

TOM PAINE

The Greatest Exile

David Powell

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Volume 47

TOM PAINE



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DAVID POWELL

First published in 1985 by Croom Helm Ltd

This edition first published in 2020

by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge

52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-367-21961-1 (Set)

ISBN: 978-0-429-35434-2 (Set) (ebk)

ISBN: 978-0-367-27133-6 (Volume 47) (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-429-29500-3 (Volume 47) (ebk)

Publisher's Note

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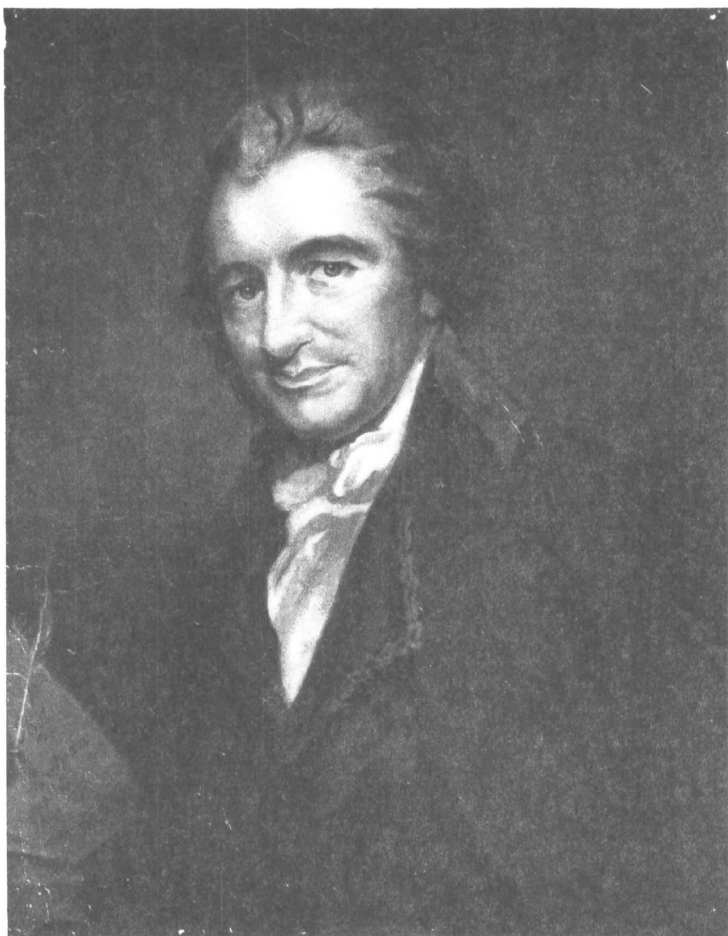
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TOM PAINE
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CROOM HELM
London & Sydney

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Croom Helm Ltd, Provident House, Burrell Row,
Beckenham, Kent BR3 1AT
Croom Helm Australia Pty Ltd, First Floor, 139 King Street,
Sydney, NSW 2001, Australia

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Powell, David

Tom Paine : the greatest exile.

1. Paine, Thomas 2. Politicians—England—
Biography

I. Title

350.5'1'0924

JC178.V2

ISBN 0-7099-2074-1

Filmset by Mayhew Typesetting, Bristol, UK
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Biddles Ltd, Guildford and King's Lynn

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For Rachel



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PREFACE

Two hundred and fifty years after his birth — and two centuries since he was central to the American and European Revolutions — Thomas Paine remains as much a contemporary as a controversial figure. Theodore Roosevelt, a former US President, once anathematised him as ‘that filthy little atheist’ (having never read *The Age of Reason* on which the charge was based); Michael Foot, a former leader of the British Labour Party, recently described him as ‘the greatest exile ever to leave these shores’; while, in response to a BBC documentary of 1982, the *Daily Telegraph* of London felt compelled to carry a leader, for which the introduction set the tone:

After MR KENNETH GRIFFITH’s marathon television eulogy of TOM PAINE . . . it would be difficult for this newspaper to remain silent without disloyalty to its own traditions. For what was this man that we are invited to admire above all the national heroes who are actually known to us? He fought against his country in the American War of Independence and invited France to invade us during the French Revolution. Among decent Englishmen in his time his name was a synonym for treachery, blasphemy, and (whether justly or not) debauchery.

What the *Telegraph* failed to mention was that Paine was charged with treachery by what was possibly the most repressive British government of the past two centuries; that, as with Roosevelt, their leader writers had not read *The Age of Reason*, a diest’s profession of a belief in God; and that, if the allegations relating to debauchery were based on Paine’s drinking habits, then they had better look to the social practices of the eighteenth century when hard drinking was the rule — the premature death of their mentor, Pitt the Younger, possibly having been accelerated by his fondness for port!

Arguably, the innuendoes were unworthy of the traditions that the paper itself claims to represent, though it may be that such superficial charges disguised a deeper fear. Paine, they write, was ‘the kind of philosopher whose natural forum was the pub’. Then, as now, the radical populist was deeply suspect, for he threatened the established order — and the only response of the Pitt government to the publication of the second part of *Rights of Man* (which sold 200,000 copies within the year

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in a country with a population of little more than ten million people) was to charge Paine with being a 'malicious, seditious, and ill-disposed person'.

