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# **TOM PAINE**

*A Political life*

**BY THE SAME AUTHOR**

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*Public Life and Late Capitalism*

*Democracy and Civil Society*

*The Media and Democracy*

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**TOM PAINE**

*A Political life*

**JOHN KEANE**



GROVE PRESS  
*New York*

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First published in Great Britain in 1995 by  
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, London, England

*Printed in the United States of America*

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Keane, John, 1949–

Tom Paine : a political life / John Keane.

p. cm.

Originally published: London : Bloomsbury, 1995.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

eBook ISBN-13: 978-0-8021-9953-9

1. Paine, Thomas, 1737-1809. 2. Political scientists —United States —Biography. 3. Revolutionaries —United States —Biography.  
I. Title.

JC178.V5 K43 2003

320.51'092—dc21

[B]

2002029961

Grove Press  
841 Broadway  
New York, NY 10003

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**For Alice**  
**George**  
**Leo**  
**Rebecca**

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# Prologue

## *A Citizen Extraordinary*

IF ONE PURPOSE of biography is to lift individuals out of time and confer upon them a form of immortality, then the Englishman Tom Paine (1737–1809) is a natural ally of the art of preserving lives in words. More than any other public figure of the eighteenth century, Paine strikes our times like a trumpet blast from a distant world. His writings still spark disputes about matters of public importance, while his thoughts move public figures as different as Ronald Reagan and Bob Dylan, Salman Rushdie and Margaret Thatcher to quote him — as if to prove that the dead are sometimes more alive than the living.

Paine’s uncanny familiarity is partly traceable to his own stupendous achievements. Despite humble beginnings, Paine’s every step later generated intense public excitement. Paine reckoned that life was either a daring adventure or nothing, and for that conviction many loathed him. The dominant classes, pickled in port and privilege, certainly thought him rough and ungracious, an upstart in their world of landed wealth and courtly power. But among enemies and friends alike, Paine earned a reputation as a citizen extraordinary — as the greatest political figure of his generation.

Paine burst onto the stage of public life as a commoner. In his early years in England, he was variously employed as a corsetmaker, a ship’s hand, a Methodist lay preacher, an exciseman, a teacher of English, and a writer who dabbled in public affairs. Fortune soon flung him twice into the furnace of revolution. In America, he served as a soldier, political adviser, and war correspondent. He was also the most prominent political thinker and writer during the Revolutionary struggle against the British. He was twice invited to France, where he helped draft the 1793 constitution. During the Reign of Terror, after having argued for abolishing the monarchy and preserving the life of Louis XVI, he spent nearly a year in prison, where he almost died of exhaustion and narrowly escaped the guillotine. At every turn, Paine’s life was packed with excitement, drama, surprises, and some remarkable failures. His writings shocked and thrilled audiences not only in England, America, and France but also in towns as different as Dublin and Dubrovnik, Philadelphia and Warsaw, Berlin and Santo Domingo. In each place, he forged a reputation as the world’s chief public defender of republican democracy — a living symbol of the modern fight for the rights of citizens against warring states and arbitrary governments, social injustice and bigotry.

These leitmotifs of Paine’s life and writings obviously bind our world to his. But he is also so strikingly one of us in the thoroughly modern language he used to express himself. Eighteenth-century English prose, by contrast with its predecessors, feels surprisingly crisp. Although certain words, phrases, and sentence constructions from that period are not normally used today, eighteenth-century writing — essays, novels, pamphlets, journals, treatises — has for us a definite familiarity, as if that language and our own coexist within the boundaries of modern English.

Paine’s own writing, encouraged by his reading the works of figures such as Daniel Defoe and Jonathan Swift, helped produce this familiarity. The brilliance of his quill made him a literary lion, a master of daring assertion, sly humor, and witty metaphor. Not only the message but also the modernist style of *Common Sense*, *Rights of Man*, and *The Age of Reason* ensured that they became the three most widely read political tracts of the eighteenth century. Their concerns still unsettle readers in our time, in no small measure because Paine, a grand master of modern prose, helped effect a revolution in political language. His books, pamphlets, letters, essays, and poetry tried to



communicate complications simply. They invented a plain style crafted to capture the attention, and secure the trust, of audiences previously accustomed to being pushed about or ignored, not being written for, talked about, and taken seriously as active citizens. “As it is my design to make those that can scarcely read understand,” Paine wrote, “I shall therefore avoid every literary ornament and put it in language as plain as the alphabet.”

And so he usually did. Full of fire, Paine hammered out lean, lightning-quick sentences for audiences he knew well — self-educated artisans and ordinary folk like himself, for whom reading and being read to were exhilarating first-time experiences. For such folk, reading “Tommy Paine” must have resembled walking into previously unimagined political territory. In Paine’s prose, they followed a confident guide, convinced that his footsteps were echoing across a landscape that no one had ever trodden before, let alone mapped. Paine described that new world of republican democracy with immense wit and seriousness. He supposed that in politics words count and that words are deeds. He further supposed that liberty is connected with prose and that people unfriendly to citizens’ liberty normally wrap their power in pompous or meaningless phrases.

Paine certainly had no elaborate theory of language, and he rarely questioned his own conceited view that his writing was “plain truth,” a reflection of the world as it actually is. He counted himself among the modern believers in the originally Greek idea that what makes us clever, language-using animals is our ability to rise above the contingencies of time and place and know the nature of things. Paine nevertheless pointed to modern humans’ bad habit of forgetting those same circumstances. We moderns continually attribute universal importance to our own particular ways of life and we therefore have an alarming tendency to boss ourselves and others, using sticks and stones and bigoted words, into accepting our preferred version of the world. Paine despised bossing, and he had a fine ear for language masquerading as Truth. “Bastilles of the word” was Paine’s phrase for needlessly haughty language, and he consequently wrote as if it were the duty of the citizen, and certainly the political thinker and writer, to be on the lookout for hubris. He prodded and poked at it wherever it appeared, his overall aim being to encourage individuals to become citizens capable of thinking, speaking, and acting clearly and confidently in public. Here Paine’s didacticism dovetailed with his wider concern to take the ax to dictators and hierophants. Paine felt enormous compassion for the unjustly treated, and he despised haughty powermongers who put themselves beyond question. Paine so disliked arrogance and venality that he not only championed citizens’ right to tell others what they do not want to hear. He also was prompted to show that human beings could live together on earth without earthly Gods — indeed, that we live fully only in their absence.

