

The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the
Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

Founded by EDWARD C. HEGELER

VOL. XXXV (No. 10)

OCTOBER, 1921

NO. 785

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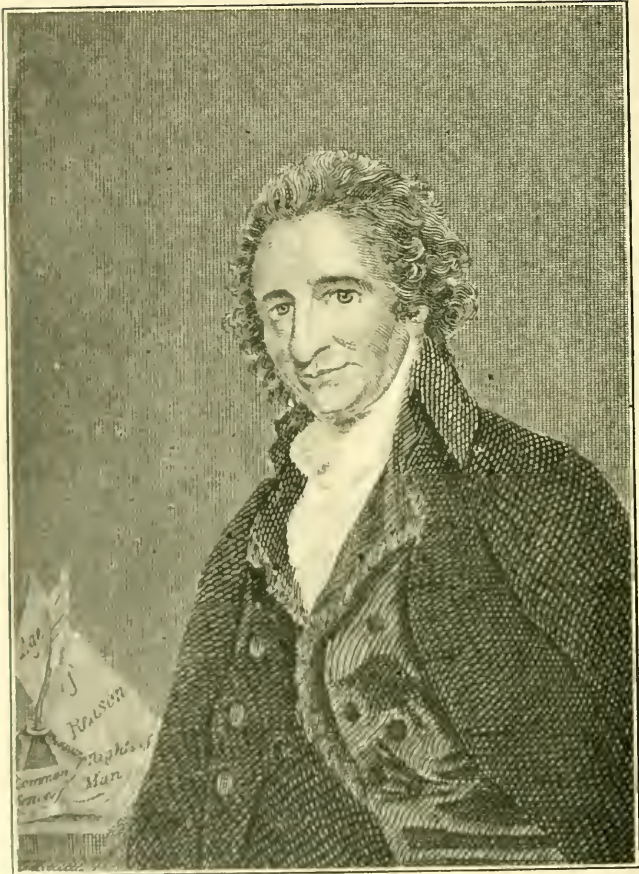
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THOMAS PAINE.

From Memoirs of The Life of Thomas Paine.

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TOM PAINE.

BY M. JOURDAIN.

THE late years of the eighteenth century in England was lit by an optimism in the minds of some leading spirits that was surprising, considering the troubled waters of the current in which they were borne along. This confidence in the coming change was founded in an exalted belief in the supreme power of human reason. Why should it not, Godwin questioned, establish its control over our bodies, or over external matter; and indefinitely prolong human life "by the immediate operation of the intellect"? He reminds us, however, that the substance of the chapter in which this confident hope is expressed is given only as a matter of probable conjecture. This belief in the potency of reason induced simplification of the theorists' outlook, as well as a confidence in unprecedented advances. The way was plain before the feet: "The duty of man (wrote Paine) is not a wilderness of turnpipe gates through which he is to pass by tickets from one to another; it is plain and simple".¹ Reason was to make straight the way and remove all obstacles, and Paine prophesies an European congress to promote civilization and liberty. He turns aside from planning a constitution, saying that we must allow elasticity, for "there is a morning of reason arising upon man on the subject that has not appeared before".

Tom Paine—the familiar abbreviation dates from his life-time, when he was placed in an infernal triad with the Devil and the World—is the authentic voice of this confidence in the coming of a beneficent change. An English mechanic caught up in the storm of the Revolutionary years of the century, he was set in the heart of the disturbance both in America and France, and troubled the waters in England. But in spite of his considerable direct influence for a time in America and France, Paine was no visionary; and

¹ *Rights of Man*, Vol. II, p. 76.

showed no trace of the love of power, or that recklessness which Mr. Max Beer says is characteristic of the English intellect, a trait that, in periods of general upheaval, tends, he thinks to their throwing their mental ballast overboard. His characteristic qualities were a certain self-complacent shrewdness, limitation of out-look, and ruthless honesty. He was no incendiary, though his readers imagined in the background of his portrait a church in ruins and a guillotine waiting for priests, a spectacle that frightened the timid and conservative. In the *Rights of Man* Paine stood for an unflinching appeal to natural rights and a loud contempt for the English constitution and monarchical system, and what must have disturbed many of his readers was his assumption that monarchy and aristocracy would shortly disappear from the face of Europe. The alarm of the upper classes was increased when the rapid sale of the book was known, and by the startling growth of radical political societies.²

Paine, who gave in his brilliantly written *Agrarian Justice*³ an economic supplement to his *Rights of Man*, is an original but moderate reformer—so moderate that (as Mr. Beer has it) he would in the present age have been "a respected member of the Liberal Party". He raises his voice vigorously in the debate upon the merits of industrial civilization, and finds it wanting. Written after the French Revolution it has a strong undercurrent of socialistic thought. His plan for "meliorating the condition of man" was to create a national fund to pay to every person when arrived at the age of twenty-one years the sum of fifteen pounds, also ten pounds sterling per annum during life, to every person now living of the age of fifty years and to all others when they shall arrive at that age, to enable them to live in old age without wretchedness and go decently out of the world". The idea of old age and sickness pensions had been proposed not many years before by Dr. Priestly⁴ but with the difference that in the latter scheme the fund was to be made up by means of deductions from wages. Paine argues that by the principle of natural law, every man and woman was entitled to an equal share of the land, which is the common inheritance. Uncultivated land itself was of small value; the improved value only when in the hands of the cultivator, was that cultivator's property; but the

² *History of English Socialism*, (Eng. trs.) Vol. I, p. 112.