And what was the basis of this bar-room philosophy of Paine's? The *Telegraph* supplied an answer: 'He made human liberty his supreme value; he talked glibly and abstractedly about the rights of man, evading all the dilemmas which are created by setting them in a social context.' Surely, even the *Daily Telegraph* could not deny the benevolence of such principles while, once again, they ignored the fact that Paine did, indeed, recognise the implications of his proposals — his carefully costed social programme anticipating Beveridge by almost two hundred years.

Not that the tenor of the *Telegraph* leader was unique; rather it was representative of the treatment that Paine has received since the late eighteenth century. In 1794, a handbill subsidised out of Pitt's Secret Fund was declaiming:

as for them that do not like the PRESENT CONSTITUTION, let them have their deserts, that is the HALTER AND A GIBBET, and be burnt afterwards, not as PAINE hath been, but in body and person. To which every loyal heart will say Amen;

while in 1802, the New England Palladium was writing, on news of Paine's return to America: 'What! Invite to the United States that lying, drunken, brutal infidel who enjoyed in the opportunity of basking and wallowing in the confusion, devastation, bloodshed, rapine, and murder, in which his soul delights?'

In the years between, the United States has lived down its fears. Today Paine remains the towering figure of whom President Monroe wrote: 'The services which he rendered them (the American people) in their struggle for liberty have made an impression of gratitude that will never be erased, whilst they continue to merit the character of a just and generous people.' In Great Britain the bogey remains, if he is remembered at all. For all the occasional outbursts against 'A Radical Rascal' (the headline over the *Telegraph* leader), neglect more than abuse has ensured that Paine has remained little more than a disturbing footnote to English history.

The contrast is extraordinary, and reflects as much on America as on Great Britain. While the one was extrovert and open, willing to debate new ideas and concepts, the other was closed and reactionary — and, for half a century after Paine wrote, the answer to dissent was transportation or the hulks. While the one was exploring new constitutional forms,

the other took precedent as its touchstone, to echo with Burke: 'The very idea of the fabrication of a new government, is enough to fill us with disgust and horror' — and suffrage was not to become universal until Paine had been dead for 120 years. In short, while the one was young and spirited, the other was old, paranoic and fearful of any change which threatened the established order, temporal or spiritual.

Paine tilted at both. *Rights of Man*, and the hopes it represented, was largely responsible for the coercive measures that Pitt was to take against the nascent radical movement that emerged in the last quarter of the eighteenth century; whilst *The Age of Reason*, a deist testament, shocked the nonconformist conscience and led to Paine's ostracism by a movement which was central to reform in the nineteenth. The irony is inescapable: that the political right and theological left combined to expunge Paine's memory in Britain, if not in the United States.

Yet Paine was as English as any free-born Englishman with a memory for the dissenting past, and the entire thrust of his work (whether related to the American or the European revolutions) was the product of the first 37 years of his life before he left England for the American colonies. For the biographer, so little is known of those early years that Hesketh Pearson (*Tom Paine, Friend of Mankind*) and Alfred Owen Aldridge (*Man of Reason*) each succeed in compacting them into 14 pages; while Conway's ageing, though still definitive, biography (*The Life of Thomas Paine*) condenses half of Paine's lifetime into three, brief chapters. The impression is that there was nothing to Paine's life before that day in late 1774 when he first landed in Philadelphia — to help nerve the Colonists claim their independence.

Clearly, the idea is absurd, the problem is to overcome it. Until comparatively recently what Hannah More once termed 'the nice arts' were largely the monopoly of the leisured class, a class with the education and the time to compose their diaries, their letters, their memoirs — which they did in abundance. If history was not written for them, then they wrote history for themselves — and Paine was not of their sort. The son of a staymaker, and a staymaker himself before entering the Excise, he had little time for those refinements recommended by Lord Chesterfield to his son, 'that easy good breeding, that engaging manner, and those graces, which seduce and prepossess people in your favour at first sight'.

They were the qualities of a world that Paine knew, but in which he had no part. Until his arrival in the Colonies, the everyday struggle for existence precluded the leisures of maintaining correspondence, of composing memoirs — thus the 'missing years' without which the later Paine is inexplicable. However, without some understanding of the isolation

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of his childhood, of his Quaker inheritance, of the world that he found in London, of his time with the Excise, the career of the man who coined the phrase the United States, and helped formulate the Declaration of Independence; of the man who first advocated that France should declare itself a Republic, then pleaded for the life of the King; of the man of whom Pitt once said 'Paine is right', to be party to his outlawry, is incomprehensible.

So again, what does the biographer do? How is it possible to reconstruct those early years on which all the rest depend? What was the genesis of Paine's achievements — the achievements of a man once described by Gouverneur Morris as being 'without fortune, without friends or connections' — in representing the aspirations of much of America and Europe during the Age of Revolution?

As I see it, the only answer is to adopt what might be termed an 'historical documentary' approach; to recreate something of the background in which Paine grew up and attempt to interpret his imagined response to all that he saw and heard. No doubt this will offend the historical purists. This work is not for them. Above all else, Paine was a populist. As such, he would be the first to reject the idea that his life was the preserve of that handful of academics who, inheriting the leisured practices of the eighteenth century, have the time to indulge in their specialisation, careless of wider audiences.

