

# Thomas Paine

## Mini-Biography

Thomas Paine was the quintessential revolutionary. No other person captured so well the explosiveness of the last quarter of the eighteenth century. His three major writings—Common Sense, Rights of Man, and Age of Reason—were revolutionary and were all best-sellers.

Paine was a paradox. He turned a life of abysmal failure into one of phenomenal success, only to die pathetically lonely and neglected. He was a tolerant man of goodwill who lived every day as a rabid partisan. A pensive philosopher, Paine was ever the zealot driven to action. A gentle man of peace, he regularly wrote sedition and inspired men to take up arms in the cause of liberty. He came to be a symbol of rebellion and civil unrest, yet he was an ardent opponent of insurrection and a staunch advocate of law and order. He refused to profit financially from his talents as a writer, yet he felt betrayed when his country refused to reward him financially for his “selfless” services. A deeply religious man, Paine was condemned as an atheist and blasphemer. He advocated harmony but lived a dissolute, disheveled life. He fervently sought the peace, stability, and enjoyment of a quiet life but was continually immersed in scandal, conflict, and the vicissitudes of war. Though an eternal optimist, he was also a skeptic. He made friends easily and lost them with even greater facility. A fervent spokesman for limited government, he was a sincere proponent of social welfare programs for the poor, the infirm, and the aged. Paine was a citizen of three countries yet truly a man without a country—although to his own way of thinking, Paine was a citizen of the world.

Paine was born in 1737 in the old impoverished town of Thetford on the east coast of England. His father was a Quaker; his mother an Anglican. He attended only five years of grammar school until apprenticed to his father making stays for women’s corsets. In 1756 at the beginning of the Seven Years’

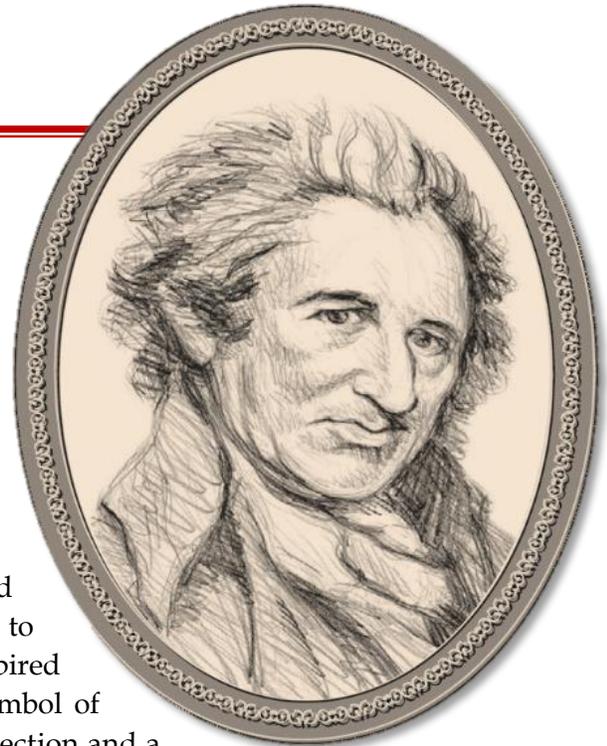
War, Paine signed on to the *Terrible*, a privateer captained by William Death. Fortunately, his father talked him out of the adventure; on its first engagement, the *Terrible* was sunk with the loss of ninety percent of its crew. The next year, however, Paine sailed on another privateer and earned enough prize money to live in London for six months and study science. There he met Benjamin Franklin.

Paine held several jobs—stay maker, teacher, excise tax collector, and grocer. He failed at each. His first wife died in childbirth; his second divorced him. He left for America arriving in Philadelphia in November

1774. With a letter of recommendation from Franklin, Paine soon became editor of the new

Pennsylvania Magazine and immediately joined the fray attacking Britain’s anti-American imperial policy.

In January 1776 he published *Common Sense*, a fifty-five page pamphlet that denounced monarchy and staunchly advocated immediate American independence—independence that Americans could achieve despite the prowess of Britain’s powerful army and navy. Throughout the war Paine wrote one series of essays after another to bolster America’s sagging spirits. Paine was responsible for changing “former habits



of thinking" in abandoning the British Empire and rejecting monarchism for republicanism. Paine did more than anyone except for George Washington to sustain the morale of the American people through "good and ill fortune."

Perhaps Paine's most familiar opening line appeared in the first number of his "American Crisis" series, which was written in December 1776 to encourage the American people and General Washington's decimated army. Read to Washington's army on the banks of the Delaware River shortly before it crossed the ice-choked river and attacked Trenton on Christmas day, the urgency of the first paragraph still rings loud and clear.

*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 their country, but he that stands it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered, yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph.*

When the war ended and independence was achieved, Paine had no profession to fall back on. "I am neither farmer, manufacturer, mechanic, merchant nor shopkeeper. I believe, however, I am of the first class. I am a Farmer of thoughts." By the spring of 1787 Paine had developed plans for an iron bridge that could span the wide rivers of America. In April 1787 he sailed for Europe to obtain the endorsement of the scientific societies in France and England. Soon he became immersed in the new revolution unfolding in France, where he was elected to the French National Convention even though he could not read, write, or speak French. There he wrote Rights of Man that called for the overthrow of the aristocratic government of Great Britain.

As a French citizen and legislator, Paine was a moderate. Opposing the execution of King Louis XVI in 1793, he was imprisoned by the Radicals for eleven months during the Reign of Terror. President George Washington and the new American government did nothing to gain Paine's release. Through the unofficial efforts of James Monroe, America's new minister to France, Paine was freed. Disillusioned, Paine published a scathing attack on President Washington for not acknowledging him as an American citizen. Paine's two-part Age of Reason, which attacked established religion, was also published at this time. These two publications made Paine an outcast when he returned to America in 1802. He lived his last seven years reclusively and intoxicated in New York alienated from most of his countrymen.

Thomas Paine was a complex man. Each of the fifty biographers since his death in 1809 has failed to unveil the full person. Because he will always be different things to different people, it is unlikely that we shall ever obtain a completely persuasive biography of this enigmatic man. Joel Barlow, one of Paine's closest friends, was perhaps right when he wrote that Paine's "own writings are his best life." It is these writings that can help identify the genius and the madness that was Thomas Paine. ■