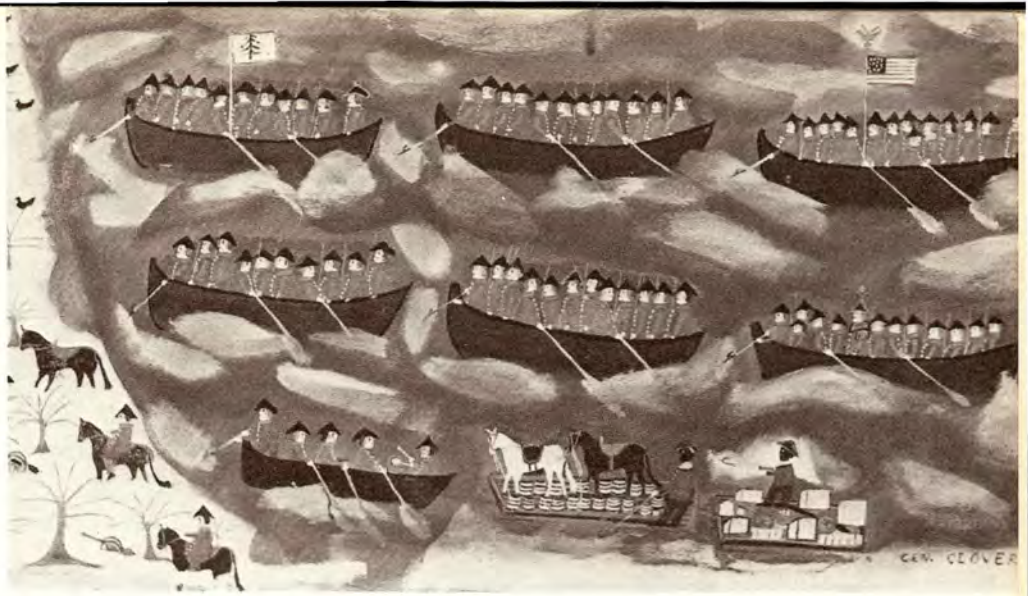
Thomas Paine

Radical Pamphleteer

In the dim glow of a campfire near the village of Newark, New Jersey, a frail little man huddled against the cold wind, writing on fluttering sheets which he held on the head of an army drum. It was November 1776, and the Revolution was nineteen months old. George Washington's army was straggling in retreat across New Jersey. Its cause seemed hopeless, and the well-fed, well-armed British army invincible. The ragged Americans in camp were ready to give up, and Congress had fled from Philadelphia to Baltimore.

The face of the earnest little man revealed the passion with which he wrote, more hurriedly now. The words he scrawled were soon to sweep the country, revive the patriot cause, and give Washington and his disheartened men courage to launch a surprise attack on the enemy.

The writer, an aide to General Nathanael Greene, was a newspaperman from Philadelphia named Thomas Paine. He was pale, thin, withdrawn, a man who drew little attention in a crowd. But,



Washington's troops crossing the icy Delaware. The scene was painted by a Marblehead artist, proud of the Massachusetts fishermen who rowed the boats.

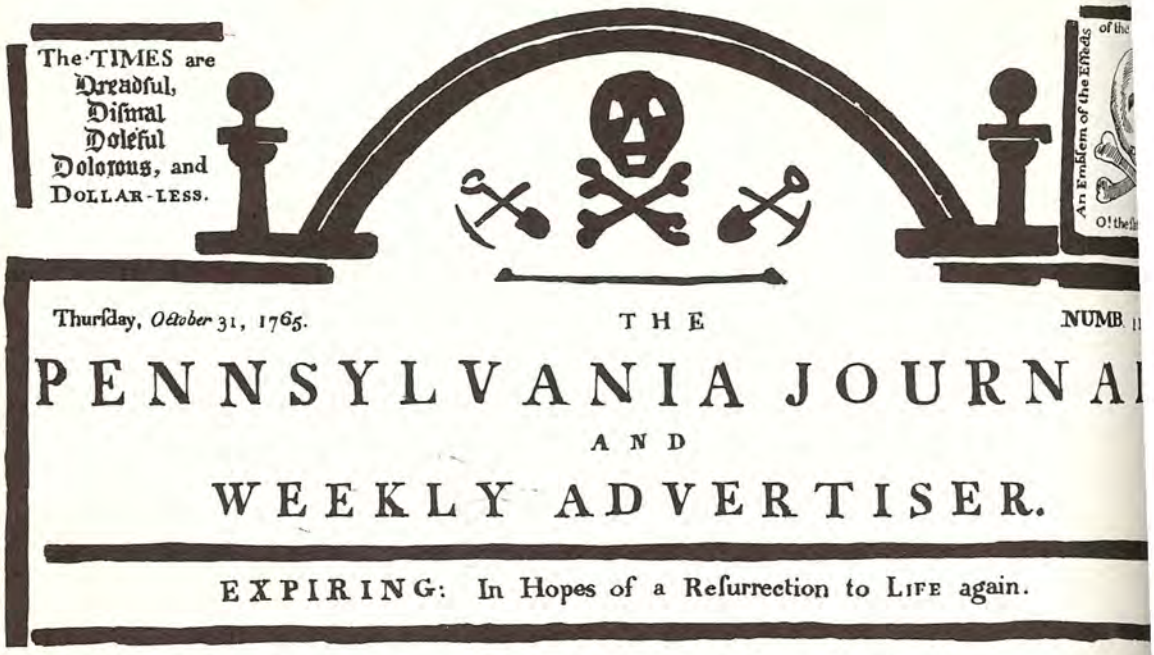
as John Adams said, he had "genius in his eyes." Paine called his new pamphlet *The Crisis,* and its opening phrases were to ring like a bugle call through the colonies:

