

## *Pamphlets and Public Opinion During the American Revolution*

**H**EAR me, for I will speak!" wrote the Westchester Farmer, Samuel Seabury, on the title page of his pamphlet, *Free Thoughts*. A similar idea had been expressed by the Pennsylvania Farmer six years earlier when he had written: "How little soever one is able to write, yet when the liberties of one's country are threatened, it is still more difficult to be silent."<sup>1</sup> This is especially true in any period of storm and stress when men feel deeply. Then many persons have ideas which urgently demand expression in language and forms designed to influence public opinion. Until the advent of the radio, the press was perhaps the principal avenue by which propaganda was spread. From the sixteenth to the eighteenth century the pamphlet was the chief instrument to carry one's ideas to the public; since the eighteenth century the newspaper has been the outstanding form in which these writings appeared. The least important reform movement or agitation aroused a host of pamphleteers to exhort in its behalf. The pamphlet, forerunner of the newspaper, was well adapted to this use because it was small and cheap and would reach "a larger audience than the orator in the House of Commons."<sup>2</sup> The peak of pamphlet writing was probably reached in the last half of the eighteenth century during the American and French Revolutions. To the propagandist at any time and to the historian of a later period, it is of interest to determine to what extent these methods were effective in shaping public opinion. This is particularly true of the American Revolution when there was ever-increasing opposition in the colonies to Great Britain. This paper is an attempt to suggest means of determining whether or not pamphlets were effective in that conflict, and why their influence was either

<sup>1</sup> John Dickinson, *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania to the Inhabitants of the British Colonies* (London, 1774), 136.

<sup>2</sup> Dora Mae Clark, *British Opinion and the American Revolution* (New Haven, 1930), 4.

positive or negative. It is by no means an exhaustive study, but, instead, a basis for further development.

It is difficult to determine exactly the number of pamphlets written during the period from 1763 to 1783. It seems likely that there were between 1200 and 1500, possibly more, published during the period. Of course, this does not include the various editions of the same pamphlet; the number of reprintings would greatly increase the total as some had as many as twenty-one editions in a single year.<sup>3</sup> In the opinion of M. C. Tyler<sup>4</sup>

More than in all other publications, it was in these political essays that the American people, on both sides of the great controversy, gave utterance to their real thoughts, their real purposes, their fears, their hopes, their hatreds, touching the bitter questions which then divided them, . . . doing so under almost every form of expression, from serious argument and earnest persuasion, to mere invective, vituperation, and banter.

John Adams commented in his diary in 1765, following the passage of the Stamp Act:<sup>5</sup>

Our presses have groaned, our pulpits have thundered, our legislatures have resolved, our towns have voted.

But all the activity was not on the colonial side; ten years later, Governor Gage wrote to Lord Dartmouth from Boston:<sup>6</sup>

I conceive the press, which has been more open to government than usual, to have been of great use; through this channel, the conduct of the leaders has been laid open, and the absurdities of the continental Congress exposed in a masterly manner, which has served to lower the impression of high importance, which the Congress has made upon the people's mind.

These pamphlets may be classified somewhat roughly in six groups. First, there are those pamphlets which were written in the period 1750 to 1763, discussing chiefly the political principles and philosophy of the colonies. Richard Bland's *A Fragment on the Pistole Fee* falls in this group. Second, sermons, orations, and similar material delivered during the Revolution were printed to use as propaganda. The sermons of John Joachim Zubly of Georgia are excellent examples

<sup>3</sup> Richard Price, *Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty* had 21 editions in 1776; others in 1777 and 1778.

<sup>4</sup> Moses Coit Tyler, *Literary History of the American Revolution* (2d edition, New York, 1898), I. 17.

<sup>5</sup> *The Works of John Adams . . .*, Charles Francis Adams, ed. (Boston, 1850), II. 154.

<sup>6</sup> Arthur Lee, *A Second Appeal to the Justice and Interests of the People, on the Measures Respecting America* (London, 1775), 62.

of this material. Third, a great number of controversial pamphlets were written by both Americans and Englishmen with the unquestioned intention of influencing the people either for or against Great Britain. Any number of examples, such as John Dickinson's *Letters from a Farmer*, Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, and Samuel Johnson's *Taxation no Tyranny*, familiar to everyone, might be cited. The fourth group, written from 1781 to 1786, does not deal with the question of the colonial relations with Great Britain. That matter being fairly well decided, the writers turned their attention to the peace settlement and the organization of a government in America. *Considerations on the provisional treaty with America*, by Andrews Kippis in 1783, belongs in this group. Fifth, there are the state papers such as *Extracts from votes and proceedings of the American Continental Congress held at Philadelphia, on the 5th of September, 1774*, published by the order of Congress. And sixth, there were the military pamphlets dealing with the war itself. Joseph Galloway's *An Account of the conduct of the war in the Middle Colonies*, written in 1780, is an example. However, it is the third group in particular that is to be considered in this study.

