



Thomas Paine

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The Founding Corset-Maker

Tom Paine had been a dabbler at many things, a failure at all. Some of it he blamed on King George. It rankled even after he left England, so one day he took his quill and decided to put it all down on paper.

On January 9, 1776, in Philadelphia, a pamphlet titled *Common Sense* was published. It said

in public what even most of the red-hot hawks had dared think only to themselves:

that the King was a tyrant and the only path for the colonies was independence. It uttered - screamed aloud - the unutterable. Probably more than any one event, more than any one person, *Common Sense* made it respectable for the general citizenry of the 13 colonies to conceive that their Revolution would be revolutionary; indeed to think of a communal future in independence.

The anonymously published pamphlet and the mystery of the author stoked interest. King George III thought Ben Franklin wrote it; others assumed it was John Adams. No, Thomas Paine had, even though he signed it merely, "an Englishman." Thomas Jefferson once said Paine was "the only writer in America, who can write better" than Jefferson himself. That was a signal compliment coming from a college-trained lawyer who was about to do some significant writing of his own. It is even more surprising considering that Paine was a dropout from school, who failed twice as a corset-maker, twice as a tax collector, had two failed marriages, and was now on his second country, having been in the colonies less than two years. He had not yet dropped out of writing because he had scarcely ever done any. But, he scored a hit almost the first time out.

Tom Paine was 37 when he arrived in Philadelphia in November 1774, bearing a recommendation from Benjamin Franklin, a first-class boat ticket and strong opinions about George III. He had been born in Thetford, north of London, where he may have imbibed some views of democracy in Georgian England. Thetford had 2,000 inhabitants and two members in Parliament although only 31 citizens were eligible to vote for them. For Paine's father, religion and profession were equally straight-laced: Quakerism and corset making. By scrimping, the father managed to send the son to school for seven years, but Tom was weak in Latin, the requisite passport into the professions. He had, however, developed an interest in the natural history of Virginia and ran off to sea, leaving his apprenticeship behind. His father caught him before the boat could sail, but Tom got away again, this time

successfully. He next appeared as a journeyman corset-maker in London, age 20, and eventually drifted to Sandwich, setting himself up in the girdle business with a £10 loan, which he never repaid. “Disgusted with the toil and little gain,” Paine, now a widower, bade farewell to corsets for good and became an excise tax collector.

Paine spent his evenings arguing at the White Hart Tavern on matters of the day, writing some poetry and a campaign song worth three guineas, for a candidate standing for Parliament. He liked the ladies, one of whom remarked: “It is a whimsical weakness in Tom Paine, imagining that every woman who sees him, directly falls victim to his charm.” (Except, apparently, his second wife, whom Paine refused to sleep with or explain why.)

In 1765, Paine was sacked from tax collecting for the first time. Briefly he tried school-teaching and then preaching. In 1768 he was given a second chance with the customs service at Lewes, south of London. Paine became enraged at the King in 1772 while in London lobbying for a raise for the excise officers. Concurrently, George III was asking Parliament for £100,000 more a year. George got his; Paine did not. Paine lasted six years as tax man this time; in 1774 he was fired again for negligence and for failing to see the conflict of interest in selling liquor and tobacco at the shop of his second wife, items whose taxation he was paid to enforce.

After meeting Ben Franklin, Paine decided he’d had enough of King and country, and set sail for America with £35 as a separation settlement with his wife, who stayed behind, and within five weeks of his arrival in Philadelphia was off on a new career: journalism!

Dr. John Witherspoon, president of the College of New Jersey, later Princeton University, said Paine could not write “until he had quickened his thought with large draughts of rum and water.” Primed or not, Paine had talent. Robert Aitken, a printer, hired him for Aitken’s new publication, “The Pennsylvania Magazine; or American Monthly Museum” and told Paine to sidestep political topics. This was fine with the new immigrant. “I had no thoughts

of independence or arms,” said Paine. As usual, he did think, however, that Aitken was underpaying him. And Aitken, despite the new magazine skyrocketing to a circulation of 1,500 a month, a colonial high, thought Paine was late in delivering his copy. They split.

