5 Doubts (1791)

The first part of *Rights of Man* resonated throughout London. It was wonderful to hear politically informed talk but as the days wore on through the spring and early summer of '91, Jeremiah experienced a growing and burdensome feeling of responsibility that he hadn't bargained for. He wasn't solely responsible. Tom Paine was the author, not him, but the increasing anger and confrontation he encountered was, he recognised, undeniably partly his doing. He had assumed that a political tract like Paine's would educate people. He had assumed that it would give them ways of articulating their experience and enable them to demand what was rightfully theirs – freedom to worship according to conscience and a proper share in government. These were rational goals that would surely lead to a better and fairer society. Yet many of the effects of Paine's book seemed to be leading in the very opposite direction.

The newspaper seller he bought his daily papers from, some of the shopmen he shared pleasantries with, even Stanhope's coachman who was always so willing to put himself out, turned into vengeful monsters when it came to Tom Paine. Instead of weighing up the rights and wrongs of Paine's argument that was, in any case offered in the spirit of helping them, they accused him and anybody who entertained his ideas, of being self-serving, wicked destroyers of all things precious. They configured Paine as a demonic manipulator intent on duping everybody and it didn't seem that any amount of rational discussion could change their minds. If he tried to defend or at least get them to think about what Paine was saying, his effort seemed to provoke them to close their minds to anything that failed to celebrate their own prejudices. He learnt the hard way that open discussion about Tom Paine nearly always ended badly.

Thankfully, not everyone reacted defensively although those that liked what Paine said, also learned to keep quiet about it. He tried to understand why there were such extremely different responses and it seemed to him that the key factor was one of personal temperament. Those that responded negatively to Paine did so very loudly and with the same pattern of argument. They would state that life was about winning and losing and the fact that some won and most lost reflected the natural order of things which could not be changed. This, they thought, made it obvious that Paine was fundamentally wrong and pursuing an evil ulterior motive. At the opposite extreme, those that responded favourably did so, or so it seemed to Jeremiah, in a considered, measured and generous way.

Paine's book served to confirm something about the way people already looked at life. For those that didn't like him, his ideas contradicted the world they lived in. For those that did like him, his ideas explained the world they lived in. Yet for these, whilst Paine provided a new language, he wasn't really teaching them anything they didn't already know. They already knew society was built on the self-interest of the lucky few and they knew it in their bones. It seemed to Jeremiah that the key marker of whether somebody liked Tom Paine's ideas was whether they believed it possible for the pattern of social life to change and whether or not they felt they could embrace that change.

This insight brought Jeremiah a small degree of solace. Once again he remembered that many of the truths about humanity lie beyond the cerebral and that it is through people's hearts and their inner religious world that they really connect with life. Somehow those that reacted negatively to Paine had closed themselves off from an inner domain of truth that allowed them to see beyond the arbitrary domain of social arrangements. They had mistaken their experience, which was indeed brutal and unfair, for a final and inevitable state of affairs, when actually it could be changed for the better. It was possible, he told himself, for the inner to direct the outer.

He had always imagined his efforts would contribute to positive development of events in the world but at the end of July very little

seemed positive. Richard Price, who was the architect of his current position, had recently died and whilst his relationship with Price had become strained through the compromises of his work with Stanhope, his memories of him were of a warm, caring and very genuine man who had helped him enormously. Price's death left a big gap in the reform movement in general because, despite occasionally letting his enthusiasms get the better of him, he exerted a powerful human morality that counterbalanced Joseph Priestley's strident insistence on logic and reason and scientific facts.

Worse was to come. In June the King of France tried to escape from Paris but was caught at Varennes and brought back to Paris in humiliation. This event proclaimed to the rest of Europe that the King was actually a prisoner and an awful logic began to appear. It was possible, if not inevitable, that the National Assembly would dispose of their king in the same brutal way that Cromwell had disposed of Charles I. It was precisely this track of events that Edmund Burke was foretelling. If you remove traditional order, Burke argued, anarchy will surely follow and what could be more anarchic than the death of a king. Whilst Jeremiah didn't want to admit it, real events now pointed to the possibility that Burke might be right.

Worst of all, the Bastille Day celebrations were conducted under a simmering cloud of anti-French, anti-reform and anti-dissent feeling. The organisers banned political speeches in the interests of minimising negative press but the celebrations provoked seriously threatening reactions across the country. Effigies of Paine and Priestley were burnt in the streets and when an ugly mob turned on Priestley's house in Birmingham, Priestley and his family had to flee across the rooftops. The situation had become one of direct and physical threat to reformers that brought Jeremiah personal fears that his mother, his brother, his friends and maybe even Stanhope, would be attacked in the streets. Had such attacks ever taken place, it would have been him that was, at least in part, responsible.