To reach any definite conclusions concerning the effectiveness of the pamphlets in forming and directing public opinion, it is necessary to regard them in as many ways as possible. No one standard of measurement will be sufficient. The first striking feature is the great number of pamphlets written, probably somewhere above twelve hundred. Unquestionably it was an excellent method of presenting one's ideas to the public. These pamphlets came not only from the brain and pen of great literary men, but from all types of writers. Miss Clark says that "the world and his wife, if we ignore the illiterate masses, were not only reading but writing pamphlets."<sup>7</sup> This we may very well conclude after reading some of them and after considering the exceedingly ephemeral nature of many of the pamphlets. However, it was not a field of endeavor neglected by the leaders of the period. Samuel Johnson wrote at least four pamphlets, *The False Alarm*, *The Patriot*, *Falkland's Islands*, and *Taxation no Tyranny*, on behalf of the British Government. Another writer of distinction, especially on questions of trade, was Richard Price who contributed his

<sup>7</sup> Clark, *op. cit.*, 4.

share to the cause. Eminent preachers, such as John Wesley, also wrote pamphlets on the issues in conflict between Great Britain and the colonies. Some of the American writers on behalf of the colonies were John and Samuel Adams, John Dickinson, Benjamin Franklin, Stephen Hopkins, and James Otis. British politicians, who gave their aid to the American side by writing pamphlets, included William Pitt and Edmund Burke. The willingness of public men to give aid is shown by a letter which William Tudor wrote in 1775 to Stephen Collins, a merchant in Philadelphia. He said in part:<sup>8</sup>

I never write *Letters* for the News Papers. However if any thing I can say can be any Way serviceable to the common Cause—You are at Liberty to make what Use you please of any Scribbleation of mine—Yet I beg your Caution.

The writings of some would be read because of the position the author held in the public eye. Where one was a leader in community matters, a pamphlet presenting his ideas would more likely be accepted than a work by some obscure writer. The necessity of a man's being in favor with the public, in order to gain a hearing, is shown in the case of John Dickinson. In 1768, he was decidedly on the side of the colonists and his *Letters from a Farmer* exerted great influence, as we shall see later. Then, in 1774, he wrote an *Essay on the Constitutional Power of Great Britain*; this passed through only two editions, one in Philadelphia and one in London. In this instance lack of popularity may be considered to be due to the fact that Dickinson was no longer willing to go to the extremes advocated by many of the other colonists in their opposition to England. Ill-feeling against Dickinson reached the point of anger because he had forsaken the cause of the colonies.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, his ideas no longer found as great a place in the thinking of the people. It must not be concluded because no mention has been made of it that the British side of the question lacked influential propagandists among officeholders and representatives in the assemblies. Thomas Hutchinson, Sir Francis Bernard, Joseph Galloway and a great many more might be listed.

Both the British and the American governments were interested in securing the aid of writers to help spread propaganda. The British

<sup>8</sup> William Tudor to Stephen Collins, Mar. 12, 1775. Charles F. Gunther Collection of Historical MSS. in the Chicago Historical Society.

<sup>9</sup> *Diary of the American Revolution from Newspapers and Original Documents*, Frank Moore, compiler (New York, 1860), I. 13.

government was especially active in making use of these men. They had Samuel Johnson, John Lind, Adam Ferguson, John Shebbeare, and James Macpherson to defend cabinet policies. In return for the use of his pen the government would give some reward to the writer. Sometimes it took the form of a government subsidy for the printing of the work; more often a pension was given to the author or some member of his family.<sup>10</sup> Only once in America does there seem to have been any governmental reward for a pamphleteer. That was in the case of Thomas Paine. The Pennsylvania Assembly gave him £500 in cash, and New York gave him a confiscated loyalist property at New Rochelle.<sup>11</sup> However, the Continental Congress, in 1778, asked Richard Price to come over and give his assistance to the colonies, but he refused.<sup>12</sup> There are other indications that the Congress was not blind to the importance of the press. The Committee of Intelligence wrote from York to David Hall and William Sellers, printers, on October 17, 1777, as follows:<sup>13</sup>

Congress having authorized their Committee of intelligence to get a Press fixed in this Town. I am as Chairman of that Committee, to propose to yo[u that] your Press be immediately brought here & set up that the expence of bringing the Press shall be defrayed by Congress, that you shall be employed in publishing for Congress and paid a liberal price for so doing. The Committee hope this will be a sufficient inducement, when you consider that a Newspaper published by you here, containing Congress intelligence, will be of extensive sale and very profitable.

Not only were the printers of that time engaged in the printing of the pamphlets, but many of them published newspapers as well.

One of the most important aspects to be considered in a study of pamphlet literature is timeliness of appearance. A pamphlet might deal with the question of the Stamp Act, the Townshend Acts, Independence, or any of the other vital questions arising during the years. To be effective a pamphlet must come neither too soon nor too late. The people must be to the point where they are ready for some one to take the lead in expressing either agreement or opposition to these questions. For example, John Cartwright's *American Independence*, published in 1775, was premature. A number of

<sup>10</sup> Clark, *op. cit.*, 4.