And there were sound business reasons to avoid writing about politics at the time. Paine, having been in North America a scant two years, could not fathom the extent of regional differences among the colonies. Unity of thought, purpose, culture or economy had never prevailed in the 13 colonies. They were just that: 13 fingers feeling their own way directed by the mother brain 3,000 miles away. The flinty Yankee, the sybaritic Southern planter, the pious Quaker were not just stereotypes. They lived in different worlds, rooms without a house. And there were rooms within the rooms. The Dutch around Albany clung to their language and culture as did the Germans of Pennsylvania, so much so that Franklin feared half seriously that English might become a dead language. In the North Carolina hills, Highlanders from Scotland, spoke Gaelic. So did some of their slaves. Other slaves were still speaking the languages they brought through the horrific Middle Passage.

Virginians and Marylanders depended on one crop, tobacco. In South Carolina it was rice and indigo. New Englanders would trade anything with anybody, legally or illegally, despite their Puritan heritage. Male property owners in Connecticut and Rhode Island could elect their own governors. Those in other colonies could not.

Differing colonial customs made each colony fearful of entangling alliances with the others. They each had their own relationship with London but little with one another. The currency of English shillings, French pistoles, Spanish dollars, and their own local currencies varied so much in value from colony to colony that a traveler carried a list to tell him what his New England pounds were worth in Philadelphia joes. They were suspicious of each other. A New Englander found Virginia an odd place and its “hospitality and politeness” exaggerated. Virginians found Pennsylvanians “remarkably grave and reserved, and the women remarkably homely, hard-favoured and sour.” A Connecticut man complained of “frauds and

unfair practices” by New York merchants, while a New Yorker said he would not send his son to school in Connecticut lest he pick up the “low craft and cunning so incident to the people of that country.” Note the word “country.” New York and New Hampshire were close to violence over the disputed land between them that later became Vermont. Pennsylvania was as mad as Quakers could get at Connecticut settlers moving into its Wyoming Valley. They were equally unhappy over Virginian migration into the Ohio Valley.

To Franklin such disunity didn’t make sense. He was a great admirer of the Iroquois Confederacy in the colony of New York. “It would be a strange thing,” he said, “if Six Nations of ignorant savages would be capable of forming a scheme ... yet a like union should be impracticable for 10 or a dozen English colonies.” Clearly these natives had the upper hand in mutual cooperation.

The idea of nationhood or independence was simply not a consideration. “What sort of dish would [such a nation] make?” demanded a South Carolina legislator. “The Northeast will throw in fish and onions. The middle states flax, feed and flour. Virginia and Maryland will add tobacco. North Carolina pitch, tar and turpentine; South Carolina rice and indigo and Georgia will sprinkle the whole composition with sawdust. Such an absurd jumble will you make if you attempt to form a union from such disordered materials ... ”

As the colonies and mother country painfully moved down the road to Lexington and Concord - and to opposing sides - anger was springing up across the nation: the tarring and feathering of Tory pamphlets, the increasingly outspoken petitions, the burning of the British warship *Gaspee*, the bloody Boston Massacre, the subversive stevedoring of tea, and yet, George remained King and the colonies were still colonies. But it seemed events had begun forcing a consensus from a commonality of need and enemy.

When Britain closed the port of Boston in 1774, other colonies had sent supplies. Israel Putnam, who had fought with the British against the French, personally drove a herd of

sheep in from Connecticut. In each colony, similar patterns were emerging. New Jersey, Pennsylvania, New York, Maryland, South Carolina all had tea parties. In December 1774 Irish-tempered John Sullivan led a raid that stole gunpowder from a British fort at Portsmouth, New Hampshire. The following April 21, a group of Charlestonians lifted 1,200 muskets from the royal arsenal. Being Southern gentlemen, of course, they did it at night so as not to embarrass Governor William Bull who was well-liked. And again, when they seized 15,000 pounds of powder from the British at St. Augustine, they delivered a receipt. After the war a Charleston physician wrote that: “Even while they were arming themselves, they [were] alleging it was only in self-defense against ministerial [Parliamentary] tyranny. The colonies southward of Boston were not immediate sufferers, yet they were sensible that the foundation was laid for every species of future oppression.”

That things were happening was clear; where it would all lead was not; at least not without Tom Paine. As John Adams said later, “Without the pen of the author of *Common Sense*, the sword of Washington would have been raised in vain.” But Paine’s stirring invective almost didn’t happen.

To be continued....

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