

Who was Thomas Paine?

By Brendan O'Neill

It's 200 years since the British-born "father of the American revolution" died. His words also helped shape modern Britain and France and yet few people know much about him at all.

"Possibly the most influential writer in modern human history" - that's the billing Thomas Paine got from one of his biographers.

Paine was an international bestseller long before the days of Dan Brown or Jackie Collins and is the only Brit to have been quoted in Barack Obama's inauguration speech earlier this year.

There are statues of him in Paris and New Jersey and a monument to him in New York - though we still haven't reached a situation where, as French leader Napoleon Bonaparte said: "A statue of gold should be erected to him in every city in the universe."

Yet no high-level commemorations of his death have been planned. His writings rarely appear on the national curriculum in the UK. And ask a man or woman in the average British street who he is, and they are likely to reply "Er..."

Just who was Thomas Paine?

Born in Thetford, Norfolk, in 1737 (there is a statue of him there, too), Paine's early adult life as a corset-maker and school teacher was largely unmarked by politics. But it was his subsequent job as an excise officer that inspired him to pen his first political work - a 21-page pamphlet that demanded better pay and conditions for his fellow workers.

A chance meeting with Benjamin Franklin, one of the founding fathers of the US, in London in 1774 changed Paine's life - and, in time, American history. Following Franklin's advice to cross the Atlantic, Paine pitched up in America in November 1774, just as American revolutionaries were having heated debates about whether to break with Britain.

Common (sense) man

Paine threw his lot in with those Americans who were thirsting for independence from Britain. In January 1776 he published a short pamphlet that earned him the title *The Father of the American Revolution*.

Titled simply, *Common Sense*, the work has been described by the Pulitzer-winning historian Gordon S Wood as "the most incendiary and popular pamphlet of the entire [American] revolutionary period". It put the case for democracy, against the monarchy, and for American independence from British rule.

It became a sensation, selling 120,000 copies in the first three months. Given that America had only two million free citizens at the time, that is the equivalent of an American author selling 15 million books in three months today.

It also altered history.

"In January 1776, only one third of the delegates to the Continental Congress [the political body of the American Revolution] were in favour of declaring independence from Britain," says Cheryl Hudson, associate fellow at the Rothermere American Institute at Oxford University.

"Then, Paine published *Common Sense* which argued for immediate and complete separation of the colonies from the 'mother country'. His visionary and uncompromising words captured the public imagination, and under pressure from the people, individual colonies began to instruct their delegates to vote for independence."

Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence followed soon after.

Cited by Obama

Not content with intellectually spearheading the case for American independence Paine went on to write a series of pro-revolutionary pamphlets, which were later published together as *The American Crisis*.

" After languishing in obscurity for years, he's enjoying a renaissance - he's the Mickey Rourke of the Founders "
Katherine Mangu-Ward

They were designed to lift the spirits of America's supporters of independence in difficult times, and 200 years later were invoked by Barack Obama with a similar aim in mind. Though this time the difficulty lay in economic recession rather than a revolutionary war.

"Let it be told to the future world... that in the depth of winter, when nothing but hope and virtue could survive... that the city and the country, alarmed at one common danger, came forth to meet [it]", said Obama at his inauguration speech, taking his words from Paine's *Crisis* No 1.

Paine worked in various positions in America's early revolutionary government. But he was never accepted as one of the founding fathers largely because his restless spirit and appetite for revolution led him to another mass revolt, this time in France.

But while Paine was elected to France's first democratic parliament and Napoleon Bonaparte numbered among his fans, his next pamphlet, *The Age of Reason*, was a step too far for many of his early admirers.

An attack on organised religion and a defence of "free and rational inquiry", the work saw him subtly edged out of founding father status in the US. When he died on 8 June 1809 in Greenwich Village, New York, there were only six mourners at his funeral.

Today, though, his legacy is enjoying a rehabilitation.

Harvey Kaye, a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay and author of *Thomas Paine and the Promise of America*, says Paine is "possibly the most influential writer in modern human history".

"His words changed the world. His voice was essentially a voice of democratic progress."

Constant revolutionary

"And he is still relevant today", says Kaye. "He put the case for political democracy AND social democracy, arguing in *The Rights of Man* that young people and the elderly should be afforded financial security by their governments. These welfare ideals are under attack right now, in our era of recession."

Katherine Mangu-Ward, associate editor of the right-leaning, Washington-based magazine *Reason*, says Paine is enjoying a comeback amongst both left-wing and right-wing American thinkers.

"Everyone wants a piece of Paine these days. After languishing in obscurity for years, he's enjoying a renaissance. He's the Mickey Rourke of the Founders."

"The left loves him because he hated the Church. The right loves him because he's a freedom-loving founding father."