³ *Agrarian Justice*, 1797.

⁴ *An account of a Society for encouraging the Industrious Poor*. Birmingham, 1787, p. 15.

absolute right of property in land, which originated from a confused identification of the improvement with the land itself led to disinheritance of the majority.⁵ The community must therefore reclaim the ground rent in the form of a ten per cent death duty on all property, which would secure a fund to endow each person with a sum of money representing the share of land that would have fallen to him, and also an annuity. It is significant of the period that "old age pensions were to begin at the early age of fifty. By Spence, Paine's proposals were thought not thorough, and he accused him of endeavoring to sell the people's birth right for a pottage of lentils.

Paine was, however, more widely known in his day and immensely effective as a leader of the rationalist attack—defining rationalism with A. W. Benn as "the mental habit of using reason for the destruction of religious belief"; and for the first time the Christian scheme of salvation was assailed in print in language as plain as that of the hustings and barparlours. Yet he added no new thing to the current criticisms of religion and dogma. His zeal in refuting the Bible was greater than his knowledge. He tells us that he went through the Bible "as a man would go through a wood with an axe on his shoulder, and fell trees"; his aim is destructive, his axe a rough and shrewd historical criticism.⁶ His shrewdness led him now and again, however, on the right path, as when he pronounces the books of Jonah and Job poetical work of gentile origin. The *Age of Reason*, which is quite devoid of any feeling for the beauty of the Testament, is often very amusing. In the first part he admits with serene ostentation that he has not even a copy of the Bible, but before the publication of the second part he had provided himself with a Bible and a Testament and had found them to be "much worse books than he had conceived".⁷ He made obvious and direct criticisms of the Fall and the Atonement, the late origin of the Pentateuch, the cruelties committed by the Israelites, when acting, as it is alleged, under divine guidance, the irrelevance of the Messianic prophecies, the incongruity of certain chapters of Isaiah, the incredible improbabilities of the book of Jonah. Strangely enough he considered the book of Daniel as genuine.⁸ In his criticism of the New Testament narratives he repeats the charge of imposture and fraud against the apostles and evangelists, no doubt

⁵ *Rights of Infants*, 1797.

⁶ *Age of Reason*, Part II (ed. 1834) p. 137.

⁷ *Age of Reason*, Part II (preface).

⁸ A. W. Benn, *Rationalism in the Nineteenth Century* (1906), Vol. I, p. 216.

because he, with his contemporaries, considered the Gospels and acts were written by eye-witnesses. Though striking right and left at theology and the follies of literal belief in the Bible, Paine never swerved from his "almost unreasoned deism",⁹ and the description of him as a dirty little atheist by the late President Roosevelt could only have been made by one unversed in his writings. His contention was that the Christian and Jewish conceptions of the Deity were not consistent with the theism as revealed to man by his own conscience and by external nature. "From whence," he writes, "could arise the solitary strange conceit that the Almighty who had millions of worlds equally dependent on his protection should quit the care of all the rest, and come to die in our world because, they say, one man and one woman had eaten an apple".¹⁰ He insists everywhere on the sufficiency of natural religion, associating it with the teaching of science, which is his main contribution to criticism.

The keen partisan feeling which in the last years of the eighteenth century colored the controversy upon Paine's *Age of Reason* and *Rights of Man* tinged all record and criticism of his personal life. He was described by some of his enemies as having "filthy habits", and this is repeated by Leslie Stephen who roundly describes him in his *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, as "as disreputable an old wretch as was at that time to be found in New York, drunk, filthy beyond all powers of decent expression, and constantly engaged in the meanest squabbles." Later Stephen admitted that this account was erroneous, adding that he was the more sorry to have been unintentionally an accomplice in defaming Paine's memory because in any case the charges were "but slightly relevant. . . . Paine's brandy is less to the purpose than Pitt's port, and much less to the purpose than Coleidge's opium".¹¹ Among his contemporaries there is a mass of evidence favorable to Paine, ranging from that of critical onlookers, such as Wolfe Tone, to out and out admirers, such as Rickman. The former tells us that he liked Paine very well when he saw him in Paris in 1797. "He is vain beyond belief," he adds, "but he has reason to be vain, and for my part I forgive him. He has done wonders for the cause of liberty, both in America and Europe, and I believe him to be conscientiously an honest man. He converses extremely well, and I find him wittier in discourse than in his writ-

⁹ *Rationalism in the nineteenth century*, p. 216.

