

amendment which allowed local parties to reject the membership of individual YLs if they so desired, whereas previously they had been obliged to accept them.

Matt Cole, in summarising the points arising from the testimony, identified some repeating themes. First, why did the YL movement change so dramatically and become so much more successful in the mid-1960s? The answer clearly had much to do with the cultural changes mentioned by the witnesses: the decline of deference, disillusion with conventional politics and politicians, greater freedom of thought and behaviour. But why were the other parties unable to profit from this culture change? The membership of the Conservative and Labour youth organisations was in decline at this time. They were the parties of government and disillusion with them partially explains their inability to capitalise on the new atmosphere. The Conservatives were also associated with the old world that was passing.

Another reason for YL success compared with old-party decline was structural, and that was the second main theme to emerge from the testimony. There were key organisational changes in the mid-1960s which enabled the YL movement to accommodate a wider range of political opinions than before. While many individuals moved on, what emerged in that period were novel and effective ideas and policies which gave coherence to activism and provided a legacy for future campaigning. Another decisive point from the testimony was the role of the party leadership, and how the change of party leader appears to have been pivotal to the fate of the YL movement. Thorpe's challenge to the YLs was a clear factor in changes to the YL leadership in 1968 and a cause of some activists quitting the party.

Michael Meadowcroft later intervened to say that the difference between Jo Grimond and Jeremy Thorpe was that Jo wasn't frightened of ideas whereas Jeremy was. Therein is a message for the leadership of all political parties. Leaders must understand that party youth movements do not behave like the rest of the

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party. They do not have the same interests or functions and they do not even have the same language. Different language can scare the mainstream party; the term 'Red Guard' is a case in point. Although this was not coined by the YLs but the media, it carried with it the notion of militancy and challenge to authority, so it was perhaps unsurprising that the party leadership was worried

by it. George Kiloh had declared that the YLs were 'going to put a bomb under the Liberal Party'. This kind of language could have led the party leadership to overestimate the threat of the YLs and underestimate the potential for creativity, innovation and support the YLs could attract to the party.

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## Thomas Paine and the Radical Liberal Tradition

Evening meeting, 12 July 2010, with Professor Edward Royle and Dr Edward Vallance. Chair: Dr Richard Grayson  
Report by Dr Emily Robinson

ON MONDAY 12 July, the *Journal of Liberal History* marked the publication of a special issue on 'Liberals and the Left' with a seminar at the National Liberal Club. Richard Grayson, Head of Politics at Goldsmiths College and guest editor of the special issue, opened proceedings by praising the *Journal* for reaching sixty-seven issues and noting that the focus of the special issue on Liberals and the Left had particular resonance following the 2010 general election. He went on to welcome the two speakers – both Edwards – who would be addressing one particular part of the left Liberal tradition: the legacy of Thomas Paine.

Professor Edward Royle, author of many works on the history of radicalism and free thought and of the article on Paine in the special issue, began the seminar with an excellent paper on Thomas (emphatically not Tom!) Paine. He noted that Paine had been a controversial character for two hundred years. In his lifetime he was both the champion of radical revolutionaries and the bugbear of the propertied classes. By the early twentieth century, however, views on Paine had been moderated – if largely as a result of ignorance and apathy rather than tolerance. Professor Royle wondered how we could

understand the legacy of a figure embraced by both Ronald Reagan and Tony Benn.

Royle outlined some competing approaches to the history of political thought. The traditional, whiggish approach tended to see ideas marching forward from text to text, but more recent scholars have encouraged their students to place political ideas in context. By this reading, Locke should not be seen as the first liberal individualist simply because later liberal individualists see their ideas reflected in his words. Instead Locke's own understanding of man as master of a household, rather than as an isolated individual should be emphasised. It is the context of the author which gives meaning to the text. This was the orthodox approach until the onset of postmodernism, which instead stressed the instrumental role of the reader in constructing the context of the text, effectively re-authoring it. As Royle noted, this approach is both plainly true and profoundly flawed.