The precise vigor with which Paine took aim at human-made Absolutes was highly unusual in his day, and it suggests another vital reason why his life and writings continue to provoke and divide audiences two centuries later. Paine was an eighteenth-century critic with “twentieth-century” philosophic tendencies. He dared to doubt most existing Grand Ideals — his faithful belief in progress, Newtonian science, and God-given reason were among the contradictory exceptions that got him into bridled freedom of assembly and expression but not its licentious abuse. He favored private property and market competition but fought for the principle of guaranteed citizens’ income and other tax-funded public measures to prevent society’s cruel subdivision into rich and poor. And Paine, who was among the leading cosmopolitans of his era, criticized empires and backed the right of national self-determination, but only as part of a broader campaign for global integration of citizens and states. Overall, Paine devoted his life to devising methods of scattering and subdividing power, to ensuring that it was not monopolized by any single pair of hands or particular “faction.” He suffered, publicly and privately, for this conviction. But there can be no doubt that he moved the world a few feet toward republican democracy — and inspired it to move a few feet farther after his death.

To trace out the life and writings of Tom Paine is thus to understand better the roots of contemporary democracy. Indeed, any appreciation of the value — and limitations — of modern republican forms of democracy is impossible without developing eyes in the back of our heads for figures like Paine. Democracy among the living, it could be said, requires democracy among the dead in that votes must be extended to the most disfranchised of all constituencies — our silenced ancestors. Biography is one way of enfranchising dead figures such as Paine, who certainly merits the vote because he helped us to see that representative democracy and citizens' self-government is the best means by which a plurality of different, often conflicting groups can live their differences in dignity without dominating or murdering each other. Thanks in no small measure to him, democracy is nowadays viewed as a system of decision making that institutionalizes the right to be different, that celebrates intermingling and hybridity, and that thrives on change by conflict and compromise. Democracy, Paine taught us, is the enemy of enforced stereotyping — the most effective weapon yet invented against arrogant armies, pompous politicians, and power-greedy groups armed with Grand Ideals.

Paine's democratic pilgrimage made him the greatest public figure of his generation. He made more noise in the world and excited more attention than such well-known European contemporaries as Adam Smith, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Voltaire, Immanuel Kant, Madame de Staël, Edmund Burke, and Pietro Verri. The controversies he stirred up naturally spilled onto the pages of his biographers, who currently number around fifty. The first biography, written by George Chalmers, a royalist refugee from the United States, appeared in 1791 as *The Life of Thomas Paine, Author of "The Rights of Man," with a Defence of His Writings*. Although it contains some valuable details about Paine's early life, it is not a defense of Paine, but a vicious scandalizing of his life. William Cobbett's biographer, Edward Smith, described the book as "one of the most horrible collections of abuse which even that venal day produced." And so it is. It complains about Paine's "bad grammar," and the title page of several editions contains the famous sketch of Paine, *Rights of Man* in hand, preaching to a group of apes. Chalmers — who wrote under the nom de guerre "Francis Oldys, A.M. of the University of Pennsylvania" and was paid £500 for his labors of libel by the Pitt government — even had the cheek to condemn Paine (whose father's surname was variously spelled "Payne," "Paine," and "Pain") as a dissembler who added an *l* to his name.

A second biography, published by James Cheetham shortly after Paine's death in 1809, is no better. *The Life of Thomas Paine* was among the first muckraking biographies in American literature. It was something of a scurrilous revenge on Paine, who, shortly before his death, was in the process of commencing a libel suit against Cheetham (or "Cheat 'em," as Paine called him). Cheetham's biography pictures Paine exactly as parts of America wanted to remember him and still do — as an arrogant, drunken atheist. Several nineteenth-century biographers fought hard to redress this image, making it clear in the process that biographies are not "facts" revealed in words, but are contingent interpretations, constantly subject to amendment at the hands of storytelling biographers to come. Charles Rickman, a close personal friend and regular correspondent of Paine's, was the first biographer to picture his hero in sycophantic terms. His surprisingly derivative *The Life of Thomas Paine* (1819) is marred by touches of personal vanity and paranoia; it amounts to an exercise in wielding a pen to protect an idol. Rickman was to Paine what Boswell was to Johnson. William Sherwin's *Memoirs of The Life of Thomas Paine*, published in the same year as Rickman's book, is marginally better, although it understates Paine's achievements in America and contains many unwarranted claims and conjectures. Gilbert Vale's *The Life of Thomas Paine* (1841) draws heavily on Sherwin's biography and contains some new material, but it suffers from its blinkered quest to prove Paine right on every political matter.

It was left to an American abolitionist and prominent supporter of Abraham Lincoln's in the Civil War, ~~Moncure Conway~~, to write the standard two-volume biography of Paine. *The Life of Thomas Paine*, published in 1892, is still considered by every authority on Paine the key reference work. It claims to rest its case on "the simple facts, dispassionately told, of Paine's life." It is a considerable achievement, containing a great quantity of compellingly accurate material and healthy correctives to the smear campaign that had been waged against Paine for a century. Justifiably, it still enjoys the reputation of being the most valuable and fully documented sourcebook for readers of Paine's life.

The following interpretation of Paine's life nevertheless takes aim at key aspects of Conway's standard account. Things to be said against it include its numerous errors of detail and its nineteenth-century obsession (absorbed from Rickman, Sherwin, and Vale) with undoing the image of Paine as a drunken, treacherous roisterer. In too many passages, its defense of Paine is simplistic and sentimental; where Paine turns, Conway follows, swooning, summarizing Paine's achievements in superlatives:

The first to urge extension of the principles of independence to the enslaved negro; the first to arraign monarchy, and to point out the danger of its survival in presidency; the first to propose articles of a more thorough nationality to the new-born States; the first to advocate international arbitration; the first to expose the absurdity and criminality of duelling; the first to suggest more rational ideas of marriage and divorce; the first to advocate national and international copyright; the first to plead for the animals; the first to demand justice for woman.

None of these claims is actually sustainable; they are symptomatic of the way in which Conway's account of Paine rests on stretched interpretations masquerading as facts. Conway supposes that his biography is a plain-talking "effort to bring the truth to light." This leads him to overlook the simple of truths: that a biography is never a straightforward "factual" account of the details of a person's life but rather it is a story, guided by a plot structure, that renders a chosen sequence of events into an intelligible narrative — one that often tells us as much about the biographer as about the person whose life is observed. In contrast to Conway's disguised sermonizing, I try to rely on techniques of modest writing, including understatement; acknowledgement of the biographer's ignorance; disclosure of confused sources and disagreement among historians; awareness that the methods of narrative storytelling adopted here are indeed reliant on interpretation and structured by plot; and, above all, recognition that Paine's life was riddled with complexity. While often admiring and defending Paine's pathbreaking achievements, I try to create an "open" rather than a "closed" text by encouraging readers to spot the plots buried in my own stories of Paine's life and to formulate their own questions and doubts about its knottiness.