<sup>11</sup> Crane Brinton, "Thomas Paine," *Dictionary of American Biography*, XIV. 161.

<sup>12</sup> Clark, *op. cit.*, 169.

<sup>13</sup> *The Letters of Richard Henry Lee*, James Curtis Ballagh, ed. (New York, 1912), I. 333.

events were necessary before the people would reach a state of mind which would accept independence as presented by Paine's *Common Sense*. This does not imply that Cartwright's pamphlet was completely useless, as a matter of fact it probably helped to pave the way for *Common Sense*.

Moreover, the amount of popular opposition to any event occasioning the production of pamphlets must be considered as a factor in their effectiveness. If an occurrence, such as the passing of the Townshend Acts, was greatly opposed, a pamphlet directed against that measure would have more effect than one against a minor act. The periods in which the most influential pamphlets were written were 1765-6, 1768-9, and 1774-6. These years were the ones in which important events occurred, and the minds of the people were worked up to a pitch where they were capable of being influenced by inflammatory arguments. The decade previous to the Declaration of Independence was especially advantageous for the exponents of the colonial point of view because a series of highly unpopular actions had given them an abundance of talking points from which to start.

The number of copies of a pamphlet distributed is to some extent a measure of its effectiveness. One of the most widely diffused of the revolutionary tracts was *Common Sense* of which more than 100,000 were sold in the first three months, and about 500,000 altogether.<sup>14</sup> Figures indicating the size of any one edition of a pamphlet are scarce; Samuel Loudon, a New York printer, claimed that 1500 copies of an answer to *Common Sense* were destroyed.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, it is difficult to decide whether an edition was completely sold, or not, unless the printer made the statement that he was bringing out a later edition because the first was insufficient in numbers. Not only the number of editions but the locations of these may also be considered as indications of the spread of any one pamphlet. Some of them, such as *Common Sense* and *Letters from a Farmer*, went through a great number of editions in almost all of the colonies, giving a wide distribution to the ideas of the writers.

Even when there were only a few hundred copies printed, there is evidence to show that the circulation was much greater than the issue

<sup>14</sup> Moncure D. Conway, *The Life of Thomas Paine with a History of His Literary, Political and Religious Career in America, France, and England* (New York, 1892), I. 69.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Force, ed., *American Archives*, ser. 4 (Washington, 1837-1853), V. 438-40.

itself. Stephen Hopkins' *The Grievances of the American Colonies* was read before the Assembly of Rhode Island before it was ever published.<sup>16</sup> *Common Sense* was read before a gathering of the leading men of New York.<sup>17</sup> Other pamphlets were also read at meetings of this kind. Furthermore, a single pamphlet might be handed from person to person. For example, Joseph Jones, writing to James Madison in 1782, said he could not find the pamphlet about which Madison had been inquiring. "Did you not lend it to Mr. Lee or Col. Bland?"<sup>18</sup> he inquired.

As in the entire colonial period, communication was a vital factor, and difficulties of communication tended to hinder the wide distribution of pamphlets. A letter from Staunton, Virginia, states that they very seldom heard any news from the world outside.<sup>19</sup> However, the fact that pamphlets might not be carried from one colony to another except in very limited numbers was overcome by reprinting them in the various central towns of the colonies; and most of the important pamphlets, no matter what their place of origin, were published in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia with additional issues coming from Williamsburg, Salem, Norwich, Lancaster, Charleston and other towns. So it may very well be said that although the difficulties of transportation limited the influence of a pamphlet to a local community in some cases, in other instances, such as *Letters from a Farmer* and *Common Sense*, this circumstance was offset by the number of editions printed in various places throughout the colonies.

Newspapers aided in the distribution of the ideas of the pamphleteers. Many of them carried portions or the complete pamphlet. In some cases, the political essay appeared first in the newspapers and was later brought together in a single volume. Examples of this are Dickinson's *Letters from a Farmer*, Thomas Paine's *Crisis*, and Daniel Leonard's *Massachusettensis*. Other pamphlets first appeared

<sup>16</sup> William E. Foster, "Stephen Hopkins, a Rhode Island Statesman" (*Rhode Island Historical Tracts*, No. 19, Providence, 1884), pt. ii. 51.

<sup>17</sup> Conway, *op. cit.*, I. 62.

<sup>18</sup> *Letters of Joseph Jones of Virginia, 1777-1787* (Washington, 1889), 88.