Increasing tension

In August Burke played another card. He responded to Paine's *Rights of Man* Part One, by bringing out what was in effect Part Two of his *Reflections* but he called it *An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs*. Burke now had targets both outside and inside the House of Commons. Outside it, he railed against Paine and the reforming societies including the Society for Constitutional Information, charging them with subverting the Constitution and trying to overthrow British law in order to introduce a French system. Inside it he charged Fox and Sheridan with supporting the radicals outside and flirting with French principles. He warned that what they were doing would make working men into political thinkers who would inevitably become unsatisfied with their lot and, in the end, usurp the foundations of British society in the same way that the French had done.

Within days Paine, who had not long returned from Paris and was now working closely with Horne Tooke, responded with a pamphlet entitled *Address and Declaration of the Friends of Universal Peace and Liberty*. Yes, admitted Paine, the radicals had welcomed the French Revolution and yes they applauded the French application of an axe to the root of tyranny, but what was really going on here in Britain was something different – here it was the assertion of the British people's right of self-determination that was at stake. More than that, he argued in a move that was genuine but also politically calculated to appeal to a wide spectrum of potential voters, two very practical things were needed to create the modern state: we need a reduction in taxation and an acceptance of the state's obligation to cater for the old, the very young and those in poverty.

Once again Jeremiah co-ordinated with Johnson and Tooke to produce and distribute Paine's pamphlet. They now had an established mechanism with which to rapidly respond to anything the government or Burke could produce.

Through September and October Jeremiah observed a slight drop in the level of antagonism shown to reformers as the nation witnessed the Paine-Burke battle. There was even some indication that a healthier

perspective was beginning to appear as Paine gained a little ground by virtue of the distasteful language and personal invective Burke persistently chose to use. Paine operated with the more abstract language of rights that served to endear him to many and his arguments for the reduction of taxes were hard for the anti-Paine lobby to discredit. Furthermore, the problem of the old, the young and poverty was important to everyone so again it was difficult for the anti-Paine lobby to dismiss the suggestion that the state had a moral obligation to look after the vulnerable.

Paine began to enjoy something of a celebratory status in radical circles and every Tuesday Johnson hosted him for dinner and invited some of the most interesting of London's intelligentsia. Regulars included Jeremiah, Mary Wollstonecraft, Horne Tooke and the painter Henry Fuseli but also Joseph Priestley, William Blake, the MP Thomas Brand Hollis, the Reverend George Gregory, the dramatist Thomas Holcroft and a very strident and apparently wealthy American called Joel Barlow.

Barlow asked Paine whether he thought revolutions across Europe were inevitable.

'In one form or another revolutions are very probably inevitable as people progressively assert their natural rights,' replied Paine.

'But surely we can build a fairer society without a revolution as such,' asserted Jeremiah. 'Revolutions tend to end up being bloody affairs. Yes we need a revolution in the way we arrange things but all this talk of revolutions provokes such a depth of fear that reason and sense and moderation seem to get lost. The end result can be that we are left responding to current events rather than actively building society on a rational plan.'

'Sadly fear comes from requiring those who have excessive wealth to give some of it up. Getting them to give it up will very probably necessitate some threat of force and the problem is going to be how we legally and constitutionally introduce change without resorting to arms, or at least the threat of arms,' said Tooke.

Jeremiah was in no mood for clever dinner party pleasantries and put his questions directly to Paine. 'Are your suggestions tactical by way of

gaining ground against Burke, and how will you respond to the obvious challenge that decreasing taxation will mean that the government has less ability to do anything, including serving the needs of the poor?'

From the smiles exchanged between Paine and Tooke, Jeremiah could see that they were playing a tactical game to some extent at least. They had obviously deliberated these very points.

'In this company I will admit they are offered tactically albeit that they are genuine suggestions I intend to expand in Part Two of my book. But I had to do something to undo Burke,' said Paine. 'Yes I can see that there is an obvious inconsistency in lowering tax on the one hand and increasing the amount we need from tax on the other but I am sure that I can work out a financial plan that will work. The keys are first to remove government pensions, next lower the cost of the army and navy and then develop a robust economy so that we can afford it.'

The table talk turned to what was going on in Paris and Jeremiah slipped into a listening mode in which he was pleasant, courteous and outwardly appearing to listen with genuine interest to the conversation. Actually he had disengaged and was digesting and interrogating the assumptions of Paine's words. Paine had spoken as if what he was proposing was a real possibility. That could only mean he assumed that the current British Parliament would be dissolved and something like a National Assembly would assume power. The prospect overtook Jeremiah whose thoughts began to move between two diametrically opposite possibilities. One, that the whole idea was fanciful as it would be simply impossible to dislodge the entire British government. The other, that despite all the resistances, Paine's project would actually come about. Each time his thoughts settled on one of the two eventualities the other pulled his attention. Once again he was stuck in the dilemma created by a pragmatic acknowledgement of reality and an aspiration for change. It wasn't long before his mind became numb.

As the dinner party moved from the table to sit in more comfortable chairs, Joseph Priestley approached Jeremiah.