> 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.

The rapid sentences flowed on, page after page, to the end:

> By perseverance and fortitude we have the prospect of a glorious issue; by cowardice and submission, the sad choice of a variety of evils—a ravaged country—a depopulated city—habitations without safety, and slavery without hope.

George Washington was deeply impressed by these words. He had them read aloud to his troops before they crossed the ice-choked Delaware on Christmas night, to attack the unsuspecting enemy garrison in Trenton. The thrilling words were still fresh in their minds as the men struggled across the river in a howling



When Paine became editor of The Pennsylvania Journal, *the newspaper was already known for its support of the patriot cause. An earlier editor used skulls-and-crossbones in bitter protest against the Stamp Act.*

storm. Within a few weeks the pamphlet was known to almost every American. The New York Revolutionary Convention, which had dwindled to nine members, took heart and was revived. Deserters in other colonies returned to the army. *The Crisis* gave the discouraged young nation a new spirit.

As the war dragged on, Paine wrote sixteen more *Crisis* papers, dealing with each new threat to the rebel cause—a rumored plot of army officers to replace Washington, a British move to make trouble between the French and Americans, a proposal to make peace on terms favorable to England. When lack of money slowed the war effort, Paine asked wryly, "whether it is better to raise two millions to defend the country and govern it ourselves . . . or pay six millions to have it conquered and let the enemy govern it?"

As a boy Thomas Paine, son of a poor Quaker corset-maker in England, had only brief though useful schooling in his home town of Thetford. At the age of thirteen he went to work for his father as a stay-maker. But within three years Thomas ran away to sea

and served as a sailor on a British privateer in the war with France. He returned to London to become a clerk in a tax office. He began to educate himself in the belief that "every person of learning is finally his own teacher." He saved money to buy books and globes and other scientific equipment, and he attended lectures by scholars.

Paine was drawn into the struggle to help poor English working people. He was strongly moved by the sight of crowds in London, "ragged and hungry children, and persons of seventy and eighty, begging in the streets."

Thomas began writing in protest and was dismissed from his government job as a troublemaker. To escape being jailed for debt, he had to sell everything he owned. In 1774 he sailed for Philadelphia to make a new life in America. Through the aid of Benjamin Franklin, who gave him a letter of introduction, Paine became editor of *The Pennsylvania Journal.*

As tension between England and America grew, he wrote eloquently in favor of independence. But he wanted more than freedom from Great Britain for his new countrymen. He wanted a democracy, a complete change "from the monarchial to the republican form of government." Opposition was powerful, for many wealthy Americans preferred British rule to the dangers of a democratic revolution.

Paine attacked these men in *The Pennsylvania Journal,* calling for independence at once. He also condemned England for having "employed herself in the most horrid of all traffics, that of human flesh . . . and ravaged the hapless shore of Africa, robbing it of its unoffending inhabitants to cultivate her stolen dominions in the west." Thus Paine was not only insisting upon a break with England months before the Declaration of Independence. He was also attacking slavery in America almost a century before the cruel practice came to an end.

Paine soon showed a new manuscript to two of his influential Philadelphia friends, Dr. Benjamin Rush and David Rittenhouse.