<sup>19</sup> *Letters from America, 1776-1779, Being Letters of Brunswick, Hessian, and Waldeck Officers with the British Armies During the Revolution*, Ray W. Pettengill, translator (Boston, 1924), 148-49.

in bound form, and extracts were later published in various newspapers. In 1768, there were twenty-five colonial papers, and, in 1775, thirty-seven;<sup>20</sup> they were distributed throughout the thirteen colonies with a majority in the northern colonies. The newspapers did not print only the pamphlets, but also many refutations of the arguments. Even if a copy of the pamphlet did not appear in a newspaper, a letter in opposition, or in praise, would help to spread the ideas and theories of the various writers. Also, the newspapers advertised the appearance of new pamphlets. Sometimes these notices were accompanied with comments by the printer, such as that which appeared in the *Massachusetts Gazette* of August 4, 1774:<sup>21</sup>

This day Published and Sold by Edes and Gill. *Considerations on the Measures carrying on with Respect to the British Colonies in North America.*

This is a most masterly Performance written since the framing of the several Acts against Boston and America, and the best calculated to convince the Ministry, the People of England, and all the World, of the Absurdity and Wickedness of the late Acts, and ruinous Consequences, to England at least, that would certainly attend their being carried into Execution.

Circulation of newspapers was probably somewhat limited although Hugh Gainé claimed<sup>22</sup> that the New York *Mercury*

is conveyed to every Town and Country Village in the Provinces of New-Jersey, Connecticut, Rhode-Island and New-York; to all the Capital Places on the Continent of America, from Georgia to Halifax; to every Island in the West-Indies, and to all the Sea Port Towns and Cities in England, Scotland, Ireland and Holland.

Since there was a greater number of publishers, newspapers, booksellers, and those interested in this trade in the northern colonies, it is natural to expect them to have had a greater influence in the colonies north of Virginia.

Two additional factors limiting the effectiveness of pamphlets no matter how widely they were circulated must be considered. First, the people were not all able to read. Secondly, the price of the pamphlet might be beyond the reach of the common people. However, in 1763, the *Boston News Letter* stated optimistically that "ignorance is not so prevalent,"<sup>23</sup> and it did not always make too much

<sup>20</sup> Isaiah Thomas, *The History of Printing in America* (Albany, 1874), II. 294-95.

<sup>21</sup> *Massachusetts Gazette*, August 4, 1774.

<sup>22</sup> *The Journals of Hugh Gainé*, Paul Leicester Ford, ed. (New York, 1902), I. 41.

<sup>23</sup> *Boston News Letter*, Jan. 6, 1763.



difference if the people were not able to read. James Rivington declared in his *Gazette* in 1775:<sup>24</sup>

At a late meeting of exotics, styled The Sons of Liberty, in New York, the pamphlet entitled "Farmer A. W.'s View of the controversy between Great Britain and the Colonies," &c., published last week by Mr. Rivington, was introduced by one of the mushrooms, and after a few pages being read to the company, they agreed *nem. con.* to commit it to the flames, without the benefit of clergy; though many, very many indeed, could neither write nor read; however, their common executioner immediately threw it into the fire, where it was consumed, and its spiritual part ascended in vapor, to the upper regions, whither not one of the company durst aspire, even in idea.

Reading a pamphlet before a group of townspeople was common and helped to overcome the lack of education on the part of those unable to read the pamphlet for themselves. The price of a pamphlet ranged from 1s. to 2s. 6d. Small though it was, this price would have prevented many from purchasing the pamphlets. However, one can again point to the fact that one pamphlet would reach a great number of people when read before groups of freeholders, Sons of Liberty, Assemblies and other groups. Then too, as has been mentioned before, the pamphlets were handed from person to person.

Most pamphlets were written to appeal to some certain emotion or to some particular group of people. Patriotic, religious, and economic motives often formed the theme of a pamphleteer. Some, such as Seabury's *Free Thoughts*, were written to appeal to a farming element; others, similar to Seabury's *The Congress Canvassed*, appealed to the merchants. With strong and convincing arguments being directed towards a specific audience, the pamphlet generally acquired a greater effectiveness among those individuals.

Likewise, the style of writing was often such that it would fit the situation at a given time. Dickinson's *Letters from a Farmer* was well argued with a careful analysis of the whole question. They would apparently appeal only to those who were versed in a knowledge of governmental institutions and political theories or to people of a reflective turn of mind. A pamphlet of this kind was very effective in 1768 when the population as a whole had not entered into the conflict; only the leaders were taking an active part. On the other hand, *Common Sense* was written in a straight-forward fashion with no

<sup>24</sup> *Diary of the American Revolution*, I. 12-13.

attempt to argue the question by quoting authorities, laws, and similar data. It was a pamphlet which the common man could read and appreciate; and, in 1776, the common man was the person to be reached. The men in the upper strata had largely made up their minds in one direction or the other. Now it was necessary for the people as a whole to be persuaded to fall in line with the leaders. *Common Sense* helped to crystallize public opinion. Both *Letters from a Farmer* and *Common Sense* were extremely effective because each was written in the style which appealed to the class needing to be influenced at this time.

