

INTRODUCTION

By G. D. H. COLE

IN 1792 the British Government prosecuted Thomas Paine for the "libel" contained in his famous book, *Rights of Man*. That prosecution was, in fact, the beginning of the great repression of British Radical opinion which followed the French Revolution, and succeeded for a time in crushing out Radicalism as an organized movement. Paine, indeed, was not present at his own trial: nor did he ever serve the sentence which was imposed upon him. For in 1792 Paine was in France, a member of the National Assembly and an honoured citizen of the new revolutionary state, though he was soon to fall from favour on account of his opposition to the execution of Louis, and to be driven from France as from England, to seek a new home in the American Republic which he had helped so manfully in the days of its struggle for independence.

Paine was famous long before he published his classic answer to Burke's onslaught upon the French Revolution. He had become famous for his stand in the American War; and his American writings, especially *Common Sense* and *The Crisis*, had played a notable part in assisting the colonists to carry their revolt against George III and his ministers to a triumphant con-

clusion. But these earlier works were not widely known in England until the publication of *Rights of Man* had made its author the most read, most beloved, and most hated political writer in Great Britain.

Part I of Rights of Man appeared in 1791—an answer to Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, which was itself an answer to the once-famous discourse of Dr. Richard Price upon *Civil Liberty*. Price, too, the foremost among Nonconformist divines, had defended the American colonists and, in 1788, had joined, under the auspices of the Revolution Society, in commemorating the "Glorious Revolution" of 1688. Burke, Whig as he was, had defended the Americans, though he deplored the separation which British mis-handling of the dispute with the colonies had made in his view unavoidable. But the French Revolution was another matter. The English Revolution of 1688 had seated a landed aristocracy firmly in political power: the French Revolution of a century later threatened to sweep aristocracy and its privileges utterly away. To Burke the Whig any society without a ruling aristocracy and a strongly established Church seemed mere anarchy; for in his view Church and aristocracy were indispensable upholders of morality and of the social tradition which bound society together. The social system, he maintained, rested on a custom and tradition of greatness of which the aristocrats were the necessary guardians. It did not rest upon reason, and it was ruinous presumption on men's part to suppose that by reasoning they could make a State. States and societies grew, and were not made; and no generation of men had

any right to lay impious hands upon them, or to seek to re-fashion them by the feeble light of reason. It was the sacred duty of each generation to hand on to the next the precious social heritage which had come down to it; and aristocracy alone would secure that this heritage should be kept intact.

To this tirade against the *sans-culottes* and the Rationalists who were seeking to build up the new France, Paine made answer; and his answer became, from the moment of its publication, the cherished classic of the common people. Where Godwin, with his *Political Justice*, spoke only to an educated few, Thomas Paine, with his *Rights of Man*, spoke plainly to the poor, in words which the artisan and the small shopkeeper could readily understand. His book went into edition after edition within a few months of its issue. After it had been proscribed, one man after another went to prison for the crime of reprinting it or offering it for sale; and when at last the repression was for a time relaxed after 1815, there was at once a fresh spate of reissues, again to be continued when the new repression Acts of 1817 and 1819 had once more made the circulation of Paine's "seditious" and "blasphemous" writings a crime to be visited with condign punishment.

Thomas Paine's book deserved its reception. It deserved to be taken as the bible of the poor because it was the first book in English political literature to set out the case of the common people from the standpoint of the common people themselves. Paine, ex-staymaker and ex-exciseman, was of the people. He knew how to speak to them as one of themselves. For this same reason,

his book deserved the suppression which it received at the hands of the governing classes. For it was really dangerous to them, as Godwin's *Political Justice* and the host of other Radical writings of the time were not. It was dangerous, because it not only formulated the poor man's rights in plain and unambiguous terms, but also set forth, for the first time, a Radical programme of social reform which offered the poor tangible benefits to fight for as well as abstract rights.

