

The Rebellion of Thomas Paine

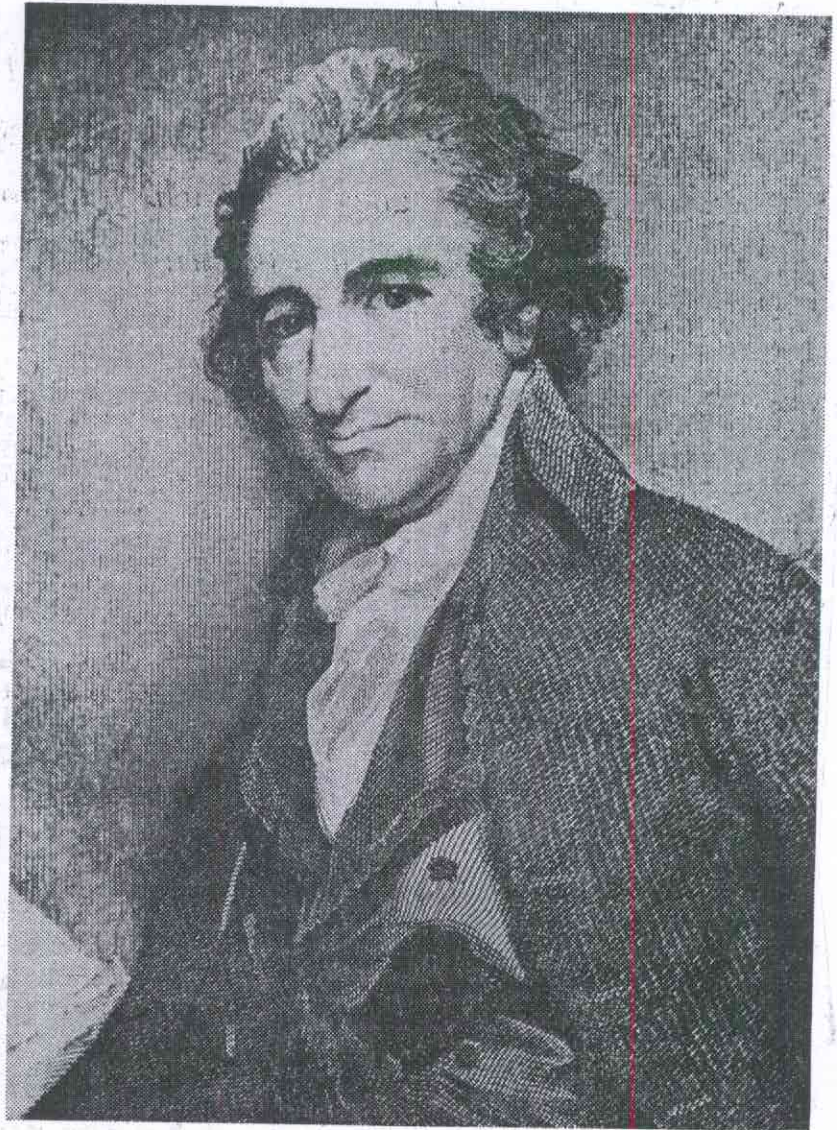
One truth sure to be forgotten or muted in our bicentennial celebrations is that more rowdies, rebels and guerrillas were among the two million citizens of the 1770s than silk-clothed statesmen begging with politeness to differ with the king. The word revolution has been sanitized in 200 years—today we are hit with everything from revolutionary diets to the revolution in men's hairdos—but the citizens of the Stamp Act riots and the Boston Massacre understood well the brutal meaning of revolt. They are called patriots today because patriots are what rabble-rousers become after posterity proves out their point.

Few were emotionally more ready for the American revolution than Thomas Paine when he came to the colonies in the mid-1770s. Divorced

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from one wife and the widower of another, he left England as a social failure. At 37, he had done nothing more than tie knots in the loose-ends of life: His jobs making corsets, collecting taxes for the crown and running a tobacco shop earned for him little money and even less prestige. Apparently, he needed neither, because on landing in Philadelphia in November 1774 he had one talent that was much in need—the gift of the bold opinion. At the time, the rebels in the colonies assuredly had their opinions about the king's mischiefs, but boldness was lacking. A valuable book, "Voices of the American Revolution," issued last month by the People's Bicentennial Commission, notes that "the revolutionary mentality that had been forming since the days of the Stamp Act was still overlaid by thousands of treasured memories of Great Britain and her monarchs. This was the real power the king was counting on to keep his American subjects in line. The institution of the monarchy had become so deified and entrenched after hundreds of years in power that most Americans simply could not imagine how life would proceed without its guiding force."