The effectiveness of a pamphlet may also be determined to some extent by its physical characteristics. Occasionally, a pamphlet of more than one hundred pages would appear. The extreme example is probably Matthew Robinson-Morris Rokeby's *Further examination of our present American Measures* of two hundred fifty-six pages; moreover, this tract contained many paragraphs eight to seventeen pages long. With scores of pamphlets appearing within a single year, the probabilities are that the average reader would turn to the shorter pamphlets which could be read in the space of an hour or two. Another factor contributing to the influence of a pamphlet was its appearance in the form of short letters as did the *Letters from a Farmer*, or in a number of divisions as in the case of *Common Sense*. These were short enough that a single letter or division might be reprinted easily in the newspapers.

That the American colonists wished to express their views through the newspapers and in pamphlets seems evident from the constant repetition of the idea of the freedom of the press. Toasts were given not only to Dickinson, the Bishop of St. Asaph, Dulany and other political writers, but also to "the Liberty of the Press," and to John Wilkes, the English exponent of a free press.<sup>25</sup> John Adams wrote that he felt "the freedom of censure is a matter of very great consequence under our government."<sup>26</sup> Freedom of the press was often mentioned in the newspapers. In the *Boston News Letter* of 1768 appeared the following: "Mr. Draper. You observed lately that the People of the Province have been and still are great Encouragers of the Liberty of the Press."<sup>27</sup> Four years later another correspondent

<sup>25</sup> *Boston News Letter*, Mar. 24, 1768, Mar. 31, 1768, Aug. 25, 1768, Sept. 29, 1774; *Annual Register* (1768), 255.

<sup>26</sup> *Works of John Adams*, II. 127.

<sup>27</sup> *Boston News Letter*, July 21, 1768.

wrote "that the Press should have its Liberty cannot be denied, but, I think, with this Restriction, that no Author should write what has any appearance of Abuse, without putting his Name to it."<sup>28</sup> In 1775, those in opposition to England felt that James Rivington was publishing material that was far too seditious and treasonable in character so that "Freedom of the Press" was being used wrongly. Consequently, meetings of freeholders, such as those in New-Windsor, Connecticut, and Newport, Rhode Island, were held and resolutions passed against Rivington and in favor of the Liberty of the Press.<sup>29</sup> Not only did individuals and groups in towns remark concerning the importance of being able to publish one's ideas, but also the colonial governments took steps to insure people this privilege. The Massachusetts House of Representatives in 1768 said that "the Liberty of the Press is a great Bulwark of the Liberty of the People."<sup>30</sup> Then, in 1776, the Maryland Convention included as one of the parts of their Declaration of Rights "That the liberty of the press ought to be inviolably preserved."<sup>31</sup>

Various means were taken to counteract the effect of the ideas of one's opponents. Some writers adopted the policy of belittling the writings of the opposition, claiming that they were primarily for the purpose of gaining proselytes. They would continue, as did a correspondent in Massachusetts:<sup>32</sup>

But their Publications [in this case by Edes] are not much read and less talked of, and can have no effect, but that of shewing an important Malignity which nobody of any considerable Acquaintance in the Town of Boston doubted was as prevalent as ever in the Hearts of his Enemies.

Often opposition took the form of replies in which opposing ideas were presented, and attempts were made to prove the adversaries in the wrong. Apparently, if a pamphlet was considered effective, more pamphlets would appear against it. Richard Price's *Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty* was answered by at least thirteen writers. These, among others, included John Lind, John Shebbeare and Adam Ferguson who were writers receiving compensation from the government, and the number of replies indicated a great amount of appre-

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, Aug. 13, 1772.

<sup>29</sup> *American Archives*, ser. 4, II. 12-13, 132-33.

<sup>30</sup> *Boston News Letter*, Mar. 10, 1768.

<sup>31</sup> *American Archives*, ser. 5, III. 147.

<sup>32</sup> *Boston News Letter*, Aug. 6, 1772.

hension in regard to this pamphlet. *Common Sense* was answered by John Adams's *Thoughts on Government*, Candidus's *Plain Truth*, and C. Inglis's *True Interest of America impartially stated* as well as numerous newspaper articles such as those signed by "Cato." *Taxation no Tyranny* was answered by at least five pamphlets which had titles such as *Tyranny Unmasked* and *Taxation Tyranny*. So one might go through a list of many of the more important pamphlets.

However, opposition often took a more violent form than this. In 1775, the House of Commons voted that *The Crisis*, No. 3 should be burned by the common hangman. The first day the sheriffs were hissed for attending; then on the next day, March 7,<sup>33</sup>

At twelve o'clock, the Sheriffs attended at the Royal Exchange for the above purpose; but as soon as the fire was lighted, it was put out, and dead dogs and cats thrown at the Officers; a fire was then made in *Cornhill*, and the executioner did his duty.