'I know things haven't quite worked out as Kippis and Price thought they would for you Jeremiah, but I can see that you really are at the

heart of things. Would it be possible for you to come and see us? I am taking Price's ministry in Hackney and teaching at the college for a while. Perhaps we could meet there or at Lindsey's in Essex Street if it is more convenient?'

'I think it would be appropriate for me to come to Hackney. We do need some time to talk at length and the privacy of the college would be good for the kind of things we need to talk about,' Jeremiah replied. 'An afternoon later in November would suit me.'

At that point Paine joined them. 'I am making preparations for the Revolution Society's 4th November dinner and I have invited Jerome Petion to come over from Paris. Apparently Petion was in the carriage that brought Louis back from Varennes and he will almost certainly become Mayor of Paris. He is coming as a member of a party supported by the Duc d'Orléans which includes the Duc's daughters and I was wondering if you could arrange for them to meet Lord Stanhope?'

'The Earl will be delighted,' answered Jeremiah. 'Petion is a member of the Jacobin Club, isn't he?'

'Yes and a very useful person to know. I am sure he will have letters of introduction from Condorcet and Rochefoucauld who, I understand, are acquaintances of Stanhope.'

'Yes they are and I would expect prior communication directly from them to the Earl. In any case we shall make them welcome.' Jeremiah's response asserted both the importance of Stanhope's connections and his own role in maintaining those connections. He left the dinner party at that point giving the excuse that he had work to do. When he got back to Stanhope's office he recounted everything that had gone on, including the planned meeting with the Elders at Hackney College.

'Yes, it is about time for that,' said Stanhope. 'It could well be that we are entering a time of crisis and we all need to know where we stand. We must certainly host Petion. My daughters can entertain the Duc's daughters whilst we talk. I don't think there is any need to keep that particular meeting quiet. I wonder if we should invite Fox?'

'I think Fox is out of town at present and only appearing when he really has to. If I read him right, like many others he is waiting to see how France and the Burke/Paine battle develops but I will invite him if you wish,' said Jeremiah.

'Maybe not on this occasion,' agreed Stanhope.

Petion's visit

Most reformers were apprehensive about the Revolution Society's 4th November anniversary dinner to celebrate the people's selection of William and Mary to the throne in 1688. This was an important moment because it asserted that power was conferred by the people on the monarchy – in direct opposition to the monarchy's claim that power was theirs by birthright. It was an important event from the reforming perspective but in the political climate, there was considerable concern about how the event would be reported in the press. Attendance at the dinner was therefore something of a test of public solidarity and willingness to be identified with both the causes of reform and of the French.

Jeremiah went reluctantly and this time several of the press noted 'Stanhope's man' as present. Fox and Sheridan didn't go but Paine and Priestley did. The atmosphere in the London Tavern was initially cautious and uncomfortable as the 350 diners abided by an unspoken agreement to limit political talk. They gave a dutiful but half-hearted response to the traditional toast to the King, but the event was lifted by the presence of Petion and a small group of Frenchmen who provided a welcome distraction. The orchestra was required to play a French revolutionary tune in their honour and, in broken English, Petion offered toasts to the continued friendship of France and Britain.

Jeremiah had arranged for Petion and his party to visit the Earl the next day and he could have taken the opportunity to introduce himself. He decided not to because he could see the eagle-eyed reporters were noting who was speaking to who. Where in the past he might have

ignored anybody else's reading or use of his actions, now the axiom 'never offer anybody an opportunity to make connections if you don't really have to', urged him to keep his own company throughout. He was not alone in leaving early and discreetly. He had disliked the whole affair and resolved to avoid such events in the future. There was something volatile and uncontrollable about the public stage that seemed to foster a malevolence that might well twist words and falsely ascribe intentions.

Stanhope's house was busy from very early on the next day as preparations were made for the French visitors due to arrive at midday. Jeremiah personally quite enjoyed the frantic activity going on around him as he could relax in the knowledge that nobody was really interested in him. Hester, Grizelda and Lucy were far too busy to come to the schoolroom and Louisa and Grizel were occupied overseeing everyone. He and Mahon were able to get on with their record keeping and their current geography project in which they were trying to work out how Massachusetts could produce enough food to sustain its population. They worked out daily nutritional requirements to the level of pounds and ounces and figured out what type of food would supply sufficient nutrition given the sort of land or produce grown in that particular country. Jeremiah had originally crafted the project to combine elements of mathematics with information about the way people lived in different countries. It certainly caught Mahon's imagination: he invented a country called Zob that he populated with imaginary people and various sorts of imaginary food and practices.

That day Jeremiah began the morning's work by studying books from Stanhope's library which they ransacked for information on seasonal temperatures, likely rainfall, population, river valleys, communications, established trade and other physical and social features. After about half an hour Mahon began to compare Massachusetts with his imaginary country. Jeremiah gently admonished him and brought him back to the task in hand but Mahon re-introduced the imaginary country a few moments later. Jeremiah had found that as well as making life pleasant, such flights of imagination were usually rich in opportunities to explore ideas and he entertained Mahon whenever he could.