialism, a view which failed to take into account the essential radical-liberalism of Paine's writings. Yet, in 1989, the true Paine-ite moment of 1789 was recaptured when, with the acknowledged failure of socialist regimes, political change was seized upon once again by revolutionaries across Europe as the necessary precondition for restoring the welfare of the people.

Edward Royle is Emeritus Professor of History at the University of York. He began his research in Cambridge in the 1960s, publishing studies of popular radicalism and freethought between 1791 and 1915, and has since researched and written about various aspects of radicalism, religion and the broader social history of Britain since the mid-eighteenth century.