Instances of violence in the colonies may also be cited. In March, 1776, Samuel Loudon of New York was asked to publish an answer to *Common Sense*. Having made certain that it "was written with decency" and "did not express, or even imply, any disapprobation of the proceedings of the honourable Continental Congress, or the glorious cause, in defence of which Americans are spending their blood and treasure," he proceeded to start the printing of it. He advertised it in Gaine's *New York Mercury*, but it met with disapproval by some people. On March 18, he was called in by a group headed by Duyckinck. He was asked who the author was; in reply, he told them he did not know, and, if he did, he felt that they had no right to demand it. They then threatened to burn the pamphlets. The next evening he was called before the general Committee of Inspection, and told that, for his own safety, he should not persist in publishing. Although he promised to do this, Mr. Duyckinck with more than forty men rushed the printing office about ten o'clock that evening and carried away about fifteen hundred copies of the pamphlet and burned them in the commons.<sup>34</sup>

A meeting of freeholders at New-Windsor, Connecticut, in March, 1775, resolved that a pamphlet of A. W. Farmer should be publicly burned, and the action was carried out.<sup>35</sup> A group of Connecticut Sons

<sup>33</sup> *American Archives*, ser. 4, II. 55.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, ser. 4, V. 438-40.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, ser. 4, II. 132-33.

of Liberty went so far as to seize the author in November of 1775 and hold him for nearly a month at New Haven.<sup>36</sup> On November 27, 1775, a similar group from Connecticut entered New York and went to James Rivington's print shop. They destroyed his press and carried away much of his type to be melted into bullets, and thus put an end to his publishing of newspapers and pamphlets.<sup>37</sup> Whether such methods succeeded in suppressing the other side may be questioned. Instead, it might well increase the determination of the oppressed group. For example, the *American Querist*, after being destroyed, went through not one but at least five editions, the first of which carried the following note on the title page:<sup>38</sup>

This pamphlet, on the 8th Day of September last, was, in full Conclave of the Sons of Liberty in New-York, Committed to the Flames by the Hands of their Common Executioner; as it contains some Queries they cannot, and others they will not answer.

At this point it might be well to stop and consider a number of pamphlets which exemplify the various aspects suggested above as determining the effectiveness of individual works in molding public opinion. The choice of pamphlets is purely an arbitrary matter. In no case has an exhaustive survey been attempted, but rather a suggestive approach to later developments.

One almost instinctively cites the work of James Otis as the first example. Gaining recognition by his opposition to the Writs of Assistance in the Massachusetts House of Representatives in 1761, Otis was to take the lead among the pamphleteers around Boston during most of the 1760's.<sup>39</sup> He wrote a number of pamphlets, including *Considerations on behalf of the colonists*, *The Rights of the British colonies asserted and proved*, and *A Vindication of the British Colonies*; these went through from two to four editions in Boston and London. *Rights of the Colonies* was read twice before the House of Representatives.<sup>40</sup> Opinions of Otis were high. Daniel Leonard

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, ser. 4, IV. 401.

<sup>37</sup> Thomas, *op. cit.*, II. 121.

<sup>38</sup> Myles Cooper, *The American Querist: Or, Some Questions Proposed Relative to the Present Disputes Between Great Britain and Her American Colonies* (New York, 1774), title page.

<sup>39</sup> Tyler, *op. cit.*, I. 39.

<sup>40</sup> Justin Winsor, *Narrative and Critical History of America* (Boston and New York, 1887), VI. 28.

"Thought Otis was not an original genius, nor a good writer, but a person who had done and would continue to do much good service."<sup>41</sup> John Adams said that his "reputation as a scholar, a lawyer, a reasoner, and a man of spirit, was then very high."<sup>42</sup> "No Taxation without representation,"<sup>43</sup>

became the party slogan of the opposition which James Otis contributed his great talents to consolidate into a political force by printing a powerful argument, showing the contrary to be an innovation upon the inherent as well as chartered rights of British Subjects.

In speaking of *Vindication of the Conduct of the House of Representatives*, Tyler said:<sup>44</sup>

Its actual effect was to furnish the starting-point for the entire movement of revolutionary reasoning, by which some two millions of people were to justify themselves in the years to come, as they advanced along their rugged and stormy path toward Independence.

Another pamphlet appearing in this early period was the *Grievance of the American Colonies Candidly examined* by Stephen Hopkins, Governor of Rhode Island. It was first read in the Assembly where it was voted that it should appear in pamphlet form.<sup>45</sup> Copies soon went to Boston and were received with approbation. Likewise, it reached New York and was reprinted in full.<sup>46</sup> An almost immediate answer was written by Martin Howard, entitled, *A Letter from a Gentleman at Halifax*. Other pamphlets such as *Considerations on the propriety of imposing taxes in the British Colonies*, by Daniel Dulany of Maryland, *Late Regulations respecting the British Colonies*, by John Dickinson of Pennsylvania, *Claim of the Colonies to an exemption from Internal taxes*, by William Knox, agent for Georgia, and *Reasons why the British Colonies in America should not be charged with taxes*, by Thomas Fitch, governor of Connecticut, appeared at this time to start the activity in the various colonies.

