"Rights of Man" (1791) by Thomas Paine: A Canonical Pamphlet

Curated by Stephen A Batman

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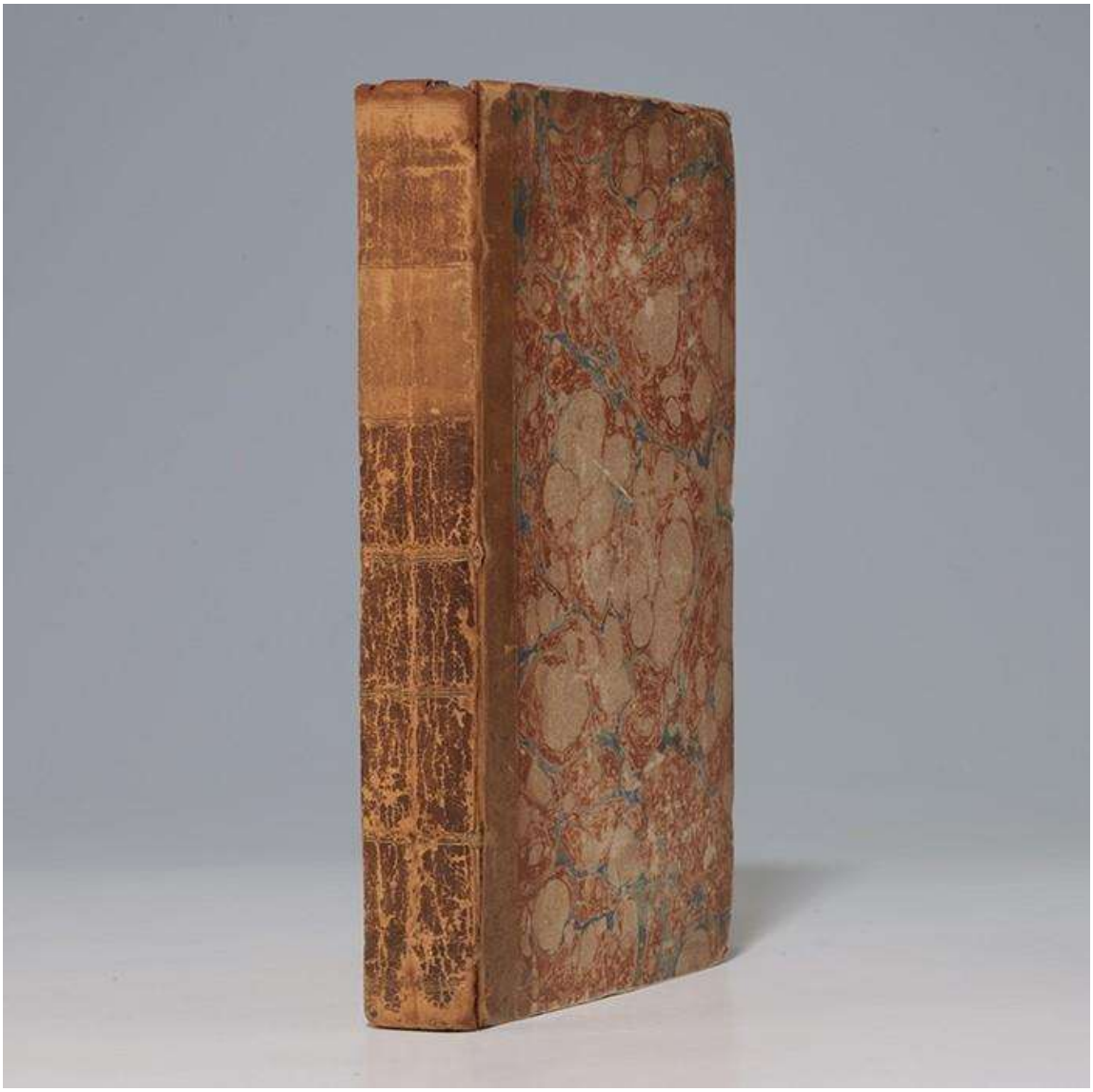
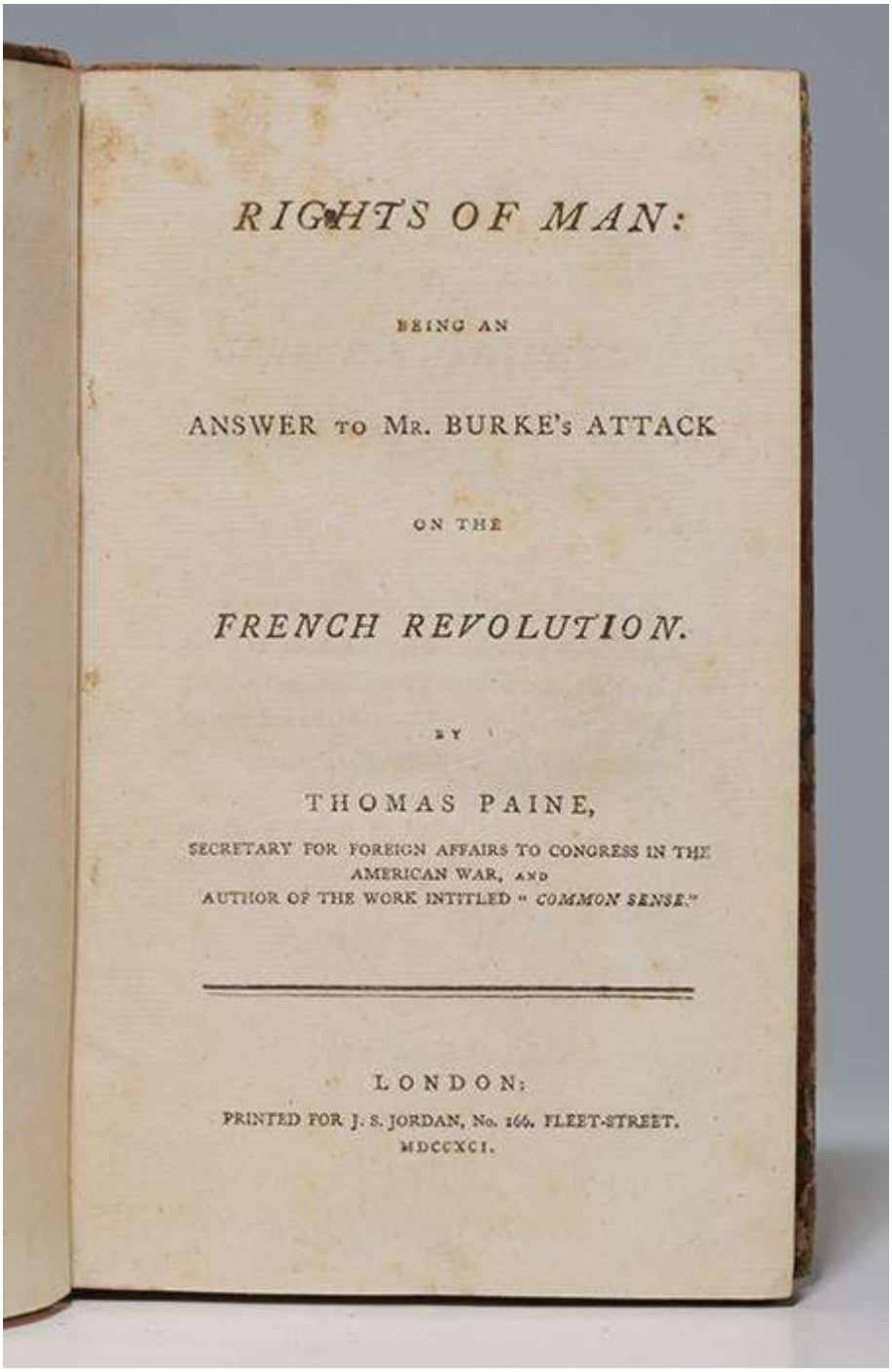
Summary of this Particular Rare First Edition

