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AudioBooks

**NON-
FICTION**

PHILOSOPHY



**Thomas
Paine**

Rights of Man

Read by
David Rintoul

NA487812D

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3	Rights of Man	7:53
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6	But there are many points of view...	8:19
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9	Lay then the axe to the root...	7:09
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11	During the latter part of the time...	6:35
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14	A constitution is not a thing in name only.	7:47
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17	Is it, then, any wonder...	7:58
18	The French Constitution has reformed...	7:52
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25	If government be what Mr Burke describes...	7:33
26	To account for this sudden transition...	7:40
27	As the present generation...	8:06
28	As the quantity of gold and silver...	7:17
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30	But in a well...	5:18
31	I. Men are born...	6:29
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36	Man, with respect to all those matters...	5:19
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40	Mr Burke is so little acquainted...	6:11
41	Much less could it when made hereditary.	6:03
42	Whether I have too little sense to see...	6:20

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Thomas Paine

Rights of Man

Thomas Paine was born on 29 January 1737 in Thetford, Norfolk. He was educated at the local grammar school but left aged thirteen to join his father, a Quaker who made stays (corsets) for a living. While still in his teens, Thomas ran away to sea and briefly served on board a privateer (as he relates in *Rights of Man*). After coming home, he went back to stay-making, married at twenty-two, and passed through a variety of occupations including exciseman and tobacconist. In 1774, after his business collapsed and a second marriage broke up, he sailed for America.

Thus far he had achieved nothing. But in a new country, and with a new profession, Paine found himself at last. He became a journalist, writing on subjects such as slavery, marriage, the British in India, aristocracy and – most importantly – the right of the American colonies to self-defence. *Common Sense*, an essay he

wrote in 1775, electrified opinion. Here was an Englishman ripping the august institution of hereditary monarchy into shreds, starting with the Norman conquest of 1066: 'A French bastard landing with an armed banditti, and establishing himself king of England against the consent of the natives, is in plain terms a very paltry rascally original.'

Paine was swiftly co-opted by the revolutionaries as propagandist; but a great polemicist does not necessarily make a good politician. Though he held office under the Continental Congress, Paine was prone to lapses in tact and discretion, and the art of accepting defeat with grace was unknown to him. Feeling sidelined and ill-used by the victors, he returned to England in 1787, where he was welcomed by the leading Whigs, including the substantial figure of Edmund Burke. Burke had been sympathetic to the cause of independence in America, which

he saw as a justifiable reaction against oppression. Home-grown revolution, however, was in his eyes plain treason, and in November 1790 his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* set out the case against it in full.

Burke was a magnificent writer, steeped in the tradition of classical oratory. But Paine's reply to the *Reflections*, though shorter and lacking its aristocratic style, was devastating. The first part of *Rights of Man* swiftly sold around 100,000 copies. Most alarming for the authorities, Paine was clearly addressing his arguments not to the small minority of the privileged and the highly educated – who could be trusted to ignore any call for a republic based on the consent of the people – but to the population at large. The language was plain and unadorned, its tone caustic and utterly devoid of the required reverence towards those in high places. When the second part appeared, the government took action. Paine was prosecuted and outlawed for seditious libel – a curious crime in today's terms, since the offending 'libel' was directed not against any person, but only the British constitution.

Paine fled to France, where the power of his name was enough to gain him immediate citizenship, and even election to the National Convention. But he was incapable of trimming to suit the prevailing wind, and in a debate on the fate of the deposed monarch Louis XVI, he stubbornly opposed an irresistible demand for the death penalty. To Paine this was a simple matter of principle: it was the institution that was evil, not the man. From that moment he was under suspicion, and by the end of 1793 he was in prison. 'My friends were falling as fast as the guillotine could cut their heads off', he wrote later in *The Age of Reason*. Why his own neck remained untouched is still something of a mystery.

It was Paine's fate to lack the easy sociability that, in combination with his achievements, would have allowed him to enjoy a position of honour wherever he went. Outlawed from Britain, and out of place in France under the rule of Napoleon, he returned to America in 1802 to find himself branded an atheist. The charge was inaccurate, but it stuck. In the land that he had helped to gain

independence, he was made to feel unwelcome, and denied the right to vote. Even after his death in 1809, recognition continued to elude him. The Englishman William Cobbett, a former critic turned admirer, became so fully converted to Paine's cause that he had his bones dug up and transported to England for reburial. But fate had decided otherwise – the bones unaccountably disappeared and were never found.

Paine's beliefs

No finer summary of Thomas Paine's political philosophy exists than these words, from the *Declaration of Independence* penned by his friend Thomas Jefferson:

We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with inherent and inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness: that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent

of the governed; that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it.

Paine's belief in a new dawn stemmed from his conviction that nothing can resist the advance of reason and knowledge. Unjust government relied upon keeping a subject people in a state of ignorance; once the notions of equality and natural rights were presented to them, enlightenment would surely triumph. 'Mankind are not now to be told they shall not think, or they shall not read.' On this question of the power of reason, Paine was completely at odds with Edmund Burke. The government of an old-established country such as France or England, reasoned Burke – unlike that of America – has developed slowly under a myriad of influences of which we can never be wholly aware. To destroy the product of such a complex process of evolution is folly, since human reason is not sufficient to design a satisfactory replacement. In a later age, Burke would

have found the pith of his argument contained in one simple piece of advice: if it ain't broke, don't fix it.

Paine came from lower down the economic scale than Burke, and he had more experience of the conditions under which the poorer part of the population – the vast majority – had to live. Their lot, he knew, would never improve until it was recognised that their rights were no less valid than those of the rich, who held a monopoly on power. A few years after *Rights of Man*, Paine wrote in *Agrarian Justice* that 'the most affluent and the most miserable of the human race are to be found in the countries that are called civilised.' For Burke, such a contrast between affluence and misery was part of the natural order of things, an inevitable fact of human life. For Paine, it was a simple injustice which reason, backed by the necessary resolution, would soon abolish.

Notes by Hugh Griffith



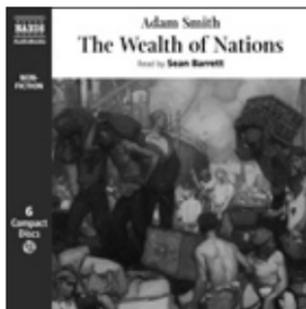
After Edinburgh University, David Rintoul went on a scholarship to RADA. Theatre work includes *Sergeant Ola and His Followers* and *Etta Jenks* at the Royal Court Theatre, *The Beaux Stratagem*, *Infidelities* and *The White Devil* at the Lyric, and *Richard II* and *Richard III* opposite Derek Jacobi at the Phoenix. His TV appearances include *Taggart*, *Poirot* and many others.

Cover picture: Justice holding scales

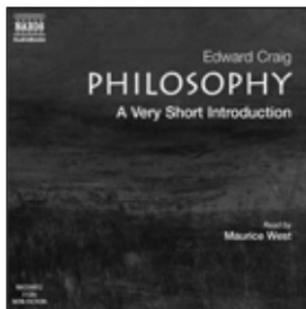
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Thomas Paine

Rights of Man

Read by **David Rintoul**

Written in 1791 as a response to Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* is a seminal work on human freedom and equality. Using the French Revolution and its ideals as an example, he demonstrates his belief that any government must put the inherent rights of its citizens above all else. So controversial was his argument, that after its publication, Paine left England for France and was tried in his absence for libel against the crown.



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