In the case of Paine, it is clear that interpretations of his works reveal more about the interpreters' politics than about those of Paine himself. He has been seen as a champion of radical liberalism but could also be used as a champion of conservatism or of socialism. Careful historical

reading is needed in order to reassess Paine's meaning and to place his thought in the context of its time. A good example of this is the tendency to expect Paine to address issues of class. He was not writing from the perspective of the 1840s, the world known by Engels. Instead, Paine was writing from his own experience, before the Industrial Revolution, from the perspective of neither the labouring poor nor the privileged rich. It is also in the circumstances of Paine's life that we can find the explanation for his particular writing style. Untrained in classical rhetoric, he used the common English language to great effect. While this would have made his works appear barbaric to contemporaries, it also makes them particularly accessible to the modern sensibility.

Royle went on to detail other ways in which Paine's life experience marked his thought and writing. His experience of working in Customs and Excise gave him both his antipathy to intrusive state administration and his sympathy for Americans. Similarly, his role as a small shopkeeper alerted him to the problems associated with a lack of coinage and with extended credit, which he saw as the rich borrowing forcibly from the poor. This cemented his lifelong hostility to the rich and to paper money. Moreover, as a vestryman Paine was involved with administering the Poor Law and was made intensely aware of the great gulf between rich and poor. Thus, by the time Paine emigrated in 1784, we can see that his ideas were already formed. His thought should therefore be understood to have been rooted in his experience in England.

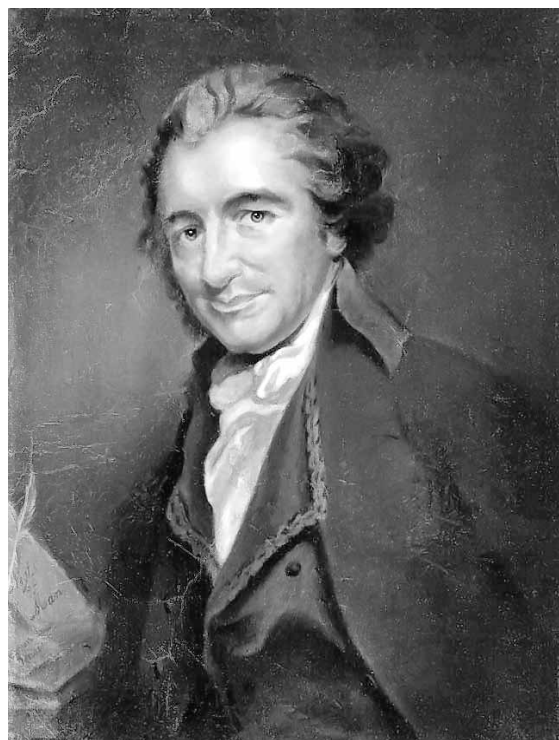
While he did not use the language of class, Paine did see himself as the champion of the people – of citizens against the parasitic aristocracy. He wanted to abolish both the poor and the privileged. As an instinctive republican and democrat, he was as uneasy among the patricians in America as among the aristocracy in England. Both *Common Sense* and *Rights of Man* are criticisms of British politics and sketches of the ideal society. *Common*

*Sense* rejected the monarchy and insisted on the status of citizens rather than subjects. But it also advocated a minimalist state; government was a necessary evil. This view was developed but not changed in *Rights of Man*. Property was seen to lead to independence, the first condition of democracy, and security meant safeguarding civil rights. According to the social contract, civil rights replaced natural rights but had to be renewed generation by generation. Paine's vision was of a small state of property owners, with the role of government extending only to protecting civil rights. He did not confront the problem of democratic dictatorship.