Thomas Paine, Rights of Man: Being an Answer to Mr. Burke's Attack on the French Revolution BOUND WITH Rights of Man, Part the Second, Combining Principle and Practice, 1791, 1792





RIGHTS OF MAN:

BEING AN

ANSWER TO MR. BURKE'S ATTACK

ON THE

FRENCH REVOLUTION.

BY

THOMAS PAINE,

SECRETARY FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS TO CONGRESS IN THE AMERICAN WAR, AND AUTHOR OF THE WORK INTITLED "*COMMON SENSE.*"

LONDON:

PRINTED FOR J. S. JORDAN, No. 166. FLEET-STREET.

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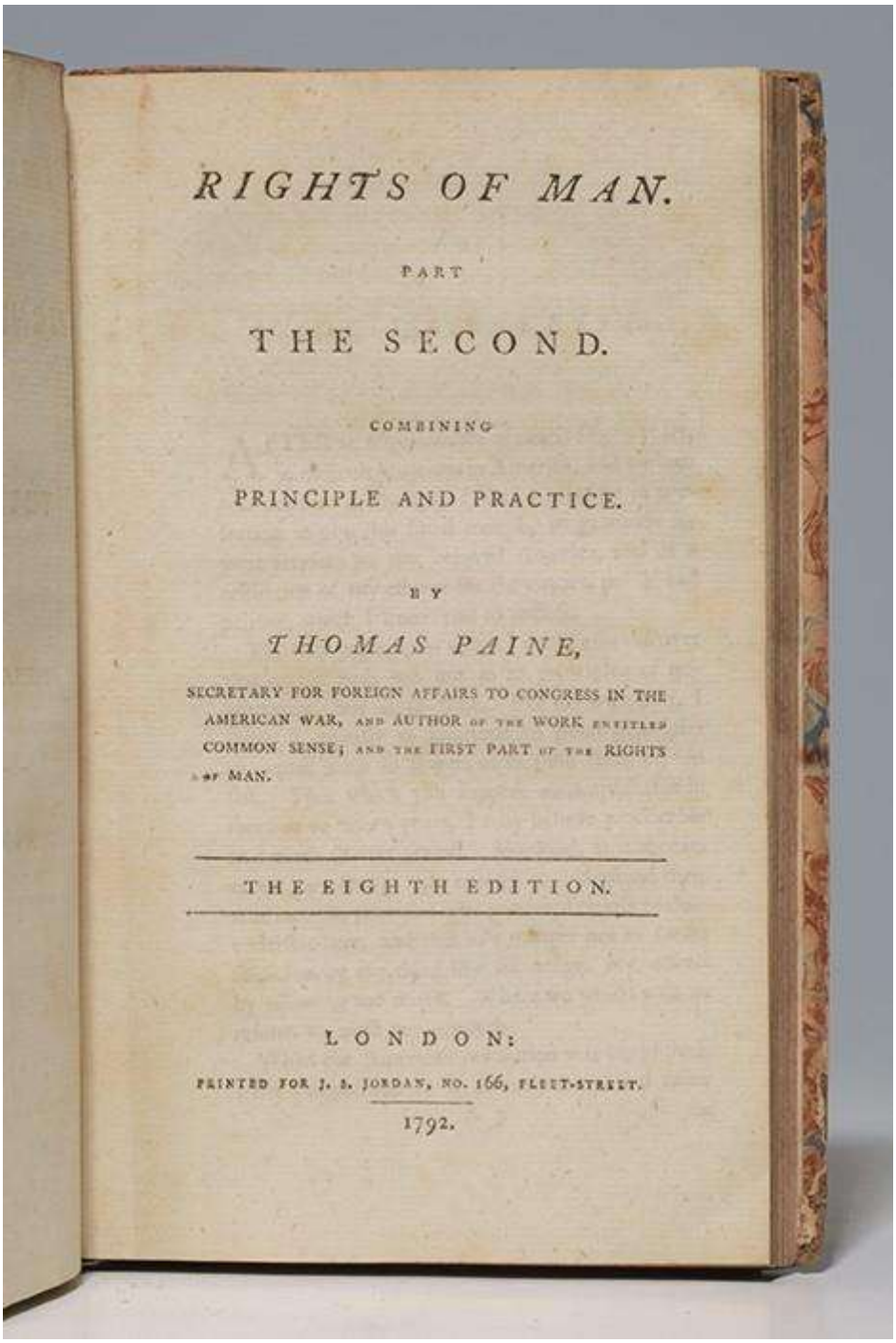