This said, however, the opening chapters are weighted towards the speculative in an effort to provide the background essential to understanding the development of Paine's later thinking and writing. In fact, without some appreciation of the social, economic and political conditions of Paine's early years, the later Paine is totally incomprehensible. Once established, however, and with an increasing amount of material available about Paine himself, I trust that the book gains a momentum of its own, for Paine's life was an extraordinary adventure. One writer went so far as to suggest that Baroness Orczy based *The Scarlet Pimpernel* on his time in France during the Revolution!

Far-fetched? Possibly, but then both the man and his times were extraordinary — not least, perhaps, for the resemblance they bear to our own day. Then, as now, the West was entering a period of radical transition. Then, as now, there was growing evidence of destabilisation — political, social, economic. Then, as now, governments attempted to re-adjust to new circumstances, and, while the United States claimed its independence, and France exploded into Revolution, Britain pioneered industrialisation and the Two Nations which Disraeli later described.

Two centuries later, at the onset of post-industrialism, the United States

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lives with the inherited problem of public affluence and private squalor, and the knowledge that with no new frontiers to explore it is no longer possible to relocate deprivation; France lives with growing evidence of political polarisation, with the renaissance of the far right and confrontation on the streets; while a British government adjusts to the problems of de-industrialisation by introducing measures in the name of 'law and order' of which Pitt the Younger would not have been ashamed.

The analogies may not be exact. They are disturbing, nevertheless; and, if history should repeat itself, then it is hoped that we have learnt something from our past mistakes, not least from a reflection of Thomas Paine writing at a time when: 'Freedom had been hunted around the globe; reason was considered as rebellion; and the slavery of fear had made men afraid to think.' Two centuries have passed since he voiced his concern. The fear remains.

Finally, I would like to thank all those who have indulged me for so long: Arthur Butler, Shirley Darlington, Diana Dixon, Liz Mandeville, Ian MacLaurin, Kay McLeod, Jacqui and Brian Morris, the staff of Lewes Library, Irene Brown (whose tolerance takes no account of the fact that there are any villains in history), Cora Kaplan (who provided me with an invaluable perspective of the times), Hilary Walford (who, whilst editing the text, taught me the correct usage of participles!), and, most especially, Rachel, to whom this book is dedicated.

Their encouragement, patience and advice has made this book possible. I can only hope that it does some credit both to them and 'The Greatest Exile'.

David Powell
Lewes



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EARLY YEARS

The small town of Thetford bellied deep against the landscape, besieged by cold and darkness. The winter of 1737 was hard; the winds out of the east careened the Anglian flatlands, numbing all life and drowning out the birth cries of Thomas Paine, first son of Frances, née Cocke, and Joseph, staymaker of Bridge Street. It was no easy delivery. Childbirth was dangerous at the best of times. With Frances in her fortieth year the risks to both mother and child were increased, especially during the long march of winter when fresh food was scarce, when the cold and damp reached upwards and inwards through flagged floors and wattle walls, and the nights were 15 hours long.

The fear of darkness still lingers, a childhood bogey. In the mid-eighteenth century it was a palpable thing; the fear of winter nights darkened the mind, Blake's 'direful monster' that 'Withers all silence, and in his hand/Unclothes the earth, and freezes up frail night.' Only the great houses knew the comfort of candlelight, a luxury beyond the means of the masses. Once Joseph had stood and marvelled at the bright lit windows of the Duke of Grafton's country seat and wondered that the distance between them was so small, yet so great. The following morning all Thetford was *en fête*, for Elizabeth, Lady Fitzroy, had borne an heir to the Grafton line that held the town and its people in its feif.

But that was two years ago and now Joseph stood in the darkness of his small workroom, and looked out across the night-veiled town, and heard the child's first cries, and thanked his Quaker God. Now, perhaps, Frances would find the happiness that had been a stranger to their married lives. Sometimes, and to himself, he wondered why she had ever accepted his proposal; to dismiss as cynical the thought that at 36 she had been well beyond what was considered a marriageable age and that he, Joseph, had been a last resort.

Cynical, perhaps, but the doubt remained for, even before the banns were called at nearby Euston Church, her father had warned them both that the difference in their ages (she was eleven years his senior) would make for difficulties in the years to come but then, being a lawyer, he dissembled like all of his profession to cloak a different concern. In an age of rigid social demarcation, Joseph needed no one to tell him that Frances had married beneath her.

His own father had talked of the Paine line reaching back to one Sir

2 Early Years

Joseph Paine, one-time Lord Mayor of Norwich, though the story remained unsubstantiated; as was the Cockes' claim to descent from Richard Cocke, author of *English Law, or a Summary Survey of the Household of God Upon Earth*. Whatever the past, however, the Cockes and the Paines were now of different social classes, for, while Joseph might be a well-found craftsman, Frances's family were professional people of 'the middling sort'. The prejudice, that anyone can get anywhere in trade so long as one gets out of it, had been a staple of the English social system; but in Hanoverian England it was not so much a prejudice, more an interdiction — and Joseph was well versed in the nuances of such differentiation.