Paine's thought was fundamentally different from socialism as his focus was primarily political, with economics following from his political positions. Royle suggested that Paine's economics were rather similar to those of Adam Smith, emphasising equality of opportunity, private property, the free market and laissez-faire approaches. He saw economic and political inequality as deriving from inherited property, to which his solution was redistributive taxation. Moreover, Paine distinguished between the original value of land and the value added to it by work and talent, which could not be equal and therefore justified a new approach to private property.

Throughout his life, Paine retained his aversion to paper money, which led to inflation and therefore ate away at rich men's debts and poor men's savings. He developed an ethos of sound money which resonated with extreme radicals throughout the nineteenth century. By the 1870s and 1880s, however, this had developed into the moderate liberalism of Bradlaugh and Gladstone. A hundred years later, it was in the rhetoric of Margaret Thatcher, rooted in the sensibility of the shopkeeper, that Paineite language could most easily be found.

Royle concluded with a consideration of Paine's religious views. They were significant in his day because they were used to discredit him and his followers;



Thomas Paine  
(1737–1809)

yet in the nineteenth century his deist views were seen as too moderate by republican atheists. Today, however, this is less important. Politicians no longer 'do God'.

While Paine's ideas cannot be crudely transplanted into contemporary politics, his ideas remain current: equality of opportunity, abolition of privilege, freedom of expression and a state which protects but does not usurp the freedom of individuals.

The next speaker was Dr Edward Vallance of Roehampton University and author of *A Radical History of Britain*. He opened with a quotation from Bob Dylan's 1963 letter of apology to the American Emergency Civil Liberties Committee for his controversial acceptance speech for the group's Tom Paine Award – given yearly to an individual seen to have championed the cause of civil liberties. Dylan had lambasted the ECLC as bunch of balding, conservative old fogies, criticised the travel ban to Cuba and, most controversially, expressed sympathy for Lee Harvey Oswald. Dylan also sang about Paine four years later on the track 'As I went out one morning', which Vallance suggested may represent a coded reference to the ECLC debacle.

The prominence of Paine in contemporary popular culture is

clear. He is, perhaps the only British political philosopher whose works are read at the bar stool or immortalised in song. In 2009, Barack Obama used the words of Paine's *The American Crisis* in his inaugural address. In Britain, the bicentenary of his death saw major festivals in his birthplace of Thetford, Norfolk and in his home town of Lewes, Sussex, and a new statue was unveiled in Lewes this summer.

As Vallance noted, this adulation is in marked contrast to Paine's pariah status both during his lifetime and immediately after his death. While *Rights of Man* was undoubtedly a best-seller, its overt republicanism and Francophile rhetoric made Paine a prime target for the loyalist press, eager to tar more moderate British reformers with the same extremist brush. The campaign against Paine was vast – the historian Frank O'Gorman has estimated that some half a million people attended the hundred of burnings of Paine's effigy that took place in 1792, making them the most witnessed British public events of the eighteenth century. In the nineteenth century, Paine remained a useful political bogeyman, invoked by opponents of even moderate reform.

Paine fared no better in early nineteenth-century America. His deism and attack on organised religion in *The Age of Reason* did not chime with the climate of zealous religiosity driving the Second Great Awakening. On his return to the USA in 1802, Paine was variously derided as 'a drunken atheist', a 'loathsome reptile' and 'the infamous scavenger of all the filth which could be trodden by all the revilers of Christianity.' One hostile biographer, William Cobbett, anticipated Paine's death, saying that this would 'excite neither sorrow nor compassion; no friendly hand will close his eyes, not a groan will be uttered, not a tear will be shed.' As Vallance noted, Cobbett's prediction was not far off. Paine's funeral was attended by only six people, whereas his old patron and friend Benjamin Franklin had been mourned by 20,000. Paine's gravestone was regularly vandalised by locals and, following a failed attempt

to repatriate Paine's bones to a planned British mausoleum, his remains were dispersed to the four corners of the earth. The skull is now reputedly in Australia.