The emphasis on complexity is important for two reasons. First, it is faithful to the kaleidoscopic patterns of Paine's life and work. Contrary to Clio Rickman, his most loyal and intimate English friend, Paine was not simply "incorrupt, straightforward, sincere." Sometimes he was these things. But his life also was riddled with tensions, confusion, surprises, and unforeseen consequences. Paine's personality was complex. He loved oysters, cared little for money, despised hypocrisy, and suspected men who lived richly. He liked stirring things up, rarely knew love or sex, considered hypocrisy the homage vice pays to virtue, and did all he could to keep his private life private. He was humble and conceited, generous and dogmatic, ironic and serious. He faced dilemmas, failed to resolve problems, made misjudgments, and rarely pleased everybody.

Teasing out such tensions in biographical form is important for another reason. It makes for more challenging reading because it recognizes the need to avoid the sniping and sermonizing that has

plagued every previous biography of Paine, David Freeman Hawke's *Paine* (1974) included. Hawke's biography is among the best since Conway's, but it contains weaknesses. It neglects the first half of Paine's life and harbors a surprising number of errors of detail. Its narrative clings to the minutiae of Paine's activities, often ignoring the wider dramas and developments — such as the growth of party politics in America, the French Reign of Terror, and the rise of nationalism — in which they unfolded and without which Paine's life and political thinking cannot properly be understood. Above all, for want of any theses about Paine's significance, past and present, Hawke resorts to the technique of sniping and burdening his subject with offhand cynical remarks — to the point where readers are left wondering why Hawke ever bothered to write a biography of Paine. In contrast, this biography aims to avoid partisanship by relying on what could be called broken narrative. I try neither to rub noses with Paine nor to spit in his face, but rather to confront readers with Paine's achievements, failures, and unsolved problems — many of which (such as citizenship rights, poverty, and the scope of government power) remain our problems two centuries later. In sum, I offer readers the opportunity to ponder Paine's questions for themselves, thereby encouraging them to tinker with their own sense of reality.

The more genuinely comprehensive scope of this biography also sets it off from Conway's. During the past century, most studies of Paine have quietly deferred to Conway's standard account by concentrating on fragments of Paine's life and work. Although this has brought to light much new material, no biographer since Conway has been interested simultaneously in detailing Paine's private and public lives in England, America, France, and Belgium. In this biography, I have tried to synthesize all the available material, old and new, to develop fresh lines of inquiry into Paine's activities. I have used previously unknown material in Russian, German, Polish, French, Dutch, Serbo-Croatian, Hungarian, Chinese, English, and Spanish. I also have given new emphasis to the novelty and influence of Paine's political thinking. Although A. J. Ayer's *Thomas Paine* (1988) and Gregory Claey's *Thomas Paine: Social and Political Thought* (1989) both attempt, in important ways, to take stock of some of Paine's religious and political views each makes the mistake of severing and de-emphasizing the details of Paine's personal and public life from his social and political philosophy. Neither adds much to Conway's seminal account of Paine's biography, and for that reason I have tried to do what no previous account of Paine has done: to detail Paine's political ideas, to situate them in the European and American contexts of Paine's daily life, to examine how these ideas developed and how they were actually interpreted by his friends and enemies, and, finally, to restore his reputation as an original, if controversial and sometimes flawed, political thinker — which was certainly the way his contemporaries saw him.

The contextual approach to biography adopted for this purpose involves immersing readers in the detailed circumstances of a distant era, in order that they can better understand that world as it was experienced by Paine and his friends and enemies. I use the contextual approach to draw a different and more comprehensive picture of Paine's activities in America. A new account is provided of the events leading up to the publication of *Common Sense*. Paine's revolutionary analysis of the grim side of the Revolution — its encouragement of revenge, random violence, fear, and the grabbing of power and property — is highlighted. His understanding of Native Americans is treated with a fresh eye. A new evidence is marshaled to support the claim that Paine was among the earliest defenders of federalism. In formulating these and other claims, I have been guided by various reinterpretations of the American Revolution, especially Bernard Bailyn's and J. C. D. Clark's, and studies such as David A. Wilson's *Paine and Cobbett: The Transatlantic Connection* (1988); a fine doctoral dissertation by Arnold Kimsey King, "Thomas Paine in America, 1774–87" (1951); Eric Foner's *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America* (1976); and A. O. Aldridge's *Thomas Paine's American Ideology* (1984). The

recently rediscovered John Hall diaries, missing since Conway's research and now held at the Library Company of Philadelphia, proved most useful, as did the impressive private collection of Paine material generously made available to me by Richard Maass and the new material concerning Paine and Robert Morris uncovered by the ongoing Robert Morris Papers project at Queens College/CUNY in Flushing, New York.

Surprisingly little is known about the long period that Paine lived in France. Conway's account of that period has become inadequate, and even such attempts to fill the gaps as A. O. Aldridge's *Man of Reason: The Life of Thomas Paine* (1960) have been overtaken by new developments. The first French biography of Paine, written by Bernard Vincent, *Thomas Paine ou la religion de la liberté* (1987), has appeared. Important new details are surfacing of Paine's extensive contributions to journals such as the *Chronique du mois* and *Le bien informé*. And exciting reinterpretations of the origins and course of the French Revolution by Keith Baker, François Furet, Monika Ozouf, Michelle Vovelle, and others arguably require a fundamental rethinking of Paine's contributions to that Revolution. I have tried to do so — for instance, by reexamining his decision to vote against the execution of the king and his reactions to the Terror, the rise of nationalism, and the militarization of the Revolution in the crucible of Anglo-French rivalry.

Finally, Paine's activities in England are here for the first time given their due weight. Conway — and every other American biographer — neglected the first half of Paine's life in England, even though such neglect arguably makes it impossible to understand Paine's later life, including his drafting of the world-shattering pamphlet *Common Sense* within a year of arriving in the American colonies from England. Conway tried to explain away our ignorance of Paine's early life by tracing everything to his contacts with the Quakers. "Had there been no Quakerism," he wrote, "there had been no Thomas Paine." Audrey Williamson's *Thomas Paine: His Life, Work and Times* (1973) correctly reacted against that reductionist explanation, but unfortunately it neither generated much new material about Paine's early years nor took account of the outbreak of new controversies in English historiography. The most recent biography to appear, Jack Fruchtman Jr.'s *Thomas Paine, Apostle of Freedom* (1994), indulges the same weaknesses. Fruchtman presents no new material; carelessly muddles details and repeats old clichés about Paine's early commitment to Quakerism and his personal "failures"; proposes that Paine came to political writing "quite by accident"; and concludes with a strange self-contradiction: "Paine was *always* the democratic, though acerbic, journalist: an apostle of freedom" (my emphasis).

