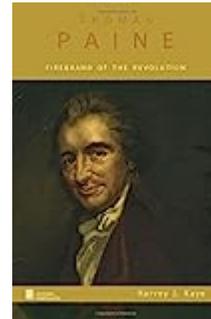




**Harvey J. Kaye.** *Thomas Paine: Firebrand of Revolution.* Oxford Portraits. New York and London: Oxford University Press, 2000. 160 pp. \$24.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-511627-4.



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## A Fiery Paine

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For the past decade, Thomas Paine has become an increasingly popular subject of study and commentary in the United States, Britain, and France. No less than three new biographies (one in French) by Jack Fruchtman, John Keane, and Bernard Vincent (respectively) have appeared in the past decade or so along with several new book-length commentaries and countless essays analyzing his political, social, and religious thought, which have appeared in both learned journals and the popular press. In 1995, a new Library of America edition of his works appeared. He is even regarded, by some, as a precursor to the Internet, as Jon Katz vigorously argued in the May 1995 issue of *Wired Magazine* in an article entitled “The Age of Paine” (an echo of John Adams’s famous deprecation of Paine in an 1805 letter to the physician Dr. Benjamin Waterhouse, which is quoted in the present work).

In addition, the cable television network C-SPAN in the winter of 2001 devoted an entire week to his life and work in its “American Writers” series, and efforts continue unabated to erect a monument to Paine in the mall between the United States Capitol and the Washington

Monument. The Thomas Paine National Historical Association has become the chief spokesman for all things Paine and the organization’s popularity is growing, especially in light of harsh criticism of Tom Paine in recent books by Pauline Maier, Joseph Ellis, David McCullough, and others. At least two motion picture producers, including Sir Richard Attenborough, are working on feature-length films covering his life and work. It appears that Thomas Paine has become an intellectual and popular culture growth industry in his own right.

Added to this phenomenal production is a new book for young adults by Harvey J. Kaye, the Ben and Joyce Rosenberg Professor of Social Change and Development at the University of Wisconsin, Green Bay. His book, which is part of Oxford University Press’s Oxford Portraits series, joins *Tom Paine: Voice of Revolution* by Milton Meltzer, which appeared in 1996. Meltzer, a well-known writer of biographies and history for young people, has published some ninety books, including biographies of Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, and Benjamin Franklin. Kaye’s book is a tour-de-force in that until now he has devoted his scholarly work to an inves-

tigation of Marxist history and historians. Indeed, he has edited several works by Marxist historians E. P. Thompson, George Rudin, and Victor Kiernan. In his 1994 co-edited work, *The American Radical*, however, Kaye included an essay on Paine and the American Revolution, which serves in some respects as the basis for the present work.

Best known as the author of *Common Sense*, which, in January of 1776, was the first published argument for America's separation from Britain; *Rights of Man*, his justification for the French Revolution; *The Age of Reason*, his attack on organized religion; and, *Agrarian Justice*, his most sophisticated theory of social welfare and social justice, Thomas Paine has never been placed by historians in the constellation of American founders making him the equal of Jefferson, Madison, Adams, Hamilton, and Washington. Kaye's work will no doubt boost Paine's standing if young people actually read his biography and learn the critical role that he played in two countries, the new United States and France, as these nations struggled with the formation of new political forms under highly charged and trying circumstances.

Kaye's biography achieves everything a good biography for young adults needs: it places Paine within his historical context, showing just how his own life and writings affected the unfolding events in America, especially during the American Revolution, and in France, most particularly during the revolution there thirteen years later. It is a smoothly written essay that seamlessly moves Paine through the changing times of the late-eighteenth century while expertly explaining the developing ideas encased in his writings. It is above all lyrically written with very little intrusive commentary on Kaye's part so that readers may come to their own conclusions. There is, however, a bias toward Paine himself and his ideas, which comes through quite clearly: Kaye definitely likes his subject and justifies his actions, no matter how controversial they may have been at the time.

With forty-five black-and-white illustrations, this attractive book moves the reader swiftly and compellingly from the moment Paine, as a young English lad, signed as a cabin boy on a British privateer during the Seven Years War with France to his death in New York City and funeral in New Rochelle in 1809. While Kaye's book is clearly a welcome addition to the Paine canon, it raises several questions and generates some minor quibbles with the interpretation.