As a Quaker, one of the handful in Thetford, he was one of that 'peculiar nation of people, quite different from ordinary English citizens by their language, manner of dressing, and religion'. During his visit to England only ten years before the young Paine's birth, Voltaire* may have found the Friends admirable (more especially, their belief in equality), but then he was French and, by definition, suspect. For Joseph Paine there was no disguising the fact that his religion set him apart from other people; not least, from his wife. Possibly they could have tolerated their age and social differences; but for Frances, an Anglican of Tory persuasion, Quakerism still smacked of the temporal and spiritual heresies of the early Friends who railed with Fox*: 'O ye great and rich men of earth, weep and howl for your misery is coming. All the loftiness of men must be laid low.'

Little more than two generations had passed since such levelling sentiments had threatened the whole political and social fabric of England. The fear remained; a memory prompted by the Quakers' continuing refusal to pay tithes to support the Anglican Church. Only last summer a number of Friends had been imprisoned for such defiance of the established order, which led the *Grub Street Journal* of March 1736 to call up Popish plots in a renewed attempt to discredit the sect:

Whether Quakers often turn Papists I cannot say, but I believe it is no difficult matter to produce instances of Papists turning Quaker, and the leader of the sect called Pennites has been seen in Jesuit garb in Rome . . . Upon the whole, should it be true that the Jesuits are at the bottom of the Quaker Tithe Bill, how little reason hath the State

* To avoid interrupting continuity, brief details about people, institutions and events of general interest in the eighteenth century are given in the Appendix, pp. 267–97. Entries are indicated by an asterisk when they first appear in the text.

to grant them more indulgence than any other set of people who are a cunning, fly, designing set of men.

The suspicion that the theological extremes of Catholic right and Quaker left shared a common interest in opposing the established church and its political masters was not lost on Joseph and the small congregation of Thetford Friends. They knew the practice well; the inheritance of their dissent reached back 90 years to that grey January day of 1649 when the English Commonwealth demonstrated that even kings have a bone in their neck (a fact that convinced George II that England was a nation of 'King killers and republicans'); since the radical Rainborough* had exclaimed:

I think that the poorest he in England hath a life to lead as the greatest he; and therefore, truly, sir, I think that it is clear that every man that is to live under government ought first, by his own consent, to put himself under government.

In 1737 such ideas were still dangerous to noise abroad, particularly for a Quaker, for those 'roundheaded rogues', the early Friends, had been in the van of the levelling movement; preach that there was a God in every man, and carrying their creed at sword point out of the north into Wales, the south, and the eastern counties where Old Nol had raised the cavalry troops that were later to form the nucleus of the New Model Army. The spirit of levelling might have been laid, and the Quakers abandoned their swords — but the legacy remained, to mock the pretensions of the new oligarchs and their Glorious Revolution of 1688.

The event was half a century distant now, distorted by time and journeying, though Joseph's father had remembered it well, and talked of it often: of James II's hurried flight; of Parliament's offer of the English crown to William of Orange on its own, carefully formulated terms. The Revolution Settlement was to exorcise, for once and for always, those dangerous times when the gentry had raised the people to further their own ambitions, and then became fearful, for 'Like unskilful conjurors they often raised those spirits they could not lay; and under cover of zeal for the cause, the poor levelled the rich of both parties.'

And they had succeeded well enough; the Graftons were evidence of that. The past two years had been hard, the agricultural wage accordingly low — £8 a year for a head ploughman, half that for his mate, and a shilling a day for casual labourers.¹ With the mass of the population dependent on the land for a livelihood, it was little wonder there was

talk of unrest both in countryside and town. With the price of bread providing the most sensitive measure of well being, a fall in real wages and a rise in wheat prices was a sure recipe for trouble — though Thetford remained distanced from it.

The surrounding countryside was rich and prosperous, while the town itself, with no more than two thousand residents, still had two Members of Parliament, its own Mayor, Alderman, Mace- and Sword-bearers — all in the gift of the Grafton family. The Glorious Revolution has seen to that. The town might still boast of its character, but in practice it was little more than a Grafton monopoly and Joseph wondered that even now an Englishman was not free in his own country; that, even in a place such as Thetford, a man in search of work from another part of the country could be hounded out as if plagued.² So much for the Revolution and its Bill of Rights; and in the darkness he knew that his son's birthright was already flawed, then hushed himself for the thought.

Even the night was not safe for such ideas. If a man was to prosper it demanded quiescence and, according to his lights, Joseph had prospered well enough. Though a Quaker he had been elected a Freeman of the town only 18 months before; and his trade of staymaking, though no route to a fortune, provided a respectable income — as much as £30 in a good year. In contrast with the gentry, it was a pittance, yet it was more than most could expect — and all it required of Joseph Paine was that he should compromise his Quaker God, and, despising himself, he swore that this would not be the succession of his son.

Meanwhile, in the rushlight of the upstairs room, Frances held her son. Now there was no more bitterness; no frustration. The child, this Tom, redeemed the rest: the anger in her father's eyes when she had first talked of Joseph, the Thetford staymaker; the secret laughter of the women of the town, long married, when the betrothal was announced; and, most of all, the contempt in the eyes of the minister which reflected her secret fear that this marriage was a blasphemy, an unclean thing.

