

THE ROANOKE TIMES

BOOK REVIEW

Thomas Paine and the Clarion Call for American Independence

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(DeCapo Press)

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*“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 sticks by it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman.”*

— Thomas Paine, *“The American Crisis”*

Thomas Paine is often a footnote in the telling of this country’s history. In surveys of American history, we learn that he wrote and published “Common Sense,” an exhortation to English colonists living in America to declare their independence from their king and government. Few of us know that Paine was also a front-line soldier in George Washington’s Continental Army.

On the banks of a near-frozen Delaware River in December 1776, Paine, using the head of a drum as a desk, penned “The American Crisis,” which inspired tired, ill-clothed, cold and hungry soldiers to march through the night to Trenton, New Jersey, and capture a unit of German mercenaries fighting as part of England’s attempts to quell the rebellion. After having inspired the troops, Paine then picked up his rifle, crossed the river and joined the fight.

It’s of some interest to those who know the plays of Shakespeare to compare the beginning of “The American Crisis” with King Henry V’s “band of brothers” speech. The rhythm of the language and the messages are eerily similar. With no evidence that Paine ever read Shakespeare and the knowledge that Shakespeare was never in battle, it appears that both speeches

speak to a basic human need to belong to something larger than the individual.

Paine was a corset maker and sometimes tax collector from Thetford, England. He came to America to make a new, more profitable life for himself. His prose helped rouse American colonists to join the fight for separation from England. In a noble act, Paine refused payment from sales of his popular pamphlets and books, and instead he donated the money to the Confederation Congress and the war effort.

Paine was given a job by the Confederation Congress and became a de facto secretary of state, and from that position he began to offer advice to the politicians who ran the country. Some of that advice included reporting that envoy to France Gouverneur Morris was profiting from his government position. Such exposure was not well received since most members of Congress were doing the same.

Harlow Giles Unger follows Paine from America to France where, through his relationship with the Marquis de Lafayette, he became involved in the French Revolution, not as a combatant, but as a pamphleteer. He became a member of the National Convention, the governing body of the Republic of France, and he was assigned to the committee to draft a new constitution.

Paine's meddling put him on the wrong side of French political leader Robespierre, who had Paine sent to prison. His prolonged stay in prison produced his magnum opus, "The Age of Reason" along with animosity toward the United States. U.S. Ambassador to France Gouverneur Morris refused to do anything to help free Paine. (The apt political advice here is "we all meet each other many times in our lives.")

Reading about the French Revolution, the Terror and senseless murder of innocent people by Robespierre, can be unsettling. Unger's clever prose during this section of the book makes reading about The Terror palatable. The cinematic juxtaposition of rioting in the street, debate in the Convention and brutal executions allows the reader to feel the tension and the uncertainty of the moment as if you were watching "jump cuts" between debating politicians and beheadings of citizens.

Paine outlasted Robespierre (who went to the guillotine), but Morris managed to keep him in prison for a while until James Monroe arrived as ambassador and freed Paine. Paine was not warmly received by the French after his imprisonment, and eventually he returned to America, where he found himself shunned by the new President Thomas Jefferson.

"The Age of Reason" was an attack on Christianity, the Jewish scriptures and the Christian Bible and the church in general. Paine, like many of his by-now former friends (Jefferson among them) was a Deist, and his arguments for a single deity caused his contemporaries to shun him. It also became a source of the calculated obscurity that has kept him out of sight for much of the telling of the story of American independence.

Unger's profile of Paine is a window into the birth of our nation — a window that gives access to the daily activities of the complex people whose different visions gave birth to a new nation and set it on a course. We see the human, sometimes venal, side of the great soldiers and statesmen who founded the United States. We also get a balanced look at the life of the man whose prose inspired two revolutions — moving Paine from history's footnotes to the main text.

Unger has a talent of presenting a full portrait of his subjects and their colleagues without venerating them or denigrating them. In his portrait of

Paine, we also learn of Paine's clever mechanical designs: bridges, steam boats, etc., and his heretofore obscure private life. The balance presents a man with many talents, one of which was the ability to motivate large numbers of people to take action.