RIGHTS OF MAN.

PART

THE SECOND.

COMBINING

PRINCIPLE AND PRACTICE.

BY

THOMAS PAINE,

SECRETARY FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS TO CONGRESS IN THE AMERICAN WAR, AND AUTHOR OF THE WORK ENTITLED COMMON SENSE; AND THE FIRST PART OF THE RIGHTS OF MAN.

THE EIGHTH EDITION.

LONDON:

PRINTED FOR J. S. JORDAN, NO. 166, FLEET-STREET.

1792.

"THE CLEAREST OF ALL EXPOSITIONS OF THE BASIC PRINCIPLES OF DEMOCRACY" (PMM): PAINE'S *RIGHTS OF MAN*, PARTS I & II, 1791-1792, EXCEPTIONALLY RARE FIRST JORDAN EDITION, SECOND ISSUE OF PART I (1791), ISSUED LESS THAN MONTH AFTER THE SUPPRESSED & VIRTUALLY UNOBTAINABLE JOHNSON EDITION, TOGETHER IN ONE VOLUME WITH THE RARE EIGHTH EDITION, FIRST ISSUE OF PART II (1792), ISSUED SAME YEAR AS FIRST, WHERE PAINE "FULLY DEVELOPED HIS GREAT POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY"

Extremely rare editions of both parts of Paine's revolutionary classic Rights of Man. The exceptionally rare and desirable first edition, second issue of Part I, consisting of the text sheets from the famous suppressed first issue printed by Paine's original publisher, Joseph Johnson (withdrawn by him on the day of publication because of British government intimidation), which were rescued by Paine and his friends, and the new title page and preface printed by Paine's new publisher, J.S. Jordan; bound together with the eighth edition of Part II.

Rights of Man, issued same year as its first edition, one of Paine's most important, influential, and best-selling works—"the clearest of all expositions on the basic principles of democracy" (PMM) and "one of the most ardent and clear defenses of human rights, liberty, and equality in any language" (Fruchtman)—Paine hoped the work "would do for England what his Common Sense had done for America" (Gimbel), but it resulted in the prosecution of Paine, his publishers and booksellers, and forced Paine to flee to France. Especially rare in contemporary half calf and marbled boards.

Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* "appeared November 1, 1790. Paine read the book the day after it was published, and a few days later he began work on his refutation–destined to become the most important essay on political democracy of that era" (Fast). "The publishing history of the [first part of *Rights of Man*] is of interest.... as showing how fragile the right to dissent was in those years. Having completed Part One on his 54th birthday, 29 January 1791, Paine made haste to take the manuscript to a printer named Joseph Johnson. The proposed publication deadline, 22 February, was intended to coincide with the opening of Parliament and the birthday of George Washington [to whom Paine dedicated the work].

Johnson was a man of some nerve and principle, as he had demonstrated by printing several radical replies to Burke (including the one by Mary Wollstonecraft) but he took fright after several heavy-footed visits from William Pitt's political police" (Hitchens, 51-52).

"Johnson was visited repeatedly by government agents... Fearing the book police, and unnerved by the prospect of arrest and bankruptcy, Johnson suppressed the book on the very day of its scheduled publication.

Alarmed by the prospect that the work would be stillborn, Paine reacted fast. He agreed to a deal with another publisher, J.S. Jordan on Fleet Street, and with the help of friends and a horse and cart delivered to him Johnson's printed, unbound sheets.

Paine scurried around for money to pay for the work… [and] managed to borrow 40 pounds… He then packed his trunk for Paris, where he planned to arrange a French translation, and entrusted final arrangements with the London publisher to three good friends, William Godwin, Thomas Brand Hollis, and Thomas Holcroft.

Prior to leaving, Paine passed on several bound copies of the original Johnson edition into private hands, but only a few of these have survived" (Keane, 304-5).