The Anglican Church, her Church, preached toleration, though within carefully circumscribed bounds; and, while Joseph was a good man, and well respected, his faith found no place in her catechism. Memories of the times when a Commonwealth trooper could swear an oath that 'This sword should never be laid down, nor many thousands more, whilst there was a priest left in England' were altogether too close for that, and sometimes she wondered to herself whether the Paines, too, had ever had the blood of the Church on their conscience.

Those had been savage times when a world was turned upside-down; nearer still, from her girlhood, she remembered the intrigues that had

followed Anne's death and George I's succession; the fears aroused when the Earl of Mar had raised James Stuart's standard in the Highlands and gathered an army of three thousand men about him within the week. As that autumn of 1715 had deepened into winter, the news had grown more wild, more disturbing: of a rising in the west; of the Jacobites of Northumberland joining up with James's supporters; of their advance south through the Cumberland hills.

For an instant it had seemed as if savagery was to be unloosed again; though this time in the name of a different God for, as her father explained, the enforced restoration of the Stuarts with their Popish ways could only mean civil war. After all, it was less than 30 years since the Glorious Revolution had averted just such a blood letting; the Settlement of 1688 had provided England with a government sanctified by the established Church (for its authors well remembered Charles I's dictum that: 'Religion is the only firm foundation of power'), which was the envy of all the civilised world, even France.

After a season of rumour and fear, the Jacobite adventure had been still-born and, with his army dwindling about him, James Stuart had taken ship to France. Yet the fear remained. The stability of England and its Settlement was still a fragile thing, though, ironically, there was a steadily mounting clamour against George II's chief Minister, Walpole,* for his unremitting pursuit of peace:

I have lived, Sir, long enough in the world to see the effects of war on this nation; I have seen how destructive the effects, even of a successful war, have been; and shall I, who have seen this, when I am admitted to the honour to share in his majesty's council, advise him to enter upon a war while peace may be had? No, Sir, I am proud to own it, that I always have been, and always shall be, an advocate for peace.

Yet now, even in Walpole's own county of Norfolk, men were drumming up the glories of war, and, remembering her husband and his torn conscience, Frances swore that there would be no compromise for her son. She, Frances, would make certain of that, for in three years of marriage she had learned what compromise meant.

As Frances wished, the child was baptised Thomas; and, as she feared, war soon came with Spain and, though Walpole resigned from office, he would still pass through Thetford on the way to his country seat at Houghton when Parliament rose for the long, summer recess. At one time

6 *Early Years*

it had been a whirlwind passage, a flying column of horses and coaches spurring north across the town bridge. Now it was a more leisurely parade, but none the less impressive, for Walpole had governed England for more than 20 years — the apotheosis of a class that had sent James and his Papist sympathies packing, to establish its own primacy in 1688.

For an impressionable child the passage must have made a powerful spectacle, for, though ageing now and heavy with good living, the stories that followed Walpole's name were legion: of how he had spent 16 years building Houghton, demolishing a whole village in the process; of how he had spent £12,000 on the drapes of his great velvet bed. The trimmings of power, perhaps, but enough to fill out a child's imagination with its majesty, for, as his mother never tired of explaining, this was the man that had brought stability to England, though his father called it a different thing — the rule of the oligarchs.

Together in the small workshop, Joseph would retell the story of the Commonwealth, and all that followed; of the Glorious Revolution and how, even then, the 'families of rank' had divided amongst themselves. While the infant Tory Party was torn in its allegiance between king, church, and Parliament, the Whigs had no such inhibitions and were relentless in pursuit of their new-won power — though it was to be quarter of a century, and more, before Walpole finally consolidated the authority of his class and its godhead, property.

For this was what these new men — the Walpoles and their kind — were about. Property was the ultimate measure of their standing. All else was subordinate to it — church, Parliament, the law itself. Concerned only with the 'dominion of property', and contemptuous of 'men of no property, and capable only of labour', the new masters of England pursued affluence with an even-handed rapacity — affluence based on landed interest, on capital speculation, on holding office under the crown; or a combination of all three.

And laying aside his tools, Joseph would describe the extravagance and list its antecedents. First, the historic wealth of the great landowning families such as the Devonshires and the Bedfords; second, an altogether more recent development, the mercantile affluence of men such as Lord Chandos who had lost more than £700,000 playing the markets in a handful of years, yet still maintained a full orchestra at his country seat; and finally, the new and burgeoning wealth of those who held government office that accounted for the rise of men such as Walpole, whose father had lived on a modest estate, whose son, when in office, put £150,000 through only one of his four bankers in as many years.

Hans Stanley, an opportunist if ever there was one, had summarised

the case neatly in a speech to the House almost too many years ago to be recalled:

If I had a son I would say to him 'Get into Parliament, make some tiresome speeches. Do not accept the first offer, but wait until you can make more provision for yourself and your family and then call yourself an independent country gentleman.'

It was advice which the Whigs pursued, assiduously. During Walpole's days, corruption became a unifying force of government, administrations depending as much on the length of their pockets as on promises of the perquisites of 'place' to obtain, and hold, majorities — Horace Walpole once listed the sinecures his father's family had reaped from his time in office: one brother had been appointed Auditor of the Exchequer at a salary of £8,000 a year; another to the Clerkship of the Pells; while Horace himself was appointed Clerk to the Estreats before leaving Eton, Usher of the Exchequer while still at Cambridge.

