

## Tom Paine's Place in History

"Disturbing the Peace" by Gordon S. Wood, in *The New York Review of Books* (June 8, 1995), 250 West 57th St., New York, N.Y. 10107.

He was the author of *Common Sense* (1776), the most influential pamphlet of the American Revolution, and of other stirring works, including an essay that famously began: "These are the times that try men's souls." He labored in behalf of liberty and the American Revolution "with as much effort as any man living," no less an authority than Thomas Jefferson recalled in 1801. And yet Thomas Paine (1737–1809) never won a place in the pantheon of America's Founding Fathers.

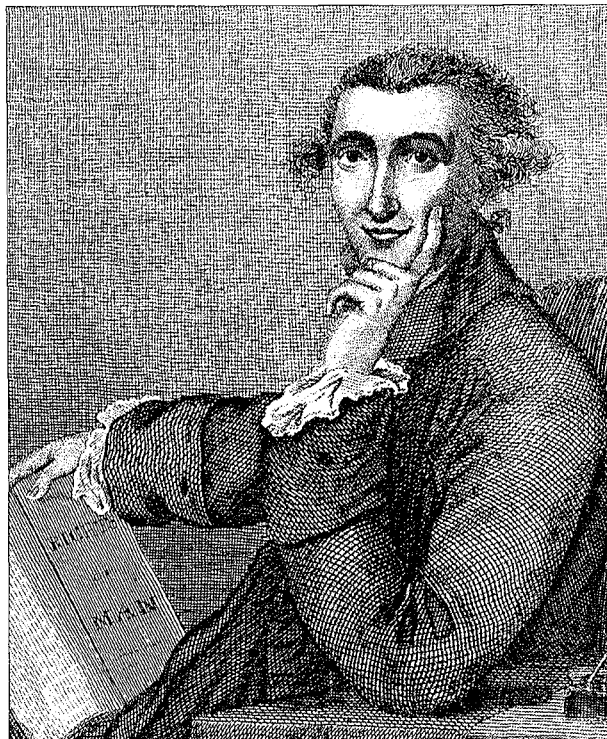
His religious views are often held to blame, but Wood, a historian at Brown University and author of *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (1991), is skeptical. In *The Age of Reason* (1794), Paine attacked Christianity and orthodox religion, Wood notes, but he also set forth "his deistic belief in God the creator and harmonizer of the world." His deism was not very different from that of Jefferson or Benjamin Franklin. Yet no one would dream of calling them what Theodore Roosevelt called Paine: a "filthy little atheist."

Wood argues that the real source of Paine's poor standing was the character of the 18th-century social order. Like most of the Founding Fathers, he was not born a gentleman. But unlike them, he "was never quite able to shed his lowly origins as the son of a corset maker and the effects of all his years of living in poverty and obscurity, close to the bottom of English society." He arrived in America only 14 months before *Common Sense* appeared. Franklin, by contrast, was a self-made man who retired at age 42 from his printing business to live the life of a "gentleman." And public life was only one of his gentlemanly pursuits. Paine was a rootless critic of society who knew "only one kind of life," as he said in 1779, "and that is a thinking one, and

of course, a writing one." He was, Wood says, "America's first modern intellectual." He mingled with Washington, Jefferson, and Lafayette, but was seen as "a man without a home and even without a country."

Paine tried to turn the perceived defect into a virtue, Wood says, becoming "quite literally a citizen of the world." He returned to Europe in 1787. "After being hounded out of England for writing the *Rights of Man* [1791–92], Paine fled to France," where he spent 10 months in prison during the Terror of the French Revolution. Although he came back to America to live in 1802, the United States to him was not home, only a symbol.

This tribune of the people was out of step with popular religious beliefs, observes Wood. Critics attacked him as a "lying, drunken, brutal infidel." Paine was allowed to die in obscurity, with most of the revolutionary leaders wanting to forget that they had ever known him. Americans since have acted as if they felt the same way.



America's "first intellectual," in an 18th-century engraving