¹⁰ Quoted in Conway, *Life of Paine*, Vol. II, p. 186.

¹¹ *Fortnightly Review*, August, 1893.

ings, when his humor is clumsy enough". Rickman, Paine's guest in 1793, thus describes his simple and laborous life in Paris: "Sometimes to a select few he would talk of his boyish days, play at chess, whist, picquet or cribbage, and enliven the moments by many interesting anecdotes. With these he would play at marbles, scotch hops, battle-dores, etc., in the broad and fine gravel walk at the upper end of the garden, and then retire to his boudoir, where he was up to his knees in letters and papers of various descriptions:"¹²

A recently published diary of a Miss Wilmot, who traveled on the continent during the first years of the nineteenth century, presents an obviously unbiassed view of Paine at that date, busy with his mechanical inventions. "He lives", she writes, "up half a dozen flights of stairs in a remote part of the town. He received us with the greatest good humor and instantly set about exhibiting his playthings. Besides this model, he has various others, and is at present planning a method of building houses without permitting the damp to penetrate. A friend of his lives in the house with him, whose two little boys, children of four and five years old, he has adopted. During the entire morning that we spent with him they were playing about his room, overturning all his machinery and putting everybody out of patience except himself, who exhibited the most incorrigible good temper. His appearance is plain beyond conception; drinking spirits has made his entire face as red as fire and his habits of life have rendered him so neglectful of his person that he is generally the most abominably dirty being upon the face of the earth. He complimented us with a clean shirt and having his face washed, which Mr. Livingston said was one of the greatest efforts he ever was known to make. In spite of his surprising ugliness, the expression of his countenance is luminous, his manners easy and benevolent and his conversation remarkably entertaining. Altogether his style of manner is guileless and good-natured, and I was agreeably disappointed in him considering the odiously disagreeable things I was led to expect. It is a whimsical weakness in Tom Paine imagining that every woman who sees him directly falls a victim to his charms."¹³

Among Paine's claims for remembrance to-day is his fresh and vigorous English. We read him as we read Cobbett, for the manner of this presentment of his protest rather than the matter. He

¹² Quoted in Conway, *Life of Paine*, Vol. II, p. 68.

¹³ C. Wilmot, *An Irish Peer on the Continent*, (1801-3) p. 26-7

wrote from the heart. "What I write (he says) is pure nature, and my pen and soul have ever gone together".¹⁴ He never, according to Hogg, made any alterations in his writing, "his manner of composing, as I have heard persons who have heard him relate, was thus. He walked backwards and forwards about the room until he had completed a sentence to his satisfaction; he then wrote it down entire and perfect and never to be amended. When the weather was fair, if there was a garden, a field, a courtyard at hand, he walked about out of doors for a while, and then came in and put down the sentence which he had arranged mentally, and went out again and walked until he was ready to be delivered of another."¹⁵ His friends, knowing how much had been made of his grammatical errors, suggested that his manuscripts should be revised before publication. He would say, writes Richard Cumberland, "that he only wished to be known as he was, without being decked with the plumes of another". Directness, vigor, a bright and unencumbered clearness of statement, rising here and there to heightened eloquence are his distinctive and precious qualities. His retort upon Burke's sentimentalism about Marie Antoinette is well-known, "Nature has been kinder to Mr. Burke than he is to her. He is not affected by the reality of distress touching his heart, but by the showy resemblance of it striking his imagination. He pities the plumage, but forgets the dying bird".¹⁶ Less familiar is a beautiful saying of his, "to believe that God created a plurality of world's at least as numerous as what we call stars renders the Christian system of faith at once little and ridiculous, and scatters it in the wind like feathers in the air";¹⁷ and his description of Nature, rises into imaginative fervor. "Bred up in antedeluvian notions (he writes) she has not yet acquired the European taste of receiving visitors in her dressing room; she locks and bolts up her private recesses with extraordinary care, as if not only resolved to preserve her hoards but conceal her age, and hide the remains of a face that was young and lovely in the days of Adam".¹⁸ His writings shine with phrases that became the simple armoury of his followers; such as that "man has no property in man; neither has any generation a property in the generations which are to follow"¹⁹

¹⁴ Quoted in *Conway*, Vol. I, p. 88.

¹⁵ Hogg, *Life of Shelley* (Ed. Dowden) p. 517.

¹⁶ *Rights of Man* (1792), Part I, p. 14.

¹⁷ *Age of Reason* (Ed. 1834), p. 44.

¹⁸ Quoted in *Conway*, Vol. I, p. 239.

¹⁹ *Rights of Man* (5th Ed), Vol. I, p. 11.

and "government is for the living not the dead",—the kind of thing that was repeated by one workman to another, and passed round the inn and the workroom, and among the crowd at the street corner, and indeed the reverberations of his solid and effective eloquence are not dead today, after the passage of more than a century.-