I have tried to correct at least some of these weaknesses, initially by concentrating on the task of understanding the English roots of Paine's political identity. His democratic republicanism no doubt had English antecedents — for instance, among prominent late-seventeenth-century and early-eighteenth-century figures such as Andrew Fletcher, William Molesworth, John Trenchard, and Walter Moyle, all of them deep admirers of an older republican tradition and writers of famous tracts against the evils of standing armies, established churches, and other threats to public-spirited liberty. These English republicans, or "Commonwealth-men," defended an aristocratic concept of "people" or "country." Despite their fear of strong executive power and commitment to power sharing, they seldom or never discussed democracy, save as a negative term to describe a nightmare of anarchy. Their elitism was evident in their concern to make England great by promoting colonial expansion and fostering domestic commerce and population growth. At no time did these republicans propose universal or manhood suffrage. They believed in representation — of the independent, the well-to-do and the literate — but not on a numerical basis. Their chief concern was to ensure that the propertied classes voted and that good men governed the country — if need be against the wishes of the huge majority of commoners.

Paine's republicanism differed in two important ways from these classical republican views. First, although he accepted the standard republican insistence on public spirit, anticlericalism, citizenship, annual parliaments, and power sharing, he pushed and dragged republicanism firmly into the modern world. After Paine, modern republican politics could no longer hide behind the dogma that a natural aristocracy of virtuous men of talent must rule over an ignorant hoi polloi hungry for property and power. Paine's brand of republicanism was dangerously democratic. It pressed for the inclusion of commoners — dairymaids, millers, fishermen, shoemakers, laborers, and servants — in the category of "the people" and considerations of "public virtue." It thereby edged republicanism toward the new principle of representative democratic government, which, Paine's good friend Thomas Jefferson later remarked, "rendered useless almost everything written before on the structures of government."

Second, unlike his predecessors', Paine's republicanism was self-taught, not bookish. The Commonwealthmen read widely about ancient republics. They admired Sparta and Rome, and their studious reflections on the decline and fall of ancient republics — attributed by them to the flouting of good laws, the decline of patriotism, and the obsession with luxury — were designed to persuade contemporary statesmen to avoid old errors and adopt right policies. Knowledge was to be the handmaiden of prudent government. Paine's republicanism was expressed through books and pamphlets, and it was certainly fueled by wide reading, of everything from the satirical prose of Jonathan Swift to Newtonian tracts on astronomy. But it requires something of a leap of imagination to see that Paine's democratic republicanism, in all its originality, did not derive primarily from books or formal education in the classics. Rather, as I try to show in the following pages, it stemmed from his firsthand experience of a maelstrom of overlapping, clashing, and colliding organizations, circles, associations, emotional commitments, personal contacts, everyday events, and stubborn intellectual currents excluded from the mainstream polite society. Out of such an English education sprang many great autodidacts — Mary Wollstonecraft, William Cobbett, William Blake, and Thomas Spence — but it was Paine, who never aspired to Oxford or Cambridge, who most effectively welded together his everyday experiences in England to become the greatest English political writer of his century.

This book was born with the help of many people and institutions. As the recipient of an Andrew Mellon Fellowship from the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia, I was the first Paine biographer to enjoy access to its library's cataloged Gimbel Collection, whose treasures were displayed to me by Roy E. Goodman, Hildegard Stephans, Beth Carroll-Horrocks, Edward Carter II, Whitfield J. Bell, Jr., and the library's photographer, Frank Margeson. Prior to his untimely death, and even during protracted periods of illness, Edward Thompson offered me solidarity and good advice. Sir Richard Attenborough, Douglas A. Cooper, Michael Foot, David Henley, and Eric Paine, all admirers of Paine, provided various forms of support. Bernard Vincent, France's leading expert on Paine, generously offered me his time and knowledge. In Paris, Nathalie Caron guided me through the Académie des Sciences, Archives Nationales, Musée Carnavalet, and Institut d'histoire de la Révolution, to whose staff I am most grateful. Hélio Osvaldo Alves, Gregory Claeys, Neil Clayton, Ian Dyck, François Furet, Mary A. Y. Gallagher, Mark Garnett, James Green, Richard Heitzenrater, Thomas A. Hoctor, Louise Marcil Lacoste, Pat Logan, Tomaž Mastnak, Tom Nairn, Edward W. Pratt, Kenneth E. Rowe, Alfred Rubens, Nigel Sinnott, Gordon K. Thomas, Ann Thomson, Michelle Vovell, Michael Weinzierl, and Naomi Wulf personally drew my attention to important gaps in the understanding of Paine's life. Zofia Libiszowska, Huang Yu, and Eva Dessewffy Palmi helped me with the Polish, Chinese, and Hungarian sources, respectively. Sarah Wallis and Clara Roukshina cheerfully met my requests for Russian material. Jean-Pierre Boyer uncovered new details of Paine's reception in Québec. Andries Van den Abeele fed me interesting material on Paine's contacts in Bruges. Jelena Bužančić and Vesna Pusić, herself something of a Paineite, skillfully traced details of

Paine's relationship with the eighteenth-century republic of Dubrovnik, during the period when the late-twentieth-century citizens of that city suffered a military siege and vicious bombardment aimed at destroying their heritage and their lives.

My teacher C. B. Macpherson first sparked my interest in Paine and alerted me to the difficulty of categorizing him in the standard terms of modern political thought. Penelope Connell fed my thoughts about biography. Bernard Crick was instrumental in securing publishers of the manuscript. William O'Neil explained in detail how Paine suffered with the gout. Brian Jenkins enlightened me about Paine's contacts with the Constable brothers. Charles Wanostrocht and Nigel Yates provided invaluable material on eighteenth-century Sandwich. The Reverend T. S. H. Elwyn of the Baptist Historical Society furnished new documents on Paine's links with the General Baptists. In London, Alan Q. Morton of the Science Museum, Christina Scull of the Sir John Soanes Museum, and the staff at the Royal Society Library helped with material on Paine's scientific and architectural interests. Additional bibliographic help in these and other matters was given personally by staff at the British Library, the Brown University Library, the Brian O'Malley Central Library in Rotherham, the Centre for Kentish Studies, the Grantham Public Library, the Mills Memorial Library, the New York Public Library, the Public Record Office, London, the Sandwich Library, the Library Company of Philadelphia, the Trinity College Library, Dublin, the University of Virginia Library, and the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Diane Aylward provided access to the records of the Thetford Town Council. Michael Carnell and the staff of the Thetford Library were always generous. So too were the archivists at the Norfolk Record Office in Norwich and the Suffolk Record Office in Bury St Edmunds. Chad Goodwin, Pat Murrell, Oliver Bone of the Ancient House Museum, the Duke of Grafton, and especially David Osborne provided expert advice on how to undo the amnesia of Thetford. David Powell, Jeremy Goring, John Houghton, George Hindmarch, Colin Brent, and the staff of the Eastbourne Central Library and the Sussex Archaeological Society did the same for Lewes. Jan Weeks and John Weeks, headmaster of Thetford Grammar School, gave generously during my stays in Thetford and Bury St. Edmunds. Margaret Blunden, Alison Curtis, Martin Faulkner, Nicholas Garnham, and Geoffrey Holt were especially supportive colleagues at the University of Westminster. Bridget Cotter, a research student at the Centre for the Study of Democracy, provided vital administrative help. Bill Hamilton lived up to his reputation as an outstanding literary agent. Jennifer Josephy and Liz Calder were model editors: intelligent, literate, honest, firm, patient, cheerful, efficient. Paul Mier heartened me during the hardest times of the manuscript. My debts to Kathy O'Neil and her children are too numerous to detail.

