



Thomas Paine: Enlightenment, Revolution, and the Birth of Modern Nations

Craig Nelson

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Despite being a founder of both the United States and the French Republic, the creator of the phrase "United States of America," and the author of three of the biggest bestsellers of the eighteenth century, Thomas Paine is perhaps the least well known – and the most controversial – of the American founding fathers. Unlike such friends and allies as Washington, Franklin, Jefferson, Hamilton, and John Adams, the world's first crusader for the public good has always remained a somewhat indistinct figure. How this lower-class British tradesman managed not only to have written the cornerstone of American democracy, *Common Sense*, but become a revered citizen of the world are questions that have challenged historians for centuries, and have more often than not left us with biographies that are more monumental than illuminating.

In Craig Nelson's *Thomas Paine* we now have a rich and vivid portrait that does justice to this towering figure of our history, one that brings him to life against the dramatic backdrop of the Revolutionary era and the heady intellectual exhilaration of the Age of Enlightenment. Nelson traces Paine's path from his years as a struggling London mechanic to his journey to seek his fortune in the New World (in which he arrived on a stretcher, after a nearly deadly bout of shipboard typhus); from his early career as a crusading pamphleteer to his emergence as the heroic voice of revolutionary fervor on two continents; from his miraculous escape from execution in Paris during The Terror to his final years in America, where the once-lionized patriot spent his final days nearly impoverished and in the throes of dementia. Throughout his insightful portrait Nelson takes full account of this paradoxical figure, whom some contemporaries judged as brilliant and charismatic and others disparaged as abrasive and egotistical, a cherished patriot who was nonetheless dismissed by John Adams as a "disastrous meteor" and Teddy Roosevelt as a "dirty little atheist."

Five years in the making, drawing on both the most recent scholarship and the archives of Philadelphia, Washington, New York, Paris, London, Lewes, and Thetford, *Thomas Paine* restores this often misunderstood man to the stature that he deserves, and reveals him, a man who famously asserted that "we have it in our power to begin the world over again," to be as much a man of our own time as a paragon of the Enlightenment.

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