And, as they accumulated wealth, so they spent it, prodigiously: on their wives and their mistresses, on their carriages and their cellars, and always on their estates. Years later, on a visit to Lord Scarsdale's country home, Dr Johnson remarked to his host: 'Why, sir, all this excludes but one evil, poverty' — the one evil that the new elite feared most. To them, it was a stigma they sought to banish with a display of conspicuous consumption made the more conspicuous by the condition of the four million men, women and children lumped together as 'the poor' who lived out their lives at subsistence level, or below.

And in growing numbers, they crossed the town bridge, too; a despairing army in search of work to contrast, vividly, with Walpole's passage. These were the two nations of Paine's childhood. He needed no lessons in their character, while even his grandfather, Henry Cocke, may have remarked on the sight, though cautiously as became a lawyer who looked for his fees from the landed classes who were rediscovering the benefits of enclosure.

In the 1740s the movement was in its infancy, though growing apace: 400,000 acres of common land were enclosed in the first half of the century, a further three million by 1800. On this issue, at least, Tories and Whigs shared a common interest, finding the system admirably suited to serving two, complementary ends — on the one hand, improving the levels of agricultural efficiency; on the other, increasing their own rent rolls.

And the law, their law, concurred. Fourteen hundred enclosure acts

were hurried through Parliament in the last 40 years of the century, denying smallholders and freeholders who made up the body of what, until then, had been largely an agrarian economy, either the time or the means to protest against measures on which their livelihoods depended. The wholesale eviction of villagers from the common lands of England may have provided the 'hands' necessary to work the new industries already emerging by the mid-century; their sequestered lands may have increased the food production for the new urban masses — but at the price of bitter hardship; and of Joseph's silence, save with his son.

But for Frances, it was different. She would watch the army of the dispossessed and pity them, yet knew that this was a cost that must be endured. The Reverend Vaughan at St Peter's and St Cuthbert's had explained it often enough. It was all very well for Joseph to wrestle with his God, and protest in the Quaker fashion: 'The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof. He hath given it to the sons of men in general, and not to a few lofty ones which lord it over their brethren.'³ But where had such rantings led, and not so long ago?

No doubt the earth was the Lord's, but her church taught a different creed: that there was a set and established order of things in which each man and woman played out their pre-ordained role, and that without such a contract there could only be chaos. Yet Joseph persisted, and the lad was only seven when she came across him writing some lines to a dead crow:

Here lies the body of John Crow
Who once was high but now is low.
Ye brother crows, take warning all
For as you rise, so you must fall.

The boy had seen Walpole only recently and doubtless heard the talk that the old man was mortally sick, but there was no excusing such levelling thoughts, for, as the Reverend Vaughan said, it would be a little while before the meek could inherit the earth.

Ten years before Paine's birth, a Portuguese visitor had written of England:

The legislature here provides an abundance of excellent laws for the maintenance of the poor, and manufactures sufficient for all of them, and yet by indolent management few nations are so burdened with them, there not being many countries where the poor are in worse condition.

In the stews of England's towns and cities, ramshackle houses huddled together about unpaved and undrained streets, traps for infectious diseases like typhus and cholera. And in the countryside, conditions were little better. Most labourers' cottages continued to be built of mud, with earth floors; Defoe described one Derbyshire lead miner whose family of six shared a cave cut into the hillside — and suspected that many would envy them their 'clean and neat home'. As the poet Gray noted, 'chill penury' was generally the labourers' lot, whilst the despotism of 'little tyrants' spread a lengthening shadow across the land.

The labourer's wage rarely rose above subsistence level, and the story in Thetford was that his Grace's three footmen earned less between them in a year than their master spent on his chocolates. And if men fared badly, women fared worse. The use of sweated labour was not new, but employers of the eighteenth century refined the Protestant work ethic, true to the Duke of Albermarle's dictum that 'the mean people have no interest in the Commonwealth but the use of breath'.

With their conscience suborned by patronage, writers preferred to ignore the presence of 'the mean people'. Foreign commentators knew no such restraints. In 1740, a Swedish visitor described how he had seen women humping four baskets on their heads at a time at the lime kilns of Gravesend, all for sixpence a day, while Thetford was too small a place to keep the secrets of the girls who took the Norwich road to prostitution. In their cobweb of shawls the gossips of the town might chatter of scarlet women, and from his pulpit Mr Vaughan might thunder 'unclean' but they went none the less — a continuing mystery to the young Paine for, when he asked why they left, and where they had gone, and what they had done that was 'unclean', his mother became a scold and his father deaf.

Ultimately, however, children were the most utilitarian element within the labour force: cheap, malleable and totally expendable as far as the reserve army of child paupers was concerned. Apprenticed off at premiums of up to £10 as soon as it was possible for them to learn a trade, their contracts lasted until they were 24 years of age — if they survived that long. With government imposing no controls whatsoever either on their hours of work or their work conditions, many simply starved or were beaten to death.

The world of the poor — of a childhood which ended at five or six years of age; of a working life of twelve or fourteen hours daily; of the constant companionship of disease and death — was the world that Frances feared for her son. It was all very well to rail at the inequities of life, but the lad had to make his way in it, and with her tongue now

sharpened by bitterness she would berate Joseph for his Quaker quietism.