Jordan took Johnson's unbound sheets of the text and added a new title page with Jordan's imprint and a preface that Paine sent him from Paris. Jordan published his edition (this first edition, second issue) on March 13, 1791, and it sold out in hours.

It's not known how many copies of this issue Jordan published using Johnson's sheets, but it was likely only in the hundreds of copies, as "the print run of most of Johnson's publications was 750 copies… [and] many of his political and religious tracts were printed in runs of 250 copies, the minimum print run, with successive printings as needed" (Chard, 144).

"Curiosity and word-of-mouth advertising kept sales brisk. Jordan had set a new edition in type [his stated "second edition," with different pagination] during Paine's absence from London and had it on the market [on March 16] three days after the first appeared. It sold out within a few hours" (Hawke, 223-4).

"Not even Paine could have imagined… that *Rights of Man* was destined to become one of the best-selling books in the history of publishing… *Rights of Man* broke every extant publishing record.

To put the figures in perspective, at this time the average printing of an edition was about 1,250 copies for a novel, and around 750 for more general works such as pamphlets, sermons, and calendars…. *Rights of Man* sold over 50,000 copies in under three months.

While Paine's claim that sales of the complete edition in Britain reached 'between four and five hundred thousand' copies within ten years of publication might well be exaggerated, as perhaps is E.P. Thompson's claim that it was the most widely read book of all time, in any language, its impact was indisputably phenomenal" (Grogan, 18).

In January 1792 Paine finished the second part of *Rights of Man* but had difficulty getting it published. Johnson and Jordan both refused to allow their names on the title page, though they agreed to sell it in their bookshops. "Johnson had been told by a friend who had read the unfinished manuscript that 'if you wish to be hanged or inured in a prison all your life, publish this book.'"

Thomas Chapman agreed to print it but never finished, as when he began to read the proof pages, he became frightened that the work was seditious. Within a week Paine found someone else to finish the printing. "Johnson now agreed to help underwrite publication costs in return for the right to sell part of the first printing, and Jordan, reversing his earlier stand, allowed his name to appear on the title page as publisher for a similar right. To protect both men in case the

government decided to prosecute the work as seditious, Paine signed a statement that he alone was both the 'author and publisher of that work.'"

The second part of *Rights of Man* was published by Jordan "on 16 February 1792, priced at three shillings, with a first printing of 5000 copies. Within two weeks the book had gone through four printings. The greatest best seller thus far in English history had been launched" (Hawke, 238-40).

"While the first part of *Rights of Man* was relatively mild… *Part the Second* fully developed his great political philosophy" (Gimbel-Yale 66). Written "with a force and clarity unequalled even by Burke, Paine laid down those principles of fundamental human rights which must stand, no matter what excesses are committed to obtain them… *Rights of Man* was an immediate success… The government tried to suppress it, but it circulated the more briskly.

Those who bought it as the work of an inflamed revolutionary were surprised by its dignity and moderation: even Pitt could say that he was quite in the right—'but what am I to do? As things are, if I were to encourage Tom Paine's opinions, we should have a bloody revolution'… [*Rights of Man* is] the textbook of radical thought and the clearest of all expositions of the basic principles of democracy" (PMM 241).

"Paine's attack on the monarchy went farther than he had attempted on *Common Sense* or the *Crisis* series… *Rights of Man* was one of the most ardent and clear defenses of human rights, liberty and equality in any language…For Paine, human rights were part of life itself… The rights of man were inherent in all men, and they were the same in every person, regardless of economic or social status…

Like Locke, Paine wrote that people have rights naturally, and as they joined together to form society and then government, they transformed a number of their natural rights into civil rights… Rights of free speech, opinion, conscience, association (in America those rights became embodied in the first amendment to the Constitution in the same year the first part of the *Rights of Man* appeared) were all part of the natural rights which a properly constituted government must protect" (Fruchtman, 225).

The British government considered prosecuting Paine for sedition shortly after the publication of Part I but decided against it at the time because "Paine had tempered argument and language so skillfully that it would be hard to make a charge of sedition stick in court. To prosecute would provide free advertising. Also, it could lead to embarrassment; the book was dedicated to the president of the United States, with whom the government now wanted to have good relations" (Hawke, 223-4).

But in 1792, after the publication of the more incendiary Part II and the rapid spread of both parts, the British government took action against Paine, his publishers, and booksellers. On May 21, 1792, Pitt's government issued a proclamation against "wicked and seditious writings," designed to suppress Paine's book. "Bookshops selling *Rights of Man* were visited and harassed by agents of the book police, and sometimes arrested, prosecuted, fined, or imprisoned."

Jordan was arrested in May 1792 for publishing Part II and pleaded guilty, and many "booksellers were imprisoned, some for as long as for two years, for selling *Rights of Man*" (St. Clair, 624). On that same date, the Pitt government issued a summons for Paine "to appear in court… on charges of seditious libel.

The summons… appeared to signal the government's desire to get its hands on the throat of political dissent, but in retrospect it was designed to force Paine into exile. The authorities reasoned that a midsummer show trial was too risky, in that it might antagonize the democratic opposition to the point of taking openly revolutionary action. The public execution or transportation of Paine might spark the same explosion—as would his transformation into a martyr by long-term imprisonment on English soil" (Keane 334-7).

Paine at first refused to leave, but as the threats to his life increased, eventually fled to France. "Paine was in France, sitting as a member of the French National Convention, which was acting as a jury in the trial of Louis XVI, King of France, when his own trial as the author of seditious literature (Part II of *Rights of Man*) began in London on December 18, 1792.