Kaye repeats the speculation that when the 21-year-old Paine was struggling financially while living in Sand-

wich in 1758 and may have become a Methodist preacher. Whether this is true or not has never been fully explained nor has evidence ever directly verified its truth. It is an intriguing prospect that Paine ministered at that time, but the origins of this conjecture are two-fold: they are rooted in an early hostile biography by George Chalmers, writing under the name of Francis Oldys, and a statement made by one Ernest A. Payne in a 1947 letter to the editor of the *Times Literary Supplement*. John Keane accepted it in his 1995 biography without producing any direct evidence, thus claiming to have new, unknown until now, information on Paine's early life. He cited an inscription that appeared in a volume of Wesley's sermons owned by Rev. Albert Nash (1812-1900), indicating that Paine preached in Dover. But one wonders why Paine himself never said anything about serving as a preacher or how we might reconcile his adherence to his father's Quakerism early in his life and his Deist criticism of organized religion thirty years later.

Kaye is also uncritical of Paine's indiscreet and unauthorized revelation of the Franco-American alliance in 1778 in light of the Silas Deane affair. Clearly, Paine's passion got the best of him when, as the Secretary to the Committee on Foreign Affairs for Congress, he went after Deane who had been justifying his war profiteering in the public press. As an agent of the United States government, Paine should have distinguished his role as official spokesman and his place as a public intellectual. But he could not, and for this, as Kaye tells us, he resigned his office. But what he doesn't tell us is that he was forced to resign: in other words, Paine would have been dismissed had he not quit on his own accord. A small difference in emphasis, no doubt, but clearly Kaye places Paine in a more favorable light than he was actually in.

Sometimes Kaye presents events in Paine's life, but fails to give us sufficient detail to fully understand the circumstances. For example, when John Laurens wanted Paine to accompany him to France in 1780, but certain congressmen opposed the idea, all Kaye tells us is that "Paine's enemies aggressively blocked the appointment." While this is true, it would have been helpful to learn who these enemies were (mainly John Witherspoon, a New Jersey delegate). Or, Paine's alleged dual with the captain of the British gunboat, the *Alert*, which has never been fully explained: why was the Comte de Noailles, the captain of a British ship, and what are the origins of this information (Keane only cites an 1895 issue of the *Annual Report of the American Historical Association*)? Moreover, Kaye does not tell us how young "Laurens himself got off to a bad start" (an infelicitous construction that Kaye too

often favors here), nor how Franklin and Paine had to pick up the pieces.

Kaye devotes as much space to Paine's involvement in the French Revolution as he does to Paine as an activist in the American. His characterization of Burke as the founder of modern conservatism, given his attack on the events in France, misses the mark, however. While Burke clearly did, as Kaye tells us, advocate "tradition, preservation, continuity, and hierarchy," this is not to say that he opposed change, *per se*. In fact, he argued quite forcefully why he opposed radical or revolutionary change, namely because it uprooted the foundations of the polity from their historical development over long, long periods of time. Hence, Burke supported American separation from Britain because the American roots were differently planted from their British cousins. He also supported what he called "economical" (financial) reform in England.

Kaye does not tell us that Burke warned of the dire consequences when revolution destroyed the institutional roots of a nation: it will lead to tyranny of the worst kind, a prediction that was fulfilled, first, with Robespierre and the Reign of Terror in 1793 and 1794, and, second, with the rise of Napoleon and the French empire five years later. Indeed, Kaye suggests this very problem in his characterization of the differences between moderate Girondins and radical Jacobins. The whole enterprise of course collapsed in 1815 with

Napoleon's final defeat and the restoration of the Bourbon monarchy. Moreover, Burke never referred to the common people as "the swinish multitude," but to those involved in the tearing down of French institutions as "a" swinish multitude, a small, though noteworthy emphasis that needs to be noted (to my own embarrassment and dismay, I too have made that error). That Burke opposed democracy was, by the way, not a peculiar belief of Burke alone: most Whigs disapproved of democracy and used the term in negative ways, mostly as interchangeable with anarchy and chaos. Only radical and progressive writers like Thomas Paine felt comfortable using the word "democracy" in a positive sense.

Paine as the *firebrand* of revolution (in the sub-title of this biography) is well put. Thomas Paine was the *voice* of revolution, as Kaye and Meltzer before him suggest. Paine himself was not a revolutionary in the sense that he picked up a musket and stormed anything (there is no evidence he actually wore a uniform or engaged in combat even when serving as an aide to Roberdeau or Greene). He was the most engaging writer of his generation (maybe in all of American history), a man who spoke directly to his readers in a language that they could immediately grasp and appreciate. In that spirit, Harvey Kaye has produced a highly attractive, elegantly crafted biography for young adults, and it is hoped that it will prove, like Paine's own works, a bestseller in its own right.

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