Little by little he was drawing away from her, haunted by the compromise that he found within himself which he discussed alone with his son. The lad was already wary of the Friends' asceticism (what was it that he had said of them, that if their tastes had been consulted at the creation, neither a flower would have blossomed in its gaiety, nor a bird been permitted to sing?) but when it came to their humanity it was a different matter.

He had learned their scriptures well, and was growing overfond of quoting them, not least the text that God 'made all men of one mould and one blood to dwell on the face of the earth'.

Even the thought was dangerous, yet there was no blinding him to the evidence. It was before him every day, among the workless who lived with the double damnation of being persecuted by a legal system for being unable to find work where it did not exist. John Locke* provided the Glorious Revolution with its philosophical legitimacy, though he was to be disappointed with the outcome; the Grandees exploiting his ideas for their own ends, and refining them with harsh judicial correctives.

To prevent pauper children absconding, they could be ringed by the neck or manacled. By an act of William III, men in receipt of poor relief could be made to wear a large roman 'P' on the right sleeves of their coats; while men and women caught in the act of begging could be stripped to the waist and 'openly whipped until his or her body be bloody'. But even the authorities flinched at the proposal that a propertyless person (a phrase that echoes down the eighteenth century) found guilty of counterfeiting the pass essential to travel from parish to parish in search of work 'shall loose his ears for forgery the first time . . . and the second time be transported to the plantations'.

As Joseph was never tired of repeating, it was little wonder that the times were troubled; that the workless carried talk (magnified by their hunger, a powerful aid to the imagination) of violence: of bread riots, wage riots, enclosure riots. Sporadic, lacking any form of leadership, isolated in small communities (only three or four towns in England had more than 20,000 inhabitants at the turn of the eighteenth century), and violated by their everyday struggle for existence, the poor lacked either the energy or the cohesion to represent the full grievousness of their distress.

Yet the fear of 'mobocracy', a word that only came into the language when Paine was a boy, continued to haunt the landed class, who were learning the age-old lesson that, the higher the value placed on property,

the greater the need for its protection. With the bizarre contrast between private affluence and public squalor, the masters of the eighteenth century learned the lesson well. If the Act of Settlement had fixed their political and economic supremacy, and if Locke had legitimised their power, then the law provided them with the means to safeguard it, Oliver Goldsmith* writing that: 'Each wanton judge new penal statutes draws/Laws grind the poor, and rich men rule the law.'

Between 1688 and George III's death in 1815, the number of capital offences on the statute book rose by 190, two-thirds of the number being enacted before 1760, and the majority being concerned with crime against poverty: for forgery, for stealing (by 1740 the theft of a shilling handkerchief was enough to send a child to the gallows), for blacking the face (this a measure against smugglers), for uprooting fence posts around enclosed lands.

At their Sunday meetings the Friends of Thetford might deny the right of any man to take a life, but here, again, was their difference, for there was no escaping the peddled tales of public executions in London, Norwich or nearby Ely. The old city was only a morning's walk away, and the burning of Amy Hutchinson in 1750 must have made a rare spectacle. Seventeen years of age and condemned for the death of her husband: 'Her hands and face were smeared with tar, and having a garment daubed with pitch, after a short prayer, her executioner strangled her, and twenty minutes after the fire was kindled and burnt for nearly half an hour.'

In Thetford, the details were recounted with morbid fascination, but for the young Paine they must have been as confusing as fascinating. As long as he could remember his father had prayed to a merciful God, provoking Frances's tongue with his nonconforming creed, yet too often God remained merciless. Why, only recently at their Sunday meeting in Cage Lane, the spirit had moved a Friend to speak on the redemption of man by the death of the Son of God. The recollection lingered, disturbing. If one doubted God's charity, what else remained?

The answer could only be contradictions: of the Sunday peity of an established church which preached deference to a congregation that dare not be otherwise; of the measured tones of a constitution which called men free, to enslave them; of the majesty of a law that elevated itself, to mock justice.

To the adolescent Paine they may have been difficult concepts, but they found concrete form in Charles, Duke of Grafton, for 33 years Lord Chamberlain of England. When in Thetford, he prayed, occasionally, at the local church; attended the occasional town meeting; occasionally

handed down law as a Justice of the Peace. It was a trinity of power that Joseph had long recognised of necessity rather than conviction and following necessity, and Frances's promptings, he enrolled Tom at the local Grammar School when the boy was 10 years of age. As she said, the boy needed an education if he was to make anything of himself.

The first days of school were an intimidating experience for Paine; the more so because his plain Quaker dress and manner of speech, and Joseph's insistence that he should learn no Latin, marked him out from the other new boys in the Reverend William Knowler's class. True, he had known most of them in the small gangs of childhood that roamed the town and nearby countryside; yet collectively they took on a different character that exposed and taunted his differences: a Friend without friendship.

It was a solitary experience, and there was little consolation to be gleaned from Joseph's explanation that he was fortunate to have any schooling — or that the family could not afford to send him away to school as the Grafton's had done with their heir. And here the otherwise taciturn man would smile a private smile, as if excusing his conscience for that at least.