Despite the brilliance of Paine's attorney, Thomas Erskine, Paine was found guilty, declared an outlaw, and *Rights of Man* contraband" (Gimbel-Yale, 425).

The first issue of Part I (with Johnson's title page imprint) is historically so rare that it has been considered virtually unacquirable; this is the earliest obtainable edition. First edition, second issue of *Rights of Man* (Part I), the first to contain Jordan's title page imprint and Paine's "Preface to the English Edition"; variant a with press figures: 38-[none], 42-4 (Gimbel-Paine, 88).

With dedication to George Washington. The eighth edition of Part the Second was issued the same year as its first edition. With dedication to M. de La Fayette dated "London, Feb. 9, 1792." Part I bound without half title; Part II with half title, without rear advertisement leaf.

Rights of Man: ESTC N13086. Gimbel-Paine, 88 and 97. Howes P31. Gimbel-Yale 59. *Part the Second*: ESTC T5885. Gimbel-Paine, 105-106, Sowerby 2826. Howes P32.

PAINE, Thomas. Rights of Man: Being an Answer to Mr. Burke's Attack on the French Revolution. By Thomas Paine, Secretary for Foreign Affairs to Congress in the American War, And Author of the Work Intitled "Common Sense." BOUND WITH: Rights of Man. Part the Second. Combining Principle and Practice. London: Printed for J.S. Jordan, 1791, 1792. Octavo, contemporary half brown calf and marbled boards; pp.[iii-vii], viii-x, [5], 6-162; [i-v], vi, [vii], viii-xv, [xvi], [1], 2-174, [175], 176-178. Housed in a custom chemise and clamshell box.

Text very fresh with lightest scattered foxing, mild rubbing to boards and spine, without spine label. A handsome extremely good copy, most desirable in a contemporary binding.

Introduction

Thomas Paine's "Rights of Man" stands as one of the most influential political pamphlets ever written, published in two parts in 1791 and 1792 during the tumultuous period of the French

Revolution. The work emerged as a direct response to Edmund Burke's "Reflections on the Revolution in France" (1790), a conservative critique that strongly appealed to the landed class and sold 30,000 copies. Burke's counterrevolutionary blast against the French Revolution prompted Paine to craft a thorough refutation, not as a quick pamphlet but as a substantial political tract of 90,000 words that systematically dismantled monarchies and traditional social institutions[1].

The cultural and political climate surrounding the publication of "Rights of Man" was characterized by revolutionary fervor. The American Revolution had recently concluded, and the French Revolution was in full swing. Paine, having been involved in the American independence movement, was deeply influenced by Enlightenment ideas of freedom, equality, and democracy. Born to a poor family in Norfolk, England, Paine had firsthand knowledge of the hardships experienced by the underclass, which fueled his passion for democratic reform[2].

The publication process of "Rights of Man" was not without drama. On January 31, 1791, Paine gave the manuscript to publisher Joseph Johnson, but a visit from government agents dissuaded Johnson from publishing it. Paine then entrusted the book to publisher J.S. Jordan before departing for Paris on William Blake's advice, leaving three friends—William Godwin, Thomas Brand Hollis, and Thomas Holcroft—to handle the publication details. The book appeared on March 13, 1791, and achieved remarkable commercial success, selling nearly a million copies[1].

The economic and political environment in which "Rights of Man" emerged was characterized by stark inequality. The British working class was struggling under harsh conditions during the early stages of the Industrial Revolution, while the aristocracy maintained its privileges. Paine's work resonated deeply with the underclass, as it defended the principles of the French Revolution, with its calls for representative democracy and focus on the needs of the poor[2].

The Author

Thomas Paine was born as Thomas Pain on February 9, 1737, in Thetford, Norfolk, England. The son of a Quaker father and an Anglican mother, Paine received only seven years of formal education at the Thetford Grammar School before taking his education into his own hands[411]. Despite his limited formal schooling, Paine was committed to self-education throughout his life, attending lectures on Newtonian physics and purchasing books and scientific apparatus despite his meager earnings. He often remarked, "I seldom passed five minutes of my life, however circumstanced, in which I did not acquire some knowledge"[4].

Paine's early career in England included working as an excise officer, a position that exposed him to the corruption of British politics and inspired him to write "The Case of the Officers of Excise" in 1772, a pamphlet criticizing his working conditions. After being dismissed for requesting a raise on behalf of his fellow excisemen, Paine left England for North America in October 1772[2].

In America, Paine quickly became involved in the independence movement. In 1775, as editor of The Pennsylvania Journal, he published "African Slavery in America," calling for the abolition of slavery in the colonies. His most significant contribution to the American Revolution came in

the form of "Common Sense" (1776), a 47-page pamphlet that catalyzed the call for independence from Great Britain and was read by virtually every American Patriot[111]. This was followed by "The American Crisis" (1776-1783), a series of pamphlets that provided crucial morale to the revolutionary army during its darkest hours. From this work came the famous phrase, "These are the times that try men's souls"[4].

After the American Revolution, Paine returned to Europe in 1787 and became deeply involved in the French Revolution. It was during this period that he wrote "Rights of Man" (1791-1792), which defended the principles of the French Revolution against Burke's criticisms. The book's popularity in Britain led to Paine being charged with seditious libel. He was tried in absentia and found guilty, effectively forcing him into exile[1].