However, as Vallance explained, there is a paradox here. It was largely on account of the loyalist attacks on Paine in the 1790s that we remember him today in Britain. And in America, the rehabilitation of Paine's reputation took place because of his religious position. By the mid-nineteenth century, freethinking societies set up by German immigrants were celebrating the author of *The Age of Reason* as a staunch defender of religious freedom. Paine's first serious modern biographer, Moncure D. Conway, was a Unitarian minister, rational theist and abolitionist who saw in Paine a kindred spirit: an earlier freethinker who had also denounced slavery.

In Britain, Paine was most powerfully embraced by so-called ultra-radicals or dyed-in-the-wool republicans such as the printer Richard Carlile and the bookseller James Watson. But Vallance cautioned that this should not lead us to judge Paine's appeal too narrowly. While it remained dangerous to sell Paine's works or to express support for his principles, the Painite style, acerbic, demagogic and irreverent, characterised much nineteenth-century radical writing – from Thomas Wooler's *Black Dwarf* to the speeches of Feargus O'Connor. Moreover, Paine was also incorporated into alternative radical (as opposed to whiggish) histories of the British Isles. The view of history taken by many popular radicals emphasised moments of 'people power' such as the Peasants' Revolt, rather than revering constitutional documents such as the Bill of Rights, and eulogised popular champions such as Thomas Paine rather than elite politicians. These histories were, in turn, following Paine's own characterisation of British history, portraying 'revolutions' such as that of 1688–89 as 'fixes' by the political elite and seeing true change as only coming via violent upheaval, as in either 1381 or 1649. Vallance emphasised that it is a mistake to see Paine as simply

**Paine is still predominantly the idol of the left and far-left, but that also seems to be changing, with the recent festivals and commemorations in Thetford and Lewes suggesting a broader re-evaluation of Paine.**

rejecting an appeal to the past. Rather, in *Rights of Man* he displayed a desire to rewrite history along these lines.

This process of historical revision continues to this day with the memorialisation of Paine himself. In the United States, 'Painites' range from the late ultra-conservative Republican Senator Jesse Helms to the imprisoned Black Panther activist, Mumia Abu Jamal, and nine state legislatures now observe Thomas Paine days. In Britain, where republicanism remains a marginal political creed, Paine is still predominantly the idol of the left and far-left, but that also seems to be changing, with the recent festivals and commemorations in Thetford and Lewes suggesting a broader re-evaluation of Paine.

Vallance noted that this wider appreciation of Paine is, perhaps, inevitable, given the ways in which 'radicalism' has now been reappropriated by the political centre and the right. However, he also cautioned that we must be wary of historical anachronism – Paine was no more a 'red Tory' than he was a proto-socialist. He was a figure of his times and must be understood within that historical context. Ultimately, though, he felt that it is completely fitting to rediscover Paine as a historical figure of national importance. His republicanism and his political thought owed much more to his formative years in England than is usually appreciated. Moreover, we are still reading his works – in pubs as well as libraries – precisely because they remain so startlingly relevant.

Vallance ended with a quotation from *The Decline and Fall of the British System of Finance* (1796): 'It will not be from the inability of procuring loans that the system will break up. On the contrary, it is the facility with which loans can be procured that hastens the event'. If only, he noted, the modern readers of Paine had included Gordon Brown and Mervyn King.

Much of the discussion after the papers focused on Paine's legacy and the lessons we should draw from his works for our politics today. Ed Randall questioned whether Paine would want to

be at the centre of a tradition or whether he would be urging us to face the problems of our own world. He noted that Paine's ideas on property are unable to take account of the damage we are doing to the environment. Similarly, the modern world revolves around paper money; rather than inveighing against that we need to focus on the question of who controls that money. Both speakers agreed that Paine would relish the challenges of the modern world.