The public schools of England were little better than a savage kindergarten to life for the gentry and those 'of the middling sort'. Run largely on the fagging system, the power of the older boys was virtually unlicensed and the young Grafton at Eton may well have seen Lord Holland's fingers, already grotesquely deformed from having to toast his fagmaster's bread before an open fire with bare hands. Such brutality was general rather than particular, and when discipline faltered the whole barbarous system often collapsed into anarchy — later in the century, the militia having to be called into Rugby School to quell a riot among the boys who had mined the headmaster's study.

And they were the fortunate ones. If the poor survived the trauma of birth, then work was their expectation; the sole purpose of education being to 'condition children to their primary purpose . . . as hewers of wood and drawers of water'. The advice dined down through the century, from the Bishop of London's warning in 1724 'that village schools should not encourage fine writing in boys, fine working in girls, or fine singing in either', to the pragmatism of that most Christian philanthropist, Hannah More,* writing 70 years later:

My plan of instruction is extremely limited and simple: they learn on weekdays such coarse works as may fit them for servants. I allow of

no writing for the poor. The object is not to make them fanatics but to train up the lower classes in habits of industry and piety.

For all his isolation at Thetford School, for all his sense of difference, the young Tom Paine was fortunate — and there was even some compensation to be gleaned from being excused Latin. The subject was a staple of the eighteenth-century curriculum but, as his father explained to the Reverend Knowler on that first day, the Friends had a powerful objection to the books in which the language was taught. What the boy missed proved to be no loss for, freed of the classical affectations of the age, it did much to account for the vividness of his later prose style and, while Mr Knowler might question Joseph's reasoning, he sympathised with his problem and promised to keep an eye on the boy.

The old dominie was as good as his word. For the next three years, and recognising that as the constant butt of the schoolyard humour the young Paine was turning in on himself and finding an escape in work, he encouraged the boy to explore the world beyond the narrow boundaries of Thetford. Heaven knew, most of the pupils had little enough incentive to study as they lived with the expectation of inheriting a farm, or even a small estate. Paine, however, was different and not so much for his Quaker's ways but because of them, for he actively wanted to work.

The habit appealed, strongly, to Knowler and he took a personal pride in Paine's education, which the lad reciprocated. Together they studied the sciences (a subject for which the pupil was later to say that he had a 'particular bent'); poetry (a subject of which Frances and Joseph disapproved 'as leading too much into the field of imagination'); and a much used globe of the world, one of the master's few keepsakes of his time at sea. A one-time naval chaplain, Knowler sparked the boy's imagination with his adventures, recounting his voyages and the places he had known: India, the Indies, the African coast, but most of all America, America most of all.⁴

There was an old book in Mr Knowler's small library, *A Natural History of Virginia*, and from first reading it enthralled Paine: 'My inclination from that day for seeing the western side of the Atlantic never left me.' In their walks together, or in the small workroom, Joseph had talked often of the Colonies as if they offered an escape that he had never had the courage to take: of the Puritans of New England and the Friends of Pennsylvania who had fled English persecution in the belief that:

Wee shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eies of all people are uppon us; soe that if wee shall deale falsely with our god in this worke wee

have undertaken and soe cause him to withdrawe his present help from us, wee shall be made a story and a by-word through the world.⁵

The globe, the book, the old chaplain's words brought Joseph's hear-say vision alive. Here was a purpose beyond the closed world of childhood. Suddenly, Thetford seemed a very small place indeed, too small when there was a world to be discovered, and at 13 Tom Paine quit school — for an adventure that took him no further than his father's workroom. For once, Frances and Joseph shared a common concern (that their son should not leave home) albeit for different reasons. A practical man, as his compromise with life testified, it was all very well for the lad to day-dream, but that never earned an honest living. Better that he learn a trade. A lonely woman, and ageing (at 50 she was well above the average life expectancy of the mid-eighteenth century), Frances found little comfort in her husband and his brooding ways, and clung tenaciously to her son.

For the young Paine, that first day as an apprentice staymaker at his father's bench was the prelude to four, bitter years. Always a withdrawn man, 16 years of domestic feuding had driven Joseph further into himself, which only heightened Tom's sense of isolation — in a house where there was little laughter; in a congregation where there was little joy; in a town where he shared less and less in common with others of his age. It was as if he was being divided against himself by some infinite power beyond comprehension: he felt a growing confusion as to the name of God, yet rejected the alternative; he saw a temporal morality practised in God's name that denied his most fundamental precepts; above all else, he had the mounting certainty that it would only be beyond the close frontiers of Thetford that he would find himself, yet his parents insisted that he remain.

For four years he worked with Joseph waiting for a justification to escape and then, one morning, for no other reason than that he could wait no longer, he walked out of the house in Bridge Street, crossed the bridge over the Little Ouse and took the Lowestoft road. A spare built, but powerful 17-year-old, he made the 48-mile journey within the day and that evening signed as a hand aboard the *Terrible*, under its master Captain Death. His time aboard was short lived. Before the privateer sailed — to be sunk in an engagement with the French and the loss of nearly all hands — Joseph came aboard and persuaded her master to give Tom his discharge.

It was a weary journey back to Thetford, the silence between father and son punctuated only by Joseph's remonstrances: 'The good Lord