

Tom Paine: The Greatest Exile, David Powell (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 303 pp., \$22.50.

Thomas Paine's extraordinary life is so rich and fascinating, from both the personal and intellectual points of view, that it is not unsurprising that so many biographies about him have appeared. Paine an English deist and a revolutionary propagandist, was born at Thetford, Norfolk, England in 1737. In his youth, he worked as a stay-maker, like his ex-Quaker father, and as a marine, a schoolmaster, an exciseman and a tobacconist. Arriving in Philadelphia in 1774 at the age of 37, he contributed to the *Pennsylvania Magazine*. His early fame came with the publication of *Common Sense*, 1776, in which he argued for an immediate declaration of independence on both ideological and practical grounds. During the revolutionary war, he published the *Crisis* papers, 1776-1783, while serving with the American army. In these papers, he sought to strengthen the spirit of America's patriots in their struggle with the English army, and advocated a strong federal union. Between 1777 and 1779, he was made Secretary of the Committee of Foreign Affairs. After losing that position, he was appointed Clerk of the Pennsylvania Legislature. In 1787, Paine returned to England where he published his famous *The Rights of Man*, 1791-1792, in which he defended republican government and the measures of the early phases of the French Revolution against Edmund Burke's 1790 *Reflections on the French Revolution*. Because of some seditious passages, *The Rights of Man* was suppressed by the British government, and Paine, who was then living in France, was tried for treason and outlawed in 1792. During the same year, Paine was made a citizen by the French National Assembly and was later elected to the National Convention. Because of his association with the Girondist party, and because of his proposal to offer the king asylum in America, he offended the Robespierre faction and was imprisoned and stripped of his French citizenship. During this time, he began writing his *The Age of Reason*, 1794-1807. A deistic work, it alienated many of his old friends. In 1794, he was released from prison and restored to his seat in the National Convention. He subsequently became disgusted with French politics and returned to America in 1802. He died in New York in 1809.

Thomas Paine once wrote that he lived in a time in which 'freedom had been hunted around the globe; reason was considered as rebellion; and the slavery of fear had made men afraid to think' (p. v.) Paine's life, not only extraordinarily adventurous even for the

Age of Revolution, also embodied a relentless struggle to remove these fears and clouds of suspicion concerning freedom, reason and free thought. And to this day, his legacy remains a subject of much debate, especially in England. According to Michael Foot, a former leader of the British Labour Party, Paine was 'the greatest exile ever to leave' the shores of England (p. 1). Such reappraisals of Paine's career, however, stand in clear contrast to the opinions of contemporaries in the three countries where he propagated his revolutionary ideas. By the end of his life, Paine 'had been outlawed in England, imprisoned in France', and 'denied by America' (p. 260), and the return of his remains to England in 1819 alarmed English authorities (p. 264). Even today, as a recent article in the *Daily Telegraph*, 1982, testifies, some Englishmen remain vehemently opposed to elevating Paine as a national hero because 'he fought against his country in the American War of Independence and invited France to invade us during the French Revolution', and because 'among decent Englishmen in his time his name was a synonym for treachery, blasphemy and (whether or not) debauchery' (p. i). It is against this background—the controversial legacy of Paine in England—that David Powell has written his sympathetic biography of Thomas Paine. Adopting Foot's view of Paine as England's 'greatest exile', Powell has tried to describe the social and ideological context of Paine's life and to depict him as a man whose ideas represented 'the aspirations of much of America and Europe during the Age of Revolution' (p. ii).

Any biography, obviously, should begin with Paine's early and middle life in England before he emigrated to America and established himself as a seminal figure in the American Revolution. Yet this period in Paine's life is particularly obscure. Believing that Paine's missing past in England is too critical to neglect, and that it should be explored and interpreted in order to reveal important influences shaping Paine's later life, Powell has attempted to imaginatively 'recreate something of the background in which Paine grew up'. This is not only 'essential to understanding of the developments of Paine's later thinking and writing'. It may also enable us to discover the source of 'the genesis' of his 'achievements' (p. iv). Powell has adopted, therefore, what he calls the 'historical documentary' or speculative approach (p. iv). This interpretative decision, no doubt, will offend some historical purists, but as Powell clearly stresses, he wrote his study for the general reader. Powell also justifies his approach by appealing to the fact that Paine was a populist. Surely, Paine would approve of the idea of his life being written for wider audiences and would clearly resent the notion that only a handful of academics deserved privileged access to it. Consequently, Powell has not written a careful historical study but a highly speculative biography which is most readable and engaging. And though it appeals to the general reader, many students of the Age of Revolution will undoubtedly find it most interesting as well, and not just because of Powell's ability to beautifully and convincingly reconstruct Paine's extraordinary life and ideological milieu.

Avihu Zakai

History of European Ideas



Official Journal of the International Society
for the Study of European Ideas
Sponsored by the European Cultural Foundation
Volume 10 Number 3 1989

Contents

SPECIAL ISSUE

Women and the French Revolution

- | | | |
|---------------------------------------------|-----|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Rudolf M. Dekker
and Judith A. Vega | 279 | Editorial |
| Janet M. Burke | 283 | Freemasonry, friendship and noblewomen: the role of the secret society in bringing enlightenment thought to pre-Revolutionary women elites |
| Dominique Godineau | 295 | Pratiques politiques féminines et masculines et lignes de partage sexuel au sein du mouvement populaire parisien pendant la Révolution Française (1793 — an III) |
| Vivian Cameron | 309 | Gender and power: images of women in late 18th-century France |
| Judith Vega | 333 | Feminist Republicanism. Etta Palm-Aelders on justice, virtue and men |
| Rudolf M. Dekker
and Lotte C. van de Pol | 353 | Republican heroines: cross-dressing women in the French Revolutionary armies |
| <i>Book Reviews</i> | | |
| Maria-Theresia
Leuker-Schnelle | 365 | <i>Grenzgängerinnen. Revolutionäre Frauen im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert. Weibliche Wirklichkeit und männliche Phantasien</i> , ed. Helga Grubitzsch, Hannelore Cyrus and Elke Haarbush |
| Joyce Pedersen | 366 | <i>What is feminism?</i> , ed. Juliet Mitchell and Ann Oakley |
| Maria-Theresia
Leuker-Schnelle | 368 | <i>Marktweiber und Amazonen. Frauen in der Französischen Revolution. Dokumente, Kommentare, Bilder</i> , Susanne Petersen |
| Joost Rosendaal | 369 | <i>Citoyennes tricoteuses. Les Femmes du Peuple à Paris pendant la Révolution française</i> , Dominique Godineau |
| Avihu Zakai | 371 | <i>Tom Paine: The Greatest Exile</i> , David Powell |

(continued)