

## PRESS &amp; MEDIA

## Tom Paine's Myth

**THE SOURCE:** "Disseminating *Common Sense*: Thomas Paine and the Problem of the Early National Bestseller" by Trish Loughran, in *American Literature*, March 2006.

THOMAS PAINE'S POLITICAL pamphlet *Common Sense* (1776), an impassioned argument for independence from Great Britain, has become a revered artifact of America's founding, often cited as evidence of a thriving early American print culture that connected isolated towns and frontier settlers. *Common Sense* was widely reproduced in the colonies in the lead-up to the Declaration of Independence to become the nation's first bestseller.

In an 1898 history, Henry Cabot Lodge said that 120,000 copies of Paine's pamphlet were sold in three months. "This means that almost every American able to read," wrote Lodge, "had read 'Common Sense.'"

Or so goes the myth, says Trish Loughran, an assistant English professor at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. In fact, Paine himself produced the often-repeated estimate of 120,000, apparently based on little more than his own self-interested speculation. *Common Sense* was indeed a sensation in Philadelphia, the colonies' biggest city

and their cultural center. But far from being reproduced "in every colony and town," as Lodge and others have written, it was reprinted in 14 towns in only seven of the 13 colonies, and in only one town south of Philadelphia. The highly localized colonial economy and the difficulty of mass distribution, particularly of luxuries such as printed matter, meant that pamphlets such as Paine's were seldom distributed outside their area of origin.

The reception and distribution of *Common Sense*, far from being a grass-roots, spontaneous phenomenon, Loughran adds,

was engineered by a cadre of elites including Benjamin Rush, Benjamin Franklin, and Samuel Adams who wanted to spread the pamphlet's ideas without risking their standing by attaching their own names to it.

So why has the myth of *Common Sense* as the colonies' *Da Vinci Code* endured? None of the historians who wrote in the years immediately after the Revolution mentions *Common Sense* as a decisive factor in the decision to separate from Britain. But later historians, such as Lodge, adopted a new standard for writing history, tending to rely on an accruing archive of official state papers, writes Loughran. Early American history came to be constructed around texts, exaggerating the role of the written word.

At the same time, the miraculous version of the story of *Common Sense*'s rise served certain political ends. "The myth of the best-seller thus enables that most democratic of fictions—the belief that all the people were (or could be) equally present at the scene of their subjection, all interested and invested readers in a common culture of consent," writes Loughran. That conception of the United States as a unified "We, the people" remains a pillar of America's identity.

## EXCERPT

## No Mortals, Please

*In the late '70s, when I was trying to figure out what to do with my life, I went to visit a family friend named Scott Newhall. Scott's best known as the man who edited The San Francisco Chronicle in the 1950s and '60s, but when I went to see him, he was running a small-town paper called The Newhall Signal. After saying hello, I asked him what it took to be a journalist. He looked at me for a minute and then asked if I was the Messiah.*

*"What?" I said, somewhat perplexed.*

*"Are you the Messiah or not?"*

*"OK, fine, you caught me," I said after a long pause.*

*"That's a good sign," he said. "Because nobody ever made it in journalism without thinking he was the Messiah."*

—JOHN NIELSEN, an environmental correspondent for National Public Radio, on the Mixed Signals blog at NPR.org (June 6, 2006)