

# Thomas Paine, 1737–1809

*‘Thomas Paine was one of the first journalists to use media as a weapon against the entrenched power structure. He should be resurrected as the moral father of the Internet.’ —Jon Katz*

**T**HOMAS PAINE WAS AN ENGLISH-BORN POLITICAL ACTIVIST, philosopher, pamphleteer and revolutionary described by historian Saul K. Padovar as ‘a corsetmaker by trade, a journalist by profession, and a propagandist by inclination’.

The son of a Quaker stay-maker, Paine was educated at the local grammar school and at the age of thirteen became an apprentice stay-maker in Kent. This was followed by work as an exciseman in Lincolnshire and a school teacher in London. In 1772, he wrote his first pamphlet, an argument outlining the work grievances of his fellow excise officers. Paine printed 4,000 copies and distributed them to members of British Parliament.

Paine emigrated to the British American colonies at the start of the American Revolution. He settled in Philadelphia where he became editor of the *Pennsylvania Magazine*. Paine’s seminal 1775 essay, *African Slavery in America*, was published in this periodical, and the piece paved the way for the country’s first anti-slavery society to be set up just a few weeks later, with Paine one of its founders.

Paine’s volume *Common Sense* (1776) advocated the right of the American colonies to be free of British rule and argued for republicanism as the sole rational means of government. It was the most widely read pamphlet of the Revolution selling more than half a million copies and paved the way for the Declaration of Independence. It has been argued that the engaging and irreverent prose style which Paine adopted was more innovative than the message.

Charged with seditious libel for advocating an end to monarchy in Britain, Paine fled to France and became deeply involved in the French Revolution. *The Rights of Man* (1791) posits that popular political revolution is permissible when a government does not safeguard the natural rights of its people. In 1793 Paine was imprisoned in Paris for refusing to endorse the execution of Louis XVI and began to write *The Age of Reason: Being an Investigation of True and Fabulous Theology* (1794–1807) in which he advocated deism, promoted reason and freethought, and argued against institutional religion in general and Christian doctrine in particular. It proffered a new vision of the republican state as a promoter of social welfare redressing poverty through an interventionist programme of welfare redistribution, including old-age pensions, marriage allowances and maternity benefits. Paine’s pamphlet *Agrarian Justice* (1797) discussed the origins of property and introduced the concept of a national minimum wage.

Paine was also an inventor and engineer and was fascinated by bridges. Perhaps his most impressive engineering feat was the Sunderland Bridge crossing the Wear River at Wearmouth. This 240-foot span bridge was completed in 1796. Only the second cast iron bridge ever built it was, at the time, also the largest single-span bridge in the world. Renovated in 1857, the bridge remained until 1927, when it was replaced with the current crossing.

Thomas Paine’s revolutionary activism and rejection of traditional Christian doctrine tarnished his reputation and he died alone in America in 1809, shunned by the country he had helped create, reviled as an infidel, denied the right to vote, his grave desecrated and his bodily remains stolen. There were but six mourners at his funeral, half of them former slaves. *The New York Citizen* wrote in its obituary ‘He had lived long, did some good and much harm’. A popular nursery rhyme ran:

*Poor Tom Paine! there he lies:  
Nobody laughs and nobody cries.  
Where he has gone or how he fares  
Nobody knows and nobody cares.*

Despite this sorry end to his life, Paine’s writing greatly influenced his contemporaries and inspired such future radical thinkers and reformers as William Cobbett, Richard Carlile, Moncure Conway, Charles Bradlaugh, Bertrand Russell and Christopher Hitchens. \*

CARTOON PORTRAIT OF THOMAS PAINE BY UNKNOWN ARTIST, 1792, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



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