Paine could imagine. He needed only a few months of rooting among the malcontents to sense that public opinion needed less to be formed than to be directed. His pamphlet "Common Sense" appeared in January 1776, an explosive blast of literary energy that shifted the feelings of its readers so that they were motivated to



Engraving of Thomas Paine by W. Sharp

act from the rightness of their own case rather than the wrongness of the king's. You are not mere rebels, "Common Sense" told them, you are leaders. "The cause of America is in great measure the cause of all mankind," Paine wrote in the introduction. The pamphlet was the nation's first best-seller, though Paine refused all money it earned. One biographer said that the sale of "Common Sense" totaled 10 per cent of the population, a figure that would be the equivalent of a modern-day sale of 22 million.

The ingenuity of "Common Sense" was not that it expressed Paine's

thoughts with much clarity but that the readers saw their own sentiments, long hushed, suddenly given loud voice. He spoke of King George in a brazen way, expressing rage only heard before in whispers in the colony's ale houses: "In England a King hath little more to do than to make war and give away places; which, in plain terms, is to impoverish the nation and set it together by the ears. A pretty business indeed for a man to be allowed eight hundred thousand sterlings a year for, and worshipped into the bargain! Of more worth is one honest man to soci-

ety, and in the sight of God, than all the crowned ruffians that ever lived."

Paine said in "Common Sense" that he was not "inflaming or exaggerating matters" but was trying to "awaken us from fatal and unmanly slumbers, that we may pursue determinately some fixed object." He had the social crusader's classic faith in citizens: Once they learn the facts, they will act on them. He raised questions and supplied answers. "Some perhaps will say that after we have made it up with Britain, she will protect us. Can they be so unwise as to mean that she will keep a navy in our harbors for that purpose? Common sense will tell us that the power which hath endeavoured to subdue us, is of all others the most improper to defend us." Rather than attacking religion—save that for later, taking on the King was pleasure enough for now—Paine showed a taste for ecumenism: "There should be a diversity of religious opinions among us. It affords a larger field for our Christian kindness."

Next to the Declaration of Independence, "Common Sense" may be the nation's best-known but least-read historical document. History has made Paine a one-book author, even though his pen was only beginning to move when the revolution heated up. Embraced by George Washington — Paine's early praise of the general came close to flattery—he felt obligated to sustain the troops now that he had roused them. For seven years, he produced essays that became "The Crisis Papers." The first lines of the first essay rank high among the stirring openers in American literature: "These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will in this crisis, shrink from the service of his country; but he that stands it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman."

In 1783 with "the greatest and com-

pletest revolution the world ever knew, gloriously and happily accomplished," Paine received \$3,000 from a grateful Congress and a piece of land from the state of New York. He turned to bridge-building but, in the pattern of his days making corsets, this venture failed. He wrote that after the success of the revolution "it did not appear to me that any object could arise great enough to engage me a second time. I began to feel myself happy in being quiet." But the itch for social reform was not still for long. He went to England to attack the British Constitution. But the English preferred to be subjects rather than citizens, so his thoughts were more argued than heeded. He was in France for that revolution, spending a year in prison for his views.

Paine has had several biographies. The most exhaustive and most objectively critical is "Paine" by David Freeman Hawke. As a human being, Hawke writes, "Paine had never been able to cope with the minor harassments of life. Wherever he had wandered some one . . . had cared for and protected him." At the end of his life—in New Rochelle, N.Y., in 1809, the year of Lincoln's birth—he was sunk in loneliness, an invalid, and sending off pathetic letters to Congress and President Jefferson seeking expense money for a trip made 28 years earlier. He was brushed aside. At his death, he was remembered more for "certain immoralities" than his writing. Hawke comments: "Paine had known virtually every important political figure in England, France and the United States during his lifetime. Not one of them publicly praised him after his death."

The story has a grimmer ending. In 1819, a friend came with a shovel to dig up Paine's bones. He hauled them to England for a monument to be built over them, but the bones were lost, without trace.