Paine's later works included "The Age of Reason" (1794-1795), a controversial treatise criticizing the supernatural aspects of Christianity and pointing out contradictions in the Bible, and "Letter to George Washington" (1796), in which he criticized Washington and other prominent political figures. These publications damaged his reputation in the United States, which never fully recovered[11].

Thomas Paine died on June 8, 1809, in New York City. Despite his significant contributions to both the American and French Revolutions, Paine has yet to receive his due homage from the peoples and nations of the world. He was a true revolutionary and cosmopolitan whose passion for freedom and distaste for injustice is apparent in everything he wrote[4].

Why this is a Canonical Book

"Rights of Man" must be included in the canon of books containing major ideas that reflect elements of America's politics, governance, economics, and culture for several compelling reasons. First and foremost, Paine's work articulates fundamental principles that underpin American democracy. Building on John Locke and others, Paine argues that the rights of individuals originate in human nature and that governments exist to protect those rights[10]. This conception of natural rights and limited government directly influenced the development of American political thought and constitutional principles.

The pamphlet's defense of representative democracy and rejection of hereditary privilege aligns perfectly with America's founding ideals. Paine argues that democracy is incompatible with primogeniture, which leads to the "despotism of the family"[12]. This rejection of aristocracy and emphasis on equality resonates deeply with America's rejection of European class systems and the establishment of a republic based on the consent of the governed.

Paine's work also proposes practical governmental reforms that would later find expression in American governance. He advocates for a written constitution composed by a national assembly, a national budget without allotted military and war expenses, lower taxes for the poor, subsidized education, and a progressive income tax weighted against wealthy estates to prevent the re-emergence of a hereditary aristocracy[12]. Many of these ideas would eventually be implemented in American governance, demonstrating the lasting influence of Paine's political philosophy.

Furthermore, "Rights of Man" articulates a vision of social justice that continues to inform American debates about the role of government in addressing inequality. Paine argues that civil government should make "provision for the instruction of youth and the support of age, as to exclude, as much as possible, profligacy from the one and despair from the other"13. This conception of government as an instrument for promoting the general welfare has been a persistent theme in American political discourse.

Perhaps most importantly, "Rights of Man" exemplifies the power of political pamphlets in shaping public opinion and driving social change. Just as "Common Sense" galvanized support for American independence, "Rights of Man" inspired countless workers to fight for their rights2. This tradition of using accessible political writing to mobilize popular support for reform is a vital part of America's political culture.

In sum, "Rights of Man" deserves canonical status because it articulates fundamental principles of American governance, proposes practical reforms that would influence American institutions, advances a vision of social justice that continues to resonate, and exemplifies the power of political writing to shape public opinion and drive social change.

Five Timeless Quotes

1. "Whatever is my right as a man is also the right of another; and it becomes my duty to guarantee as well as to possess."1314

This profound statement encapsulates Paine's conception of universal human rights and the reciprocal obligations they entail. It suggests that rights are not merely individual entitlements but create a moral duty to ensure others can exercise those same rights. In our current times, this quote remains extraordinarily relevant as societies grapple with issues of equality, discrimination, and social justice. It reminds us that recognizing the equal rights of all people is not just a matter of abstract principle but requires active commitment to protecting those rights for others. This perspective informs modern human rights movements, anti-discrimination laws, and international humanitarian efforts, making it a foundational idea for contemporary discussions about social responsibility and global citizenship.

2. "Independence is my happiness, and I view things as they are, without regard to place or person; my country is the world, and my religion is to do good."13

This quote reflects Paine's cosmopolitan worldview and his commitment to universal principles rather than narrow nationalism or sectarian religion. Today, as we face global challenges like climate change, pandemics, and economic inequality that transcend national boundaries, Paine's global perspective offers a valuable framework. His emphasis on doing good as a universal moral principle provides a common ground that can unite people across cultural and religious divides. This quote challenges us to think beyond our immediate communities and consider our responsibilities to humanity as a whole, making it particularly relevant in our interconnected global society.

3. "When it shall be said in any country in the world my poor are happy; neither ignorance nor distress is to be found among them; my jails are empty of prisoners, my streets of beggars; the aged are not in want; the taxes are not oppressive; the rational world is my friend, because I am a friend of its happiness: When these things can be said, there may that country boast its Constitution and its Government."[13]

This quote establishes a powerful standard for evaluating governments based on their ability to secure the welfare of all citizens, particularly the most vulnerable. In our current era of growing economic inequality, this perspective challenges us to look beyond traditional metrics like GDP growth to consider how effectively our social and economic systems serve the needs of the poor, the elderly, and the marginalized. It suggests that the true measure of a society's success lies not in its wealth or power but in its ability to ensure that no one is left behind. This perspective informs contemporary debates about social safety nets, healthcare access, educational opportunity, and criminal justice reform.

4. "The World is my country, all mankind are my brethren, and to do good is my religion."[13]

This variation of Paine's cosmopolitan creed emphasizes the unity of humanity and the moral imperative to act for the common good. In our increasingly diverse and multicultural societies, this perspective offers a powerful antidote to xenophobia, nationalism, and religious intolerance. It suggests that our moral obligations extend to all people, regardless of nationality, ethnicity, or faith. This universalist ethic informs contemporary movements for global justice, international cooperation, and interfaith dialogue. It challenges us to recognize our common humanity and work together to address shared challenges, making it particularly relevant in an age of global interdependence.