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**PART I**  
*England, 1737–1774*





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# 1

## *Thetford Days*



### **Child of Violence**

FROM THE HOUR of his birth, Tom Paine felt the deathly hand of the English state. Some called him a child of state violence, for the thatched cottage where he came crying into the world in Thetford, England, in the winter of 1737, stood near an execution site, on the slopes of a low, windswept hill known locally as the Wilderness.<sup>1</sup> Townspeople favored this name because of its wretched soil and winter winds, but also because each year, with the arrival of spring, convicted criminals were herded through the area from the borough gaol, a quarter of a mile away, up to a nearby chalk ridge resembling Golgotha. There, on Gallows Hill, within plain sight of Paine's cottage within the Wilderness, the gaol governors and town constables arranged hangings, watched by wide-eyed crowds.

The yearly ritual of Thetford executions dated back at least six centuries, to the time when the medieval gaol was first built. On Paine's birthday — Saturday, January 29, 1737 — the gaol stood on the same site that it had first occupied in the reign of King Edward I. Square-built of black flint and stretching three stories upward from its basement dungeon, the gaol symbolized the cruel punishment system in whose shadow the young Paine became an adult. From an early age, he undoubtedly knew of the building, for it was renowned as a house of horrors to which prisoners from all over Norfolk County were brought to await trial or sentencing. Townspeople saw the gaol as a hellish maze of bars and doors, dirt and debauchery, which left prisoners scarred or dead. One contemporary observer likened it to the black hole of Calcutta; another considered it a sewer of vice where the old were hardened in iniquity and the young instructed in crime.<sup>2</sup> Still others gossiped about its rough routines. Each morning, it was said, prisoners were loaded with irons or forced onto the treadmill, while at dusk, as female prisoners were flung into solitary confinement in the top floor cells, the most dangerous men were stuffed into the low-ceilinged basement dungeon. The men were then forced by the duty constables to lie down, head to toe, on a stone floor and to sleep, if sleep it could be called, without either mattresses or bedding. The accused complained constantly about the filth and poor food, while long delays in trials and sentencing added to their misery. That is why, townspeople said, prisoners often yearned for the courtroom — for “gaol delivery” — which gave them momentary release into the outside world, where prisoners could hear birds twittering and feel sunlight or rain splash on their faces, reminding them that death was not yet theirs.

The court sessions, or so-called Lent Assizes, for the county of Norfolk were always held in Thetford during the month of March. In the year of Paine's birth, proceedings were conducted by Sir John Willes, recently appointed as Lord Chief Justice of the Court of Common Pleas and later satirized as a red-nosed, triple-chinned lecher in William Hogarth's painting *The Bench*. “In politicks he was a right ol' bugger,” locals often said, “but a lawy'r of great learnin' an' a judge of ability.” Escorted by a livery of forty mounted men, he had traveled from Cambridge to Thetford by way of Newmarket, arriving in Thetford on Saturday afternoon, March 5. His arrival in Paine's hometown was bathed in pomp, above all because the Lord Chief Justice symbolized the power of George II's government over outlying courts and regions. After stepping from his gilded coach, Willes was welcomed by the splendidly dressed High Sheriff of Norfolk and the Mayor, Henry Cocksedge. He

was then escorted to his lodgings in the King's House, where he dined privately that evening on pheasant, spit-roasted spring lamb, and fine burgundy wine.

The arrival in Thetford of the Lord Chief Justice usually triggered a week of town celebrations. There was an old Norfolk saying, "There no be warm weather 'til the prison'rs are now goin' to Thetford." As if to prove that maxim and hasten the arrival of spring, hundreds of visitors flocked to the little town of some two thousand people to witness the spectacle of punishment. Necrophilia hung in the air. On Saturday, hours before the appearance of the Lord Chief Justice, the town grew excited. Men and women, young and old, rich and poor rubbed shoulders for a time at the marketplace near the gaol, or lingered in small groups to watch the to-and-fro of stagecoaches at the Bell and other local inns.

Travelers often remarked that there was nothing gloomier than an English Sunday. So it was with 'Size Sunday in Thetford. By law, Sunday was a vestige of the Puritan day of enforced godliness and compulsory inactivity. The town residents and visitors were forbidden to sing or play musical instruments, dance, or play ball games, cards, or skittles. Religion and law ruled supreme, as was obvious to the handful of townspeople who watched the Lord Chief Justice walk a private path to St. Peter's Church, accompanied by the High Sheriff, the Mayor, and black-gowned members of the Thetford Corporation. There a mid-morning sermon was preached by the High Sheriff's chaplain, who emphasized in solemn tones the wrath of God and the necessity of obeying His King's laws.

Early next morning, the sobriety vanished. Booths selling ale and cider were set up, and street corners came alive. The temporary population of Thetford continued to mushroom. Accommodations in the town were always in short supply, and beds were let at inflated prices of half a guinea each, with the poorest townspeople taking in lodgers to reap some grain from the harvest. In one recorded case, a poor family had its six children sleep in one bed, three at the head and three at the foot, to earn a few shillings from a lodger. Gentlemen, taking up residence in their town houses, suffered no such discomforts. By day, they tallyhoed their hounds across the surrounding heathland and indulged in horse racing, stag hunting, and pheasant shooting. By nightfall, the same gentlemen gathered at the White Hart Inn, just down the hill from Paine's cottage on a street named Bridgegate, to drink ale, play cards, and bet on cockfights. The courtyards of other local inns had meanwhile been turned into commoners' theaters, filled to capacity every night for a week, their jesting, heckling audiences charmed and taunted with a mixture of classics and vaudeville performed by touring companies.<sup>3</sup>

After several days and nights of unbroken reveling, the Assizes were formally opened in the Guildhall — a short walk from the Paines' — on the morning of Thursday, March 10. The Lord Chief Justice, seated high above a packed courtroom watched over by the High Constable and the Petty Constables, read aloud his commission from the King, sealed with the Great Seal. The names of all Justices of the Peace in the county of Norfolk were then read out, and the gentlemen of the Grand Jury were administered the oath of faithfulness to their King, Church, Country, and conscience. The accused, prevented from giving evidence themselves or even knowing beforehand the charges against them, were expected to stand mute. The whole ceremony mimicked the description of the English justice system in the third part of the famous *Commentaries* of Sir William Blackstone, who himself later presided at the Thetford Lent Assizes in March 1777, three years before his death.<sup>4</sup> Blackstone praised the assize system as an example of "the wise oeconomy and admirable provision of our ancestors, in settling the distribution of justice in a method so well calculated for cheapness, expedition, and ease." He went on to describe the architects of the ancient system as "an illustrious train of Ancestors, who are formed by their education, interested by their property, and bound upon their conscience and honour, to be skilled in the Laws of their Country."