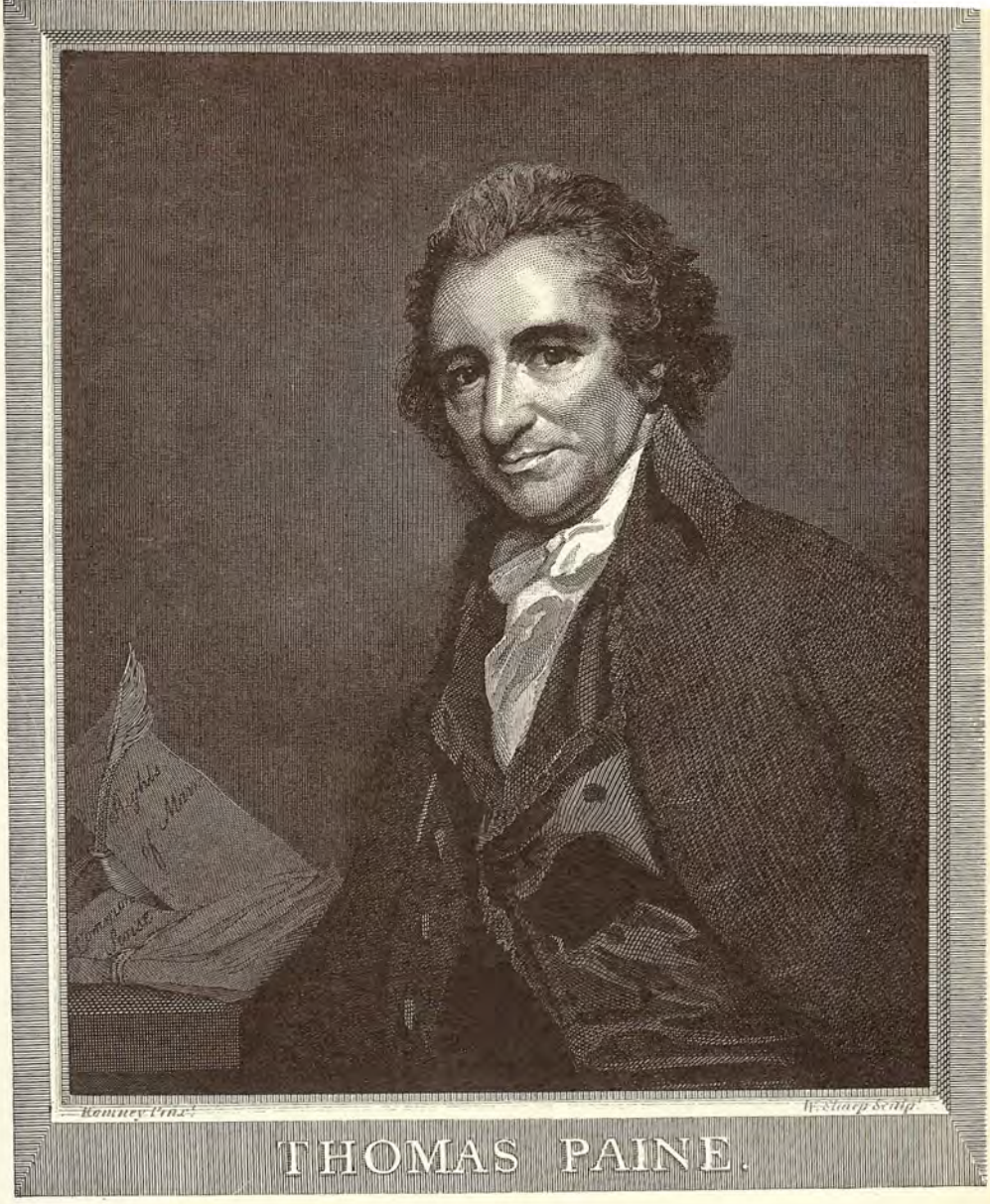
Rush suggested a title—*Common Sense*—and the pamphlet appeared in January 1776. It was a call for a free America, the first of modern republics, with the power of government to be held by the people. Paine foresaw the future role of the United States:

> O! Ye that love mankind! Ye that dare oppose not only the tyranny but the tyrant, stand forth! Every spot of the old world is overrun with oppression. Freedom hath been hunted around the globe. Asia and Africa have long expelled her. Europe regards her like a stranger, and England hath given her warning to depart. O! receive the fugitive, and prepare in time for an asylum for mankind.