5. "Man did not enter into society to become worse than he was before, nor to have fewer rights than he had before, but to have those rights better secured."[13]

This quote articulates a fundamental principle of social contract theory that continues to inform debates about the proper role of government. It suggests that the purpose of political institutions is not to limit or suppress individual rights but to protect and enhance them. In our current political climate, where tensions between individual liberty and collective security are often at the forefront of public debate, this perspective offers a valuable framework for evaluating government actions. It reminds us that restrictions on freedom must be justified by their contribution to securing rights, not by appeals to tradition, authority, or expediency. This principle informs contemporary discussions about privacy rights, civil liberties, and the limits of state power.

Five Major Ideas

1. **Natural Rights and the Social Contract**

A central theme in "Rights of Man" is the concept of natural rights inherent to all individuals. Paine argues that human rights originate in nature and cannot be granted or revoked by political

charters or governments[9][12]. He writes, "Rights are inherently in all the inhabitants; but charters, by annulling those rights, in the majority, leave the right, by exclusion, in the hands of a few"[12]. This perspective leads Paine to articulate a social contract theory in which government arises from individuals entering into a contract with each other, not from divine right or historical precedent. He asserts that "the individuals, themselves, each, in his own personal and sovereign right, entered into a contract with each other to produce a government: and this is the only mode in which governments have a right to arise, and the only principle on which they have a right to exist"[12]. This conception of natural rights and the social contract forms the philosophical foundation for Paine's critique of traditional political institutions and his vision of democratic governance.

2. **Critique of Hereditary Monarchy and Aristocracy**

Paine delivers a scathing critique of hereditary systems of government, particularly monarchy and aristocracy. He rejects the authority of traditional structures of society such as aristocracy as unjustifiable privilege[10]. Paine argues that democracy is incompatible with primogeniture, which leads to the "despotism of the family"[12]. This critique extends to the notion that particular genetic dispositions make for great leaders, which he sees as the foundation of aristocratic systems that can turn tyrannical due to the guaranteed license to leadership[14]. Paine's rejection of hereditary rule is rooted in his belief in human equality: "Every child born in the world must be considered as deriving its existence from God. The world is this new to him as it was to the first that existed, and his natural right in it is of the same kind"[13][14]. This democratic perspective challenges the legitimacy of any system that grants special privileges based on birth rather than merit or popular consent.

3. **Representative Democracy and Popular Sovereignty**

In contrast to hereditary systems, Paine advocates for representative democracy based on popular sovereignty. He argues that France's revolution was justified and right because it established a government elected by and accountable to its citizens[8]. Paine distinguishes between society and government, arguing that the former arises naturally from human needs while the latter is a human invention that should serve the people's interests[7]. He emphasizes that true representation requires that elected officials remain accountable to the people and do not possess unlimited powers: "It is not because a part of the government is elective, that makes it less a despotism, if the persons so elected possess afterwards, as a parliament, unlimited powers. Election, in this case, becomes separated from representation, and the candidates are candidates for despotism"[13]. This conception of democracy as requiring both popular election and ongoing accountability to the people remains a vital principle in democratic theory.

4. **Social Justice and Economic Reform**

Paine goes beyond political reform to advocate for social and economic measures to address poverty and inequality. He proposes practical reforms including a progressive income tax weighted against wealthy estates, lower taxes for the poor, and subsidized education[12]. Paine argues that civil government should make "provision for the instruction of youth and the support of age, as to exclude, as much as possible, profligacy from the one and despair from the

other"13. He connects poverty and crime, noting that "When in countries that are called civilized, we see age going to the workhouse and youth to the gallows, something must be wrong in the system of government"13. This perspective challenges governments to address the root causes of social problems rather than merely punishing their symptoms. Paine's vision of social justice includes redirecting resources from monarchs, courts, and military expenditures toward meeting the needs of ordinary citizens, anticipating modern welfare states.

5. **Cosmopolitanism and Universal Brotherhood**

Throughout "Rights of Man," Paine articulates a cosmopolitan worldview that transcends national boundaries and sectarian divisions. His famous declaration, "My country is the world, and my religion is to do good"13, reflects his commitment to universal principles rather than narrow nationalism or religious dogma. Paine extends this universalism to religious tolerance, writing, "But with respect to religion itself, without regard to names, and as directing itself from the universal family of mankind to the divine object of adoration, it is man bringing to his maker the fruits of his heart; and though these fruits may differ from each other like the fruits of the earth, the grateful tribute of everyone is accepted"13. This cosmopolitan perspective challenges the divisive nationalism and religious intolerance of his time and offers a vision of human unity based on shared moral principles rather than shared identities. Paine's global citizenship and universal ethics anticipate contemporary discussions about global justice and human rights.

Three Major Controversies

1. **Challenge to Traditional Authority and Social Order**

"Rights of Man" provoked intense controversy by directly challenging the legitimacy of traditional political and social hierarchies. Paine's assertion that rights originate in nature rather than from governmental charters or historical precedent undermined the foundations of monarchical and aristocratic authority12. His critique of hereditary privilege and advocacy for representative democracy threatened the established social order in Britain and other European monarchies. The British government responded with a fierce campaign to discredit Paine, including indictments for seditious libel against both the publisher and author. Government agents followed Paine and instigated mobs, hate meetings, and burnings in effigy1. A pamphlet war erupted, with Paine being defended and assailed in dozens of works. The authorities ultimately succeeded in forcing Paine out of Great Britain, and he was tried in absentia and found guilty of seditious libel1. This controversy reflects the profound threat that Paine's ideas posed to established power structures and the lengths to which those structures would go to suppress challenges to their legitimacy.