In answer to a question from Duncan Brack, Vallance explained that however much they refer to his legacy, none of the present political parties could be seen to have been directly influenced by Paine's politics. Royle agreed with this but also noted that the last vestiges of Paine's policies could be seen in Liberal ideas on Land Value Taxation. Richard Grayson also commented that it is the Labour Party which makes the most explicit use of Paine's legacy; however, he felt that this was T-shirt politics and that the party had lost the tradition of referring to the political thought of figures like Paine. Grayson then pushed this point further, asking both of the speakers how plausibly Liberal Democrats could claim the legacy of Paine and also seventeenth century thinkers like Gerard Winstanley. Vallance was absolutely clear that Lib Dems have little common ground with Winstanley. Even by the standards of the seventeenth century, Winstanley was against the separation of political and religious life. His view of a highly interventionist state is also very problematic for Liberals. He did feel however, that Paine's legacy sits more easily within the Liberal than the Socialist tradition, being based on a negative rather than a positive conception of freedom. Professor Royle agreed with this analysis and added that all the political parties search for legitimating ancestors and will attempt to annexe figures like Paine to their political cause.

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**The last vestiges of Paine's politics could be seen in Liberal ideas on Land Value Taxation.**

# REVIEWS

## Scarborough politicians

Anne and Paul Bayliss, *Scarborough's MPs 1832 to 1906; Scarborough's Mayors 1836 to 1906; A Biographical Dictionary* (A. M. Bayliss, 2008)

Reviewed by Robert Ingham

**T**HIS SHORT book (114 A5 pages) consists of introductory essays on Scarborough's parliamentary and municipal politics in the nineteenth century, lists of election results and mayors, and biographical essays on each MP and mayor during the period.

Scarborough was a fascinating constituency to which Pelling devotes a page in his *Social Geography of British Elections*. Despite what Pelling describes as the town's 'comfort and respectability' it was a marginal seat, which often bucked the national trend.

Two Whigs were elected in 1832, but in 1835 a Tory, Sir Frederick Trench, topped the poll. An opponent of the 'rash and revolutionary' Great Reform Act, Trench had been first elected as a Cornish MP in 1806. His electioneering included 'bribes, often liquid, dinners and theatres, and he was especially attentive to fishermen and sailors'. Trench remained a Scarborough MP until his retirement in 1847.

The incumbent Whig, Earl Mulgrave, lost a by-election in 1851, necessitated by his appointment as Comptroller of the Household, because he was a supporter of free trade, an unpopular cause in the town. The election was the cause of riots and Mulgrave lost to George Young, a Tory ship-owner with no prior connection with the town. Young, who was defeated by Mulgrave in the 1852 general election, was described by Dickens as a 'prodigious bore' in the House.

One of the most prominent political families in the town was the Johnstone family. Sir John Johnstone served as Whig, and

later Liberal, MP for Scarborough for thirty-three years before retiring in 1874. His place was taken by his son, Sir Harcourt Johnstone, later to become first Baron Derwent. He was, presumably, grandfather of the Harcourt Johnstone who served as a Liberal MP in the 1930s and 1940s, although this is not noted by the authors.

Scarborough became a single-member constituency in 1885, when the seat was surprisingly gained by the Conservative Sir George Sitwell. Described by Pelling as an 'eccentric baronet', Sitwell contrived to lose in 1886, regained it in 1892, but lost again in 1895 and 1900, years when the Conservatives prevailed over the Liberals elsewhere. The Liberal victor in 1886 was Joshua Rowntree, the mayor of the town and a member of the famous Quaker family. Another prominent Liberal MP for Scarborough was Walter Rea, who sat from 1906–18, and was later a minister in the National Government of 1931.

Much of the biographical information in this book is extracted from local newspapers and focuses on the MPs' and mayors' connections with the town. There are few differences in the social backgrounds of Conservatives and Liberals. The landed gentry predominate; there are some Liberal industrialists in the later nineteenth century and a few small tradesmen, but only a handful of the mayors included had a humble background. It would have been useful if the authors could have drawn some general conclusions about the town's political elite, but the introductory essays are very short and relate almost entirely to the