Common Sense, published anonymously, was a sensation. Soon half a million copies were in print. Thousands of Americans quoted its phrases. Even conservative colonial leaders were swayed by this pamphlet. George Washington wrote, "A few more of such flaming arguments as . . . the sound doctrine and unanswerable reasoning of *Common Sense* will not leave numbers at a loss to decide upon the propriety of a separation." He added later, "I find that *Common Sense* is working a powerful change in the minds of many men."

Common Sense was a simple, forceful document on the nature of man and government. "There is something exceedingly ridiculous in the composition of monarchy," wrote Paine. "The state of a King shuts him from the world, yet the business of a King requires him to know it thoroughly." Paine attacked George III as a "hardened sullen-tempered Pharaoh" and the "Royal Brute of Great Britain." In a day when men could hardly imagine government without kings, these lines were exciting reading for the subjects of a powerful monarch.

Paine realized that the fighting in Massachusetts and the debates in the legislature of Virginia were both parts of one vital cause. " 'Tis not in numbers but in unity that our great strength lies,"



Paine continued. "No single colony is able to support itself, and the whole, when united, is able to do any thing!"

Thomas Paine was more devoted to the revolutionary cause than many native-born Americans. Despite his poverty, he donated to the revolutionary movement all money from the sale of *Common Sense,* and he added the small fortune of $2500 voted him by the legislature of Pennsylvania.

Tory leaders, stunned by the effects of the pamphlet, wrote newspaper attacks against the "artful, insidious and pernicious" tract. But public demand for independence grew stronger. And Paine's writings had a direct influence on the writing of the Declaration of Independence in July 1776. Jefferson said that he embraced "the same principles" of which Paine wrote, and paid tribute to the Englishman's skill. "No writer had exceeded Paine in ease and familiarity of style," said Jefferson, "and in simple and unassuming language."

Paine later helped to obtain a radical constitution for Pennsylvania, written largely by his friend Benjamin Franklin. Judges were to be elected, not appointed. Most men could vote, not just well-to-do property owners. The legislature had only one house, so that no smaller, aristocratic upper house could offset the power of a larger, more democratic lower house. The new constitution destroyed aristocratic rule in Pennsylvania. It was a pattern that Jefferson was to follow in Virginia, and it changed American life for all time by making it more democratic.

After the battle of Trenton, where *The Crisis* helped to inspire the American victory, Paine became a kind of public-relations man for Washington's tattered forces. Washington and other leaders persuaded Congress to vote Paine a salary of $800 a year to continue to arouse the public and keep alive the spirit of rebellion. Paine also held several government positions. As Congressional secretary to the Committee on Foreign Affairs, he helped to obtain loans and military assistance from France for the rebels.

Near the end of the war, state jealousies were endangering passage of the Articles of Confederation, a first step toward permanent union. Maryland refused to sign the Articles until Virginia gave up her claims to the Northwest Territory, which blocked western settlements by Maryland and Pennsylvania. Paine attacked Virginia's claims in a pamphlet called *Public Good,* insisting that the western lands had been won by the national war effort, and that Americans should work for unity and forget state pride. Virginia

deeded the lands to the United States and the way was opened to form the American union.

At the end of the Revolution, when Paine was poverty-stricken, Congress refused to help him. But two states came to his aid, Pennsylvania granting him $500 in cash and New York a farm near New Rochelle.

Paine traveled to France just as the French people opened a revolution of their own to reform the regime of King Louis XVI. The French were strongly influenced by the American Revolution. As a link between the two, Paine was greeted in Paris as a hero. To help this new cause Paine wrote one of his greatest pamphlets, *The Rights of Man.*

When the French radicals executed the King and many of the nobility, Paine protested bitterly. He was thrown into prison, from which he was rescued many months later by the American Minister, James Monroe. In 1802, at the invitation of President Jefferson, Paine returned to the United States, where he continued his writing.

He was popular with common people who remembered his services in the Revolution. But he was scorned by many Americans because of his pamphlets attacking the narrow-minded church leaders of his time. He was branded an atheist, "a loathsome reptile," a "demi-human archbeast," a "lying, drunken, brutal infidel." Only a few old friends, like Thomas Jefferson and the inventor Robert Fulton, remained loyal to him. Paine died in a rooming house on Fulton Street in New York City on June 8, 1809, and was buried on his farm in New Rochelle. A few years later his bones were dug up and carried to England.

For many years Paine was forgotten by "respectable" Americans. It was almost the middle of the twentieth century before his reputation was revived and the importance of his creed once more excited men who believed in freedom for everyone:

"My country is the world; to do good, my religion."

The WAR in the SOUTH