2. **Radical Economic and Social Reforms**

Paine's proposals for economic and social reforms were considered radical and dangerous by many of his contemporaries. His advocacy for progressive taxation, public education, and support for the elderly and poor challenged the prevailing laissez-faire economic orthodoxy and limited conception of government responsibility12. Paine's critique of excessive military spending and his suggestion that "taxes are not raised to carry on wars, but that wars are raised to

carry on taxes"[13] threatened powerful military and financial interests. His observation that "We still find the greedy hand of government thrusting itself into every corner and crevice of industry and grasping at the spoil of the multitude"[13] resonated with ordinary people but alarmed economic elites. These economic and social proposals were seen by conservatives as promoting class warfare and undermining the natural economic order. The controversy over these ideas reflected deeper disagreements about the proper role of government in addressing inequality and the extent to which economic arrangements should be subject to democratic control.

3. **Support for Revolutionary Change**

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of "Rights of Man" was its explicit support for revolutionary political change. Published during the French Revolution, Paine's work defended the principles of that revolution against Burke's criticisms and implicitly encouraged similar democratic movements in Britain and elsewhere[28]. Paine argues that "when the tongue or the pen is let loose in a frenzy of passion, it is the man, and not the subject, that becomes exhausted"[13], suggesting that passionate advocacy for change is justified. His statement that "To reason with governments, as they have existed for ages, is to argue with brutes. It is only from the nations themselves that reforms can be expected"[13] could be interpreted as endorsing popular uprisings against established governments. In the context of the French Revolution's increasing radicalization and violence, Paine's support for revolutionary principles was seen by many as dangerous and destabilizing. The controversy over his revolutionary sympathies reflected broader anxieties about rapid social change and the potential for democratic movements to descend into chaos and violence, concerns that continue to shape debates about political change today.

In Closing

Civic-minded Americans should read "Rights of Man" because it offers a profound exploration of the principles that underpin our democratic system and the challenges involved in realizing those principles in practice. Paine's work is not merely a historical artifact but a living document that continues to speak to contemporary issues of governance, rights, and social justice.

First, "Rights of Man" provides a clear articulation of natural rights philosophy that influenced America's founding documents. By understanding Paine's arguments about the origin and nature of rights, citizens can better appreciate the philosophical foundations of American democracy and evaluate current policies and practices against these foundational principles. Paine's assertion that "Whatever is my right as a man is also the right of another; and it becomes my duty to guarantee as well as to possess"[1314] reminds us that rights entail responsibilities and that democracy requires active citizenship.

Second, Paine's critique of hereditary privilege and advocacy for representative government offers valuable insights into the distinctive character of American democracy. His arguments against monarchy and aristocracy help clarify why the founders rejected these systems and chose instead to establish a republic based on popular sovereignty. In an era when democratic norms are sometimes taken for granted or even challenged, Paine's passionate defense of democratic principles can reinvigorate our commitment to representative government.

Third, "Rights of Man" addresses perennial questions about the proper role of government in addressing social and economic inequality. Paine's proposals for progressive taxation, public education, and support for the vulnerable anticipate modern debates about the welfare state and economic justice. His vision of a government that actively promotes the general welfare while respecting individual rights offers a nuanced perspective that transcends simplistic dichotomies between "big" and "small" government.

Fourth, Paine's cosmopolitan worldview and commitment to universal principles provide a valuable counterpoint to narrow nationalism. His famous declaration that "My country is the world, and my religion is to do good"13 reminds us that patriotism need not conflict with global citizenship and that America's ideals have universal significance. This perspective can help citizens navigate the complex relationship between national identity and global responsibility in an interconnected world.

Finally, Paine's accessible writing style and passionate advocacy demonstrate the power of political discourse to shape public opinion and drive social change. In an age of information overload and political cynicism, "Rights of Man" reminds us that clear, principled arguments can cut through confusion and inspire action. Paine's work sold nearly a million copies in his lifetime, reaching ordinary citizens and influencing public debate in ways that few political treatises have matched. This legacy of effective political communication offers valuable lessons for contemporary civic engagement.

Reading "Rights of Man" also provides insight into Paine's practical proposals for social welfare, which were remarkably progressive for his time. He argued that welfare is not charity but an irrevocable right, stating that "Man did not enter into society to become worse than he was before, nor to have fewer rights than he had before, but to have those rights better secured"2. His welfare proposals included education reform, progressive taxation, and assistance for the young, elderly, and struggling individuals2. These ideas anticipate modern debates about social safety nets and economic justice.

Paine's critique of war and militarism also remains relevant today. He argued that representative democracies reduce the possibility of war and that money saved by reducing military expenditures could be redirected to help those in need4. His vision of international cooperation—suggesting an alliance between America, France, and Britain to preserve global peace5—offers a compelling alternative to nationalist isolationism.

In conclusion, "Rights of Man" is not merely a historical document but a living text that continues to illuminate contemporary political challenges. Its defense of natural rights, representative democracy, social welfare, and international cooperation provides a comprehensive vision of democratic governance that remains inspiring and instructive. By engaging with Paine's arguments, civic-minded Americans can deepen their understanding of democratic principles, sharpen their critical thinking about current policies, and draw inspiration for their own civic engagement. In a time of political polarization and democratic fragility, Paine's passionate defense of human rights and democratic governance offers a powerful reminder of what is at stake and what is possible.

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