The outstanding pamphlet of the first decade of the controversy was undoubtedly *Letters from a Farmer*. Appearing first in the form of twelve letters in the Pennsylvania newspapers from December,

<sup>41</sup> *Works of John Adams*, II. 182.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, II. 124, fn. 1.

<sup>43</sup> Samuel Adams Drake, *History of Middlesex County, Massachusetts* (Boston, 1880), I. 104.

<sup>44</sup> Tyler, *op. cit.*, I. 51.

<sup>45</sup> Foster, *op. cit.*, pt. ii. 51.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, pt. ii. 57.

1767, to February, 1768, most of the twenty-five newspapers of that time were quick to reprint them, the chief exceptions being Miller's and Sower's German papers and the *Boston Evening Post*.<sup>47</sup> The letters were soon printed in pamphlet form by David Hall and William Sellers of Philadelphia; other editions appeared in Boston, New York, Williamsburg, Dublin, London and Paris. The French edition stated in its preface that thirty editions of the work had appeared, but it seems likely that the reprints in the newspapers were included in this estimate.

The first indication of the effectiveness of these *Letters* is probably the taking into account of the duties on glass, paper, etc., by the Pennsylvania Assembly in February, 1768. There are many other evidences of the Farmer's popularity. One of the common toasts of 1768 was to "the Ingenious and patriotic Author of the Farmer's Letters."<sup>48</sup> At a meeting of the freeholders and other inhabitants of Boston it was moved and voted "that the Thanks of the Town be given to the ingenious Author of a Course of Letters published at Philadelphia and in this place, signed A FARMER; wherein the Rights of the America Subjects are clearly stated and fully vindicated." Dr. Benjamin Church, John Hancock, Samuel Adams, Joseph Warren, and John Rowe were appointed to draw up the vote of thanks,<sup>49</sup> "the first Honour of the kind ever given by a City to any person in America."<sup>50</sup> This vote of thanks appeared in the *Boston News Letter* of March 24, 1768:<sup>51</sup>

To the ingenious Author of certain patriotic Letters, subscribed A FARMER  
Much respected Sir!

At this alarming period, when . . . to oppose such Measures as are injudicious and destructive, is construed as a formal attempt to subvert Order and Government; when to reason is to rebel. . . 'Tis to YOU, worthy Sir! that America is obliged, for a most seasonable, sensible, loyal and vigorous Vindication of her Rights and Liberties: 'Tis to You the distinguished Honour is due; that when many of the Friends of Liberty were ready to fear its utter Subversion: Armed with Truth, supported by the immutable Laws of Nature, the common Inheritance of Man, and leaning on the Pillars of the British Constitution; You seasonably brought your Aid, opposed impending Ruin, awakened the most indolent and inactive to a sense of Danger, re-animated the Hopes of those, who

<sup>47</sup> Charles R. Hildeburn, *A Century of Printing: The Issues of the Press in Pennsylvania, 1685-1784* (Philadelphia, 1886), II. 75.

<sup>48</sup> *Boston News Letter*, Mar. 24, Mar. 31, Aug. 25, 1768; *Annual Register* (1768), 255.

<sup>49</sup> *Boston News Letter*, Mar. 17, 1768.

<sup>50</sup> *Pennsylvania Gazette*, quoted in Hildeburn, *op. cit.*, II. 75.

<sup>51</sup> *Boston News Letter*, Mar. 31, 1768.

had before exerted themselves in the Cause of Freedom, and instructed America in the best Means to obtain Redress.

Nor is this Western World alone indebted to your Wisdom, Fortitude and Patriotism; Great Britain also must be confirmed by You, that to be truly great and successful She must be just; That to oppress America is to violate her own Honour, defeat her brightest Prospects, and contract her spreading Empire.

Tho' such superior Merit must assuredly, in the closest Recess, enjoy the divine Satisfaction of having served, and possibly saved this People; tho' vested from our View, You modestly shun the deserved Applause of Millions; permit Us to intrude upon your Retirement, and salute the FARMER, as the Friend of Americans, and the common Benefactor of Mankind.

In reply, Dickinson expressed his gratitude to them for the honor bestowed upon him. He told them that he was particularly pleased by their acceptance of his ideas because of the "Rank of the Town of Boston, the Wisdom of her Counsels, and the Spirit of her Conduct."<sup>52</sup> Other towns followed the example of Boston by extending their appreciation to him. Lebanon, Connecticut, on April 11, 1768, "congratulated him as one born for the most noble and exalted purpose."<sup>53</sup> In Pennsylvania the proceedings of the Grand Jury were delayed in order to present complimentary remarks to Dickinson when he appeared. Similar addresses were sent from Maryland and the other Southern colonies.<sup>54</sup> Richard Henry Lee wrote to Dickinson, "You . . . have the honour of giving a just alarm, and of demonstrating the late measures to be . . . destructive of public liberty, and in violation of those rights which God and nature have given us."<sup>55</sup> People's appreciation to the Farmer took other forms than words. For example:<sup>56</sup>

We are informed, that a Gentleman in Virginia, has lately left, by his will, a handsome Fortune to the patriotic Author of the FARMER'S Letters, as a grateful Acknowledgment of the eminent Services thereby rendered.