Ancestors of the realm loomed large in the architecture of the Guildhall courtrooms. In the smaller Nisi Prius court, where Lord Chief Justice Willes turned to the day's business, hung a fine oil painting of Justice. Its inscription read: "Judge righteously, and plead the cause of the Poor and Needy. Proverbs 31 and 9." The civil cases were heard first. Business was brisk. About two-thirds of the accused were convicted of offenses such as petty larceny, forgery, libel, and the use of unjust weights. A boy who robbed his master and a man who stole hats were ordered to be transported to the American colonies.<sup>5</sup> A trader convicted of dishonesty and a woman accused of being a shrew were humiliated on the ducking stool on the river Thet. The remaining convicted were ordered to be branded, put in the town pillory, publicly or privately whipped, or fined and imprisoned.

After hearing the civil cases, the Lord Chief Justice moved on to criminal business in the Crown Court, where he sat facing the Grand Jury Gallery. Behind him was a draped canopy submounted by the Royal Arms and the motto *Pro rege, lege, et grege* (For the king, the law, and the people); in the window to his right were stained-glass Royal Arms, while to his left were the Arms of the Borough of Thetford. The crowded courtroom hushed. All eyes fixed on the Lord Chief Justice, the gentlemen of the jury, and the accused, who stood motionless as their fetters were temporarily removed, their eyes sunken and glazed, convinced that the sand in their hourglass was running for the last time.

Criminal cases at the Thetford Assizes normally included burglary, stealing livestock, highway robbery, and arson. Very few were charged with murder. Crimes were as a rule ad hoc acts against property — that is, driven by material desperation and not by any widespread culture of criminality within the ranks of the poor. Sometimes the proceedings were entertaining, as when a packed courtroom watched a man capitally convicted for burglary compulsively eat oranges throughout his trial and sentencing. There were also tales of the time when the courtroom watched with amazement an accused man rob a constable in their midst, or heard the case of a boy who had picked a constable's pocket as he was arrested and was subsequently transported for fourteen years. By these standards, the criminal hearings of March 10, 1737, were uneventful. Stamped with the unsmiling authority of George II, they followed the harsh maxim of Voltaire, who had commented when visiting the area a few years before that the English were a people who murdered by law.

The nearby *Norwich Mercury* reported that in the year of Paine's birth, three of the accused were sentenced to death by the Grand Jury.<sup>6</sup> James Blade, age forty-one years, a former ship's carpenter apprentice, confessed to stealing money and goods to the value of twenty shillings four years earlier from the owner of the King's Head tavern in nearby Stanfield High-Green. He also confessed to keeping fairs at which members of the public played unlawful games such as pricking the girdle, thimbles and ball, and the newly invented game black joke. William Wright, "a poor stupid Creature" born at Silem in Suffolk County, was convicted of stealing a bushel of wheat from a barn and robbing a woman on the King's Highway near Dickelburgh by cutting off her pocket and escaping with one guinea, six shillings, and six pence. John Painter, about thirty-five years of age, was born of "very poor, but honest Parents" and lived near Brandon with his wife and children, working as a warrener. He was convicted of purchasing a stolen horse and stealing a parcel of tea and hiding it in a blacksmith's shop, where he was apprehended. He strongly denied the charges, insisting that the most unlawful act in his life was to poach several dozen rabbits one evening from a nearby warren.

The Lord Chief Justice ordered that each man be executed the next day. "Wretches hang that jurymen may dine," wrote Alexander Pope. And so it was in Thetford. Overnight, as the Chief Justice banqueted with the Grand Jury at the King's House, the three were held groaning in the Thetford gaol, double-ironed and handcuffed. A large yoke circled their necks, and their limbs were chained to the floor of the cell. What they thought or did overnight went unrecorded. We know only that a few

minutes before eight o'clock next morning, shortly after sunrise, Blade, Wright, and Painter were escorted by the Borough Sheriff, several petty constables, a clergyman, the executioner, and his two assistants from the gaol up through the nearby Wilderness, past Paine's cottage, to the chalk ridge known as Gallows Hill.

The prisoners, dressed in the same shabby blue coats worn during their trial, looked cadaverous before the murmuring crowd bunched beside the scaffold. Prayers were said. A mournful hymn was sung by a small group in the crowd. The blue-coated men mounted the scaffold. The executioner let fall three ropes, which the assistants adjusted in turn around each prisoner's neck. The convicted joined hands. Staring into the distance, they exchanged no words. Their nightcaps were pulled down over their faces, and a black handkerchief was tied over their eyes. The crowd stilled. The clergyman called, "God bless you! God bless you!" A signal was given, and each man's shoulders were suddenly flung into convulsions. The violent breathing and choked gasps that followed went as quickly as they had come. The convicted criminals had been launched into eternity.

According to custom, the bodies were left to swing in the cold March wind for a full hour. They were then cut down and carted from the scaffold to the gaol, the dispersing crowd trailing along. John Painter's corpse was placed in a coffin, returned to his family, and later buried in a churchyard. The bodies of James Blade and William Wright were delivered to the county surgeons, who picked through their flesh and bones in the name of science, in accordance with the instructions of Lord Chief Justice Willes.

Each Lent for the next nineteen years — all of them spent in Thetford — Tom Paine likely grew conscious of the imprisonment, trial, and execution of scores of figures like Painter, Blade, and Wright. Mid-eighteenth-century punishment was an ugly sight to Paine's eyes, as it is to ours. In his youth, the field of criminal law was the most violent patch of English life. Certainly by European and world standards, Georgian England was not a murderous country. In contrast to the previous century of failed revolution, political assassinations were unknown, soldiers rarely fired on crowds, and kings lost their heads only mentally. The means of state violence were often overstretched, policing was an amateurish affair, and the resort to murder in everyday life was comparatively rare. Other forms of violence — the routine beating of wives, servants, and children, the flogging of soldiers, the brawls of drunken hirelings during election campaigns — were undoubtedly commonplace, and the ubiquity of symbolic violence, such as the seizure of overpriced bread and stone throwing against the excisemen and profiteering millers, shocked visitors to the country. But with few exceptions, even this popular symbolic violence was constrained by considerations of moral economy — that is, limited by custom to specific purposes and clearly targeted at specific objectives such as the defense of ancient liberties and the remedying of perceived injustices.