This Radical programme, the very first of its kind in England, is contained in *Part II* of *Rights of Man*, which appeared in 1792, when the enormous pamphlet controversy aroused by Burke's *Reflections* and by *Part I* was already in full swing. In *Part I* Paine had been principally concerned to do two things—to defend the French Revolution against Burke's aspersions, and to link his defence to a plain statement of ultimate political rights on behalf of the British people. In *Part II*, after a further upholding of those rights against his critics, he turned to the declaration of positive projects of social reform; and these projects of his have to-day a ring of modernity which sets them far apart from every other writing of the time. For Paine, a century and a half ago, was proclaiming the need for universal public education, for children's allowances and for old age pensions (to begin, be it noted, at 50, and to rise at 60 to a higher scale), for the public provision of work at wages for the unemployed, and for the financing of these measures by means of a progressive income tax, rising to 20s. in the pound upon the largest incomes.

Therewith Paine was setting down, in plain English,

his criterion of the right adjustment of the social system. "When it can be said by any country in the world, My poor are happy : neither ignorance nor distress is to be found among them : my jails are empty of prisoners, my streets of beggars ; the aged are not in want ; the taxes are not oppressive : the rational world is my friend, because I am the friend of happiness. When these things can be said, then may that country boast its constitution and its government."

Words like these put Paine in a category by himself among the great Radical pioneers. He was, indeed, no Socialist ; for, when he wrote, Socialism, save as a dream of Utopia-makers, such as More and Mably, was still unborn. But he believed in using the State as a practical instrument for the promotion of the welfare of its citizens ; and he was certain this would not be done except on a basis of complete democratic equality, and also that, given democratic equality as the basis of society, it would be done. He believed utterly in democratic representation. "By engrafting representation upon democracy, we arrive at a system of government capable of embracing and confederating all the various interests and every extent of territory or population." He was certain that democracy would promote peace and happiness, and lead on to "universal security, as a means to universal commerce."

Therewith he believed deeply in human freedom. Toleration of differences was not enough for him. "Intolerance is the Pope armed with fire and faggot, toleration is the Pope selling or granting indulgences." He demanded, not mere toleration, but a positive

recognition that differences are beneficial and creative, and equal rights for all, irrespective of their divergent opinions. The State might be entitled to punish acts: it could never, under any circumstances, have the right to persecute or penalize opinions. It was man's natural right to hold what views he pleased; and civil, or State, rights could never abrogate natural rights, out of which alone they could arise.

This is the language of the eighteenth-century enlightenment. But Paine put it to a new use. Voltaire and Rousseau had stopped far short of advocating full democracy, or of putting their faith in the creative power of the common people. There had been, in effect, among the common people no movement, no stirring of a creative force, to which they could look. There was but the very beginning of such a movement when Paine wrote; but he had the wits and the courage to recognize it, and his writings helped more than any other man's to give it shape and direction in its early struggles. Well might Thomas Hardy's London Corresponding Society, the first political association of working men in England, offer fervent thanks and congratulations to Paine for his *Rights of Man*, and many other of the societies that were springing up echo these sentiments. Every movement needs a gospel; and Paine's *Rights of Man* was for at least two generations the gospel of the working-class Radicals of Great Britain.

Nor are its challenge and its appeal outworn to-day, when again the world is face to face with a struggle between fundamental forces. Paine's writings can no longer serve us for a gospel; for the issues have too

much changed shape. Each age must find its own social gospel, and get it expressed in its own language and in terms of its own most pressing problems. But the gospels of the past are not dead—and the interpretation which Paine put upon the forces underlying the great French Revolution has a very living message for to-day. The French Revolution did not in fact achieve that democracy which he proclaimed as its objective, and as the sole legitimate foundation for any social system. It only helped, after a prodigious struggle, to clear the ground for the planting of the democratic seed. And to-day, wherever the crop of democracy begins to grow, there are still reactionaries and oppressors eager to cut it down. What Paine fought for in America and France and England in the eighteenth century we have still to fight for now—and as manfully, if we are not to suffer defeat. In that struggle, we cannot afford to miss the inspiration of our own past, of the thinkers and doers and fighters who made possible the great advances which the common people has achieved. Those gains of the long campaign for human happiness are still in danger. We are in need of a new Paine to hearten us, and unite us in the cause of decency and reason. But the old Paine, too, can help to give us courage, and to reinforce our faith in the cause of the common man.

May 31, 1937.

Revised, July 1949.