Cheryl Hudson of Oxford University says Paine, the history-shaping Brit, should be taught more widely in British schools: "At the centre of his thought was a profound trust in the people and in their 'common sense'. He encouraged the public's aspirations for a better, more democratic world and he expressed his support in a rigorous and robust vernacular style.

"Today, political leaders on both sides of the Atlantic pay lip service to concepts like 'personal empowerment' but Paine truly believed in the transformative power that the people could and should wield."

Tantalising words, especially amid the current crisis in public trust of parliament. Chad Goodwin, chair of the Thomas Paine Society, says his hero would have been "astounded that we still have a hereditary monarchy... not to mention an unelected upper chamber".

But this scandal unfolded in Britain's highest elected chamber - the House of Commons.

"Paine thought just because something seemed to be working, on whose behalf was it working? He was a constant revolutionary, " says Mr Goodwin. "He believed that government shouldn't be fixed and that it was up to every generation to say how they should be governed.

"He would have been a great supporter of the Freedom of Information Act [under which MPs' expenses came to be revealed]. He always said there is nothing mysterious about government."

Ms Hudson says there are similarities and differences between the disillusionment with mainstream politics today and the anger about politics that drove Paine and his supporters 250 years ago: "Paine and his contemporaries were just as scathing about the venal and corrupt nature of their politicians as people are today - the difference was that they, especially Paine, had something constructive to say about the alternative to that corrupt politics."

Below is a selection of your comments.

Like so many great men and women, Tom Paine was a 'prophet without honour' in his own country. 'Common Sense' and 'The Rights of Man' are blueprints for civilised government and man's humanity to man. Why is Cromwell - a monomaniacal mass murderer - honoured with a statue outside the Palace of Westminster? Tear it down and instal Tom Paine in his place. **Adrian King, London**

What a great article. I studied political thought as part of my history degree and ended up writing my dissertation on Mr Paine, and I was always surprised that whenever anyone asked me about my dissertation I would end up having to tell people that it was about the American War of Independence because no one knew who he was. **Laura, Bristol**

Let's face it! It was not a revolution, it was an English civil war in the 13 English colonies, fought by greedy landowners who would not pay there tax and wanted more land. Thomas Paine and all the others like Washington were traitors to England and ultimately Britain. All of them should have been put in prison or hanged for treason. That's why they will forever be remembered as being traitors! If you don't pay your tax today you get put in prison. **David Johns, Manchester**

And while he was doing all that the elite of England were founding the Bullingdon Club at Oxford, in 1780, the acme of exclusiveness, the club for the sons of great wealth that continues to shape our young lords and masters. **Victor Blease, Belfast**

A Brit? Your article has explained Paine was first and foremost a leading American. Confused by this cultural appropriation... **Nick Spicer, Washington DC**

Thomas Paine was a traitor to his country. It doesn't matter if what he said was right or wrong or we look back on as profound, his meddling in colonial affairs were catastrophic. Supporting a French dictator and American rebels? His descendants should hang their heads in shame. **Lucian Whippe, Cambridge**

Fascinating, never heard of him before. Such as shame we weren't taught about him at school, even bigger shame is that there is no one like around today to inspire us. **Suki, Coventry**

Hardly ignored. He was as loved and reviled as Wilkes and just as much a thorn in the flesh of the establishment. I have given four books to each of my three sons: 'The Rights of Man' and 'Age of Reason', by Paine, 'The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists', by Tressell and 'The Condition of the Working Class in England', by Engels. I have read then all of my life and feel sickened that they have more resonance and relevance today than when I was my children's ages. **Ian Patchett, Beverley**

Thomas Paine is over-rated as a political thinker whose main asset was a smart turn of phrase, akin to a tabloid editorial writer today. As a serial revolutionary who was always preaching change, he was bound to be right at some point and his calls during the American Revolution were right for that moment. He was though comprehensively out thought and out argued over the French Revolution by Edmund Burke, "Reflections on the Revolution in France" (1790). Paine had sought to legitimise the French Revolution by quoting the en vogue justifier "the Rights of Man". Burke demonstrated that such unrestricted orgies of destruction destroyed more liberty than they created, throwing out the good with the bad and led inexorably towards violence and dictatorship, for which the French suffered for many decades to come. Burke is the true political visionary who should be lauded as having, in many ways, saved Britain from Paine's foolishness. **Ken Terry, London, England**

Thank you for making Thomas Paine's contribution to the founding of the U.S. (as well as the French Revolution) more widely known. Many educated persons, who can tell you all about Ben Franklin and George Washington, know little or nothing about the man and his writings, and have never heard of Thetford or even Norfolk (U.K. not Virginia)! **Stephen Knowles, Nassau, Bahamas**

A man who encouraged ordinary people to think critically about the way they were governed and by whom; to expect fairness of treatment and freedom from exploitation; and to question imposed, arbitrary authority whether by church or state. I cannot think why our political masters don't want Paine's work to be studied in schools! **Richard Towers, Sheffield, UK**

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