The tough application of a vicious penal code was the exception. During Paine's youth, capital statutes mushroomed, even for paltry offenses such as stealing a packet of tea, being out at night with a blackened face, purchasing a stolen horse, or stealing a few shillings. While well-to-do homicides were often acquitted or given nominal sentences, servants who pilfered from their masters or rural laborers who stole a sheep found themselves sentenced to death by hanging. England seemed destined to have laws for the rich and laws for the poor. In 1689, there had been fifty capital offenses in the country. During Paine's century, the number quadrupled, most of the additions being related (as might be expected in a burgeoning capitalist economy) to securing absolute rights of private property — against those who continued to think in old-fashioned usufructuary terms of property as the right of peacefully enjoying the use and advantages of another's property. Among the supreme ironies of the period, which Paine himself quickly grasped, was that just as Continental absolute monarchies were

beginning to liberalize their statute books, England, renowned as the home of liberty and good government, was imposing Europe's most barbarous criminal code on a population that was among the least violent in the region.<sup>7</sup>

### The Graftons

The executions at Thetford two months after Paine's birth confirmed this ironic trend. They contradict subsequent accounts of his birthplace, which has conventionally been pictured, in romantic language, as an ancient haven of poetic stillness and beauty. Francis Blomefield (1705–1752), who was educated at the same school as Paine and became the first historian of Norfolk County, introduced his account of Paine's birthplace with a strain of poetry:

*Thetford, thy age shall introduce my rhymes,  
I honour all thy joys in ancient times,  
And wish thee happy, in what now appears  
The relicts of above a thousand years.*<sup>8</sup>

The Suffolk poet Robert Bloomfield (1766–1823), Paine's later acquaintance and critic, compounded the romance:

*To where of old rich abbeys smil'd  
In all the pomp of Gothic taste  
By fond tradition proudly styl'd  
The mighty "City in the East."*<sup>9</sup>

And Moncure Conway, Paine's most-quoted biographer, wrote lyrically about its quaint streets, pretty landscape, historic vistas and (quoting Robert Browning) its "beauty buried everywhere." It is as if the young Paine played in the same kind of unspoiled rural utopia that inspired the idyllic prose of his contemporary, a Genevan writer whom he later read with great interest, Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

Thetford and its surrounding brecklands were actually little like that. During Paine's youth, it is true, Thetford was aptly designated "a town in the midst of a large heath," and his later love of nature undoubtedly stemmed from his familiarity with its windswept beauty. Pitted by meres, dotted with villages and houses tipped with smoking chimneys, the heath was a four-hundred-square-mile stronghold of some of the rarest English plants and insects. During the spring and summer months — or so it was said locally — the heath's bracing air and twisted lines of Scotch pines were filled with wild ducks, nightjars, lapwings, and the weird cries of the stone curlew.

The annual executions at the Thetford Assizes cast a lurid light on such romancing. So too did the presence of the Grafton family, with whose vast wealth and power the young Paine was surely familiar. A contemporary sketch of Euston Hall, the county seat of the dukes of Grafton, conveys something of their grip on the local inhabitants.<sup>10</sup> The estate was immense. The young Frenchman François de la Rochefoucauld, who spent a year in the area during Paine's lifetime, noted how the barrenness of parts of the estate seemed to multiply its vastness. "You cross the duke of Grafton's estate, remarkable for the great numbers of rabbits you see and foxes you don't see," reported la Rochefoucauld. "All this country, which the road crosses for eight miles, is covered only with heath reaching out of sight in all directions; not a shrub, not a decent herb, except in the little valleys that

one sees some way off, shallow and so hardly damp.”<sup>11</sup>

Nearly forty miles in circumference, the estate dwarfed the borough of Thetford and encompassed a number of villages and hamlets, as well as perhaps the most elegant seventeenth-century church in England, St. Genevieve, where Paine’s parents were married in the summer of 1734. Most visitors found the estate charming. “It lies in the open country towards the side of Norfolk not far from Thetford; a place capable of all that is pleasant and delightful in nature, and improv’d by art to every extreme that Nature is able to produce,” reported Daniel Defoe on a visit several years before Paine’s birth.<sup>12</sup> “The park and plantations are well worth your viewing; they are very expensive and sketched with great taste,” observed Arthur Young during a visit in 1769. “Remark particularly the approach to the house from Bury; it is exceedingly beautiful.”<sup>13</sup>

At the center of the Grafton estate there stood a magnificent seventeenth-century brick house arranged around a central court with four pavilions at the corners —“after the French” as the dukes liked to tell their guests. John Evelyn, the famous diarist and expert on gardening, stayed there for a fortnight in the autumn of 1671. He noted with delight that the house was “not onely capable and roomsome, but very magnificent and commodious, as well within as without, nor lesse splendidly furnish’d.”<sup>14</sup>

The interior, from which humble folk like Paine were excluded, contained painted ceilings by Antonio Verrio, a state portrait of King Charles II by Sir Peter Lely, and a conservatory adorned with maps. Showcases contained armorial plates made to order in China, a Venetian gilt table, exquisite dining chairs, mirrors, card tables, and Spanish painted cabinets. The dukes were especially proud of a painting of Charles II dancing with his sister the princess of Orange at the great ball held in the Mauritshuis, at The Hague, the night before his return to England in 1660. Downstairs and out through the front door, visitors admired the sundial in the center of the courtyard. Nearby was a walled garden with a stone seat by William Kent and a little garden house from one of his designs. From there a broad path led through the orangery past the end of the house and through the pleasure grounds to the octagonal temple, from which the Graftons watched their racehorses or expensive hounds exercising in the park amid the beeches, firs, elms, and limes.

Beside the path leading back from the temple to the house stood a dead oak, said to have been grown from an acorn from the oak in which Charles II had hid at Boscobel after the Battle of Worcester in 1651. The oak, of course, was a royalist symbol, and the thought that that dead oak pointed to the future of the English aristocracy would have been lost on the Graftons. The second duke of Grafton, Charles Fitz Roy (1683–1757), and his family formed part of a tiny class of agrarian millionaires whose point of pride was the rural palace. They felt no modesty about displaying their wealth. Like all eighteenth-century gentlemen, they were convinced that property was the very basis of civilization, that “dominion follows property” (as Bernard Mandeville famously wrote), and that the first duty of government was to preserve both. The grandeur of their estates radiated their confidence that they would rule forever, and history certainly seemed to be on their side.<sup>15</sup> From the end of the seventeenth century, technical improvements and big farming profits in wool, cattle, and corn made the possession of great estates a coveted investment. Through careful purchases, prudent marriages, and their control of Parliament, families like the Graftons amassed wealth far in excess of any other stratum of English society, to the point where the shape of the rural landscape and society was altered irreversibly.

Well before Paine was born and still during his youth, large landowners throughout the country excluded certain land from common or public access. Trackways and paths were blocked off, roads

redirected and swept away, without compensation. Many of the traditional common rights of grazing and wood collecting, the ancient privileges of rural folk and villagers, disappeared. The dramatic growth of rural poverty followed immediately. In Norfolk and elsewhere, such enclosure ensured the disappearance of the class of agricultural laborers eking out a precarious living on their small allotments and exercising their common right of access to their masters' property. Small proprietors — peasants or yeomen — were similarly squeezed out of existence. The dispossessed swelled the ranks of the rural poor and made their snaring and poaching presence felt in towns such as Thetford, searching for parish relief.

Although the Anglican Church and private benefactors (including the Graftons) continued to collect and distribute alms for the poor, the relief system provided by the parish authorities was constantly overburdened during Paine's youth. Especially in lean years, Thetford was stalked by migrant paupers who were attracted to the town because of its position at the junction of several main roads. Toward the end of the eighteenth century, the desperation of the poor resulted in food riots, looting, burning, and mob violence in the Thetford area. Things had probably not yet reached this point during Paine's youth, although there is evidence that many Thetfordians felt that the fabric of society was threatened and regarded those trapped in poverty with constant suspicion. Town ordinances dating back to the sixteenth century ruled that no stranger could live in the town without the permission of the Thetford Corporation. Since these rules were easily evaded, there were occasional house-to-house searches for illegal immigrants, the idle, and the feckless. The Law of Settlement and Removal of 1662 confirmed the local parishes' responsibility for relieving the poverty of its permanent residents. From there on, the "deserving poor"—the elderly, helpless, or unavoidably unemployed — were eligible for outrelief (assistance while resident at home) or were put to useful work organized by the parish or town authorities — for instance, in the workhouse located in the lower room of the Guildhall.

Although the parishes functioned as "miniature welfare states" for the "settled" inhabitants of Thetford, the growing number of "unsettled" idle and vagrant were treated harshly.<sup>16</sup> The sick, poor, and old were ruthlessly driven out or bribed to leave. Unmarried pregnant women were bullied into leaving, even when in labor, in order to "pass the baby." Since it was in the financial interest of Thetford's three parishes to deny settlement certificates to nonresidents, the local authorities obtained the maximum number of removal orders. Justices of the Peace, local constables, and parish overseers of the poor cracked down hard in other ways. As Paine knew from playing in Thetford's streets, it was often a crime simply to be poor, the punishment for which was rough treatment, trial, whipping, transportation, or hanging.

It would be misleading to say that the Graftons themselves were directly responsible for creating a vulnerable underclass of rural poor in and around Thetford. The family certainly had engaged in several acts of enclosure — for example, during Paine's teenage years in the early 1750s, when the second duke of Grafton concluded that the vista from his Pink Bedroom was spoiled by the sight of Euston village. The duke proceeded to solve the problem by contracting the famous English architect Matthew Brettingham to supervise the physical resiting of the entire village and redirect the Little Ouse River to fit in with the "cleansed" rural landscape. Such megalomania was practiced elsewhere in England — Thomas Coke resited the whole Norfolk hamlet of Holkham, for instance — but the Graftons' case was exceptional, if only because they already owned all the land of the surrounding parishes and therefore did not need to enclose through recourse to Acts of Parliament. It might even be said that the bulk of the population in the Thetford area, living as they did within closed parishes protected by "my lord," was shielded by the Graftons' paternalism from the social corrosion caused by nationwide enclosure. That conclusion was reached by some contemporary observers, including Robert Bloomfield, whose poem "Autumn" waxed lyrical about the Graftons: "Lord of pure alms, an

gifts that wide extend; The farmer's patron, and the poor man's friend."<sup>17</sup>

The prose was exaggerated, but it correctly pointed to the swollen system of patronage operated by the Graftons. The family had been persuaded of the classical theory that when masters neglect their subjects, the mob clamors for ochlocracy. They consequently took precautions by cultivating an elaborate system of patronage that bolstered their own power and divided their potential opponents, ensuring their reputation (in Edmund Burke's famous words) as the "great oaks that shade a country." The methods were less formal and escapeproof than feudal homage, more personal and comprehensive than the contractual relationships of capitalist competition, but they were hardly new. In 1574, Thetford had been granted a charter of incorporation, becoming a nominally self-governing body. It thereby gained possession of the fee farm — the right to collect taxes on behalf of the Crown and to remit only a fixed annual sum, so that any profits were retained for the use of the town. This change left Thetford wide-open to aristocratic intrigue. Thereafter, until the parliamentary reforms of 1835, was renowned throughout the country as among the most rotten of rotten, or pocket, boroughs, in which local talent was normally prevented from climbing into national politics, high office, and high society.

Young Paine was presented a lesson in scandalously undemocratic local government, and it is not far-fetched to suppose that his belief that pride and prejudice must be continually pricked by public criticism stems from this period. It is true that Paine's contemporary the third duke of Grafton (1735—1811) was widely regarded as a Unitarian, showed liberal tendencies, and as prime minister of England during the years 1767 to 1770 was sacked by George III after pressing for more independence for the American colonies. But in and around Thetford, the Graftons' rule was virtually absolute. They dispensed a rich harvest of patronage in the form of salaried jobs, tenancies, and, through the borough licenses, building contracts, and provisions for elections and charity dinners. Uniting in their persons practically all executive power, they acted as the satraps of the community, watching and controlling its public life, scheming to disappoint later historians by ensuring that no class of plebeians emerged to take revenge upon the patricians.

In the matter of parliamentary elections, for example, the Graftons' rule was a synonym for venality. There were occasional signs of anti-Grafton rebellion, as when the incumbent mayor, who had fallen out with the dukes, had his clothes removed by Grafton supporters during an election rally. The mayor refused to conduct the election and withdrew, taking his mayor's robes with him.<sup>18</sup> Such naked challenges to the parliamentary game were exceptional. Throughout the eighteenth century, the two Thetford Members of Parliament, representatives of an electoral roll of only thirty voters, elected themselves. By purchasing votes and distributing favors, the Grafton family exercised virtually undisputed control over the town. Their power of patronage peaked during Paine's first years in Thetford. Thirty years before his birth, it was said that the going rate for a Thetford vote was fifty guineas, and in 1708 one of the successful candidates, Robert Baylis, reportedly spent £3,000 to secure his return.<sup>19</sup> The tightening grip of the Graftons slowly brought such electoral contests to an end. Knowing the difficulty of sailing over political seas in eggshells — their fathers had reminded them of the political debacles of the 1640s — they applied patience, time, and money to their cause. At a by-election in February 1733, Lord Charles Fitz Roy, the second duke's son, was returned. This was the last parliamentary contest for seventy years. Thereafter, all parliamentary candidates went unopposed and a Fitz Roy was nominated at each one of the next six elections held over twenty-eight years and a eighth of the subsequent sixteen elections during the years to 1826.<sup>20</sup>

The Graftons perfectly matched Daniel Defoe's famous description of the eighteenth-century English aristocracy as the most confident in Europe. Picturing themselves as "the great, who live



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