Not only in America but in England were the people aware of the excellent presentation of America's position and feelings in the matter. A member of parliament wrote to a friend in Philadelphia:<sup>57</sup>

The B--sh P--t will never give up the right of taxing her own Colonies, and I think the Americans will never submit to such an authority, whilst they have such a Writer, as the author of the aforesaid letters, to stir them up.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, April 28, 1768.

<sup>53</sup> *Pennsylvania Chronicle*, May 9, 1768, quoted in Richard Frothingham, *The Rise of the Republic of the United States* (Boston, 1886), 208, fn. 3.

<sup>54</sup> Hildeburn, *op. cit.*, II. 75.

<sup>55</sup> *Letters of Richard Henry Lee*, I. 29.

<sup>56</sup> *Boston News Letter*, Sept. 15, 1768.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, Sept. 29, 1768.



Another letter from London gave further information of the influence that the *Farmer's Letters* were having in England:<sup>58</sup>

The pieces signed a Farmer, do great honor to the writers, they have had great effect with every thinking person here, and Mr. De.B---t tells me that the Board of Trade feels the weight of them more than any thing that has been wrote on that subject, & he says, they have staggered them very much.

Philadelphia and London editions in 1774 indicate that there was still regard for this excellent piece of writing. John Cartwright in his pamphlet, *American Independence*, wrote:<sup>59</sup>

Let me recommend to the readers perusal, an excellent pamphlet, under the title of Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania, to the Inhabitants of the British Colonies.

Another pamphlet of widespread circulation was Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, appearing first on January 9, 1776. Aided by Dr. Benjamin Rush, he was able to bring together the material needed for this pamphlet. John Adams describes it thus:<sup>60</sup>

Finding the great question was concerning independence, he gleaned from those he saw the common-place arguments, such as the necessity of independence at some time or other; the peculiar fitness at this time; the justice of it; the provocation to it; our ability to maintain it, &c. &c.

Having written it, he was finally able to get Robert Bell to publish it, using odds and ends of paper around his shop. It immediately went through editions, in addition to those published at Philadelphia, at Boston, Norwich, Providence, Lancaster, Salem, Newport, Edinburgh, London, Newcastle on Tyne, and Paris, as well as editions in German at Philadelphia. Paine states that more than 100,000 copies were sold in the first three months, and Conway, his biographer, places the total figure at more than 500,000.<sup>61</sup>

Various leading men commented in their correspondence on *Common Sense*. General Lee wrote to Washington on January 24, 1776:<sup>62</sup>

Have you seen the pamphlets *Common Sense*? I never saw such a masterly, irresistible performance. It will, if I mistake not, in concurrence with the transcendent folly and wickedness of the Ministry, give the coup-de-grace to *Great*

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> John Cartwright, *American Independence the Interest and Glory of Great Britain* . . (Philadelphia, 1776), 30.

<sup>60</sup> *Works of John Adams*, II. 506-507.

<sup>61</sup> Conway, *op. cit.*, I. 60-70, gives an extended account.

<sup>62</sup> *American Archives*, ser. 4, IV. 839.

*Britain.* In short, I own myself convinced, by the arguments, of the necessity of separation.

Washington had seen the pamphlet because a week later he wrote to Joseph Reed:<sup>63</sup>

A few more of such flaming arguments as were exhibited at Falmouth and Norfolk, added to the sound doctrine and unanswerable reasoning contained in the pamphlet "Common Sense," will not leave numbers at a loss to decide upon the propriety of a separation.

A thousand copies of the pamphlet were ordered at once by Virginia, and a great many more followed.<sup>64</sup> That they had an effect is evidenced by another letter Washington wrote to Reed on the first of April:<sup>65</sup>

By private letters which I have lately received from Virginia, I find "Common Sense" is working a wonderful change there in the minds of many men.

Samuel Adams, another leader in propaganda, wrote to James Warren from Philadelphia:<sup>66</sup>

It has fretted some folks here more than a little. I recommend it to your Perusal and wish you would borrow it of her [Mrs. Adams]. Don't be displeased with me if you find the Spirit of it totally repugnant with your Ideas of Government. Read it without Prejudice, and give me your impartial Sentiments of it when you may be at Leisure.

Other indications of acceptance are the fact that Loudon's attempt to bring an answer out against it met with failure and that "the people of New-York have collected and burnt publicly every copy they could find of Plain Truth."<sup>67</sup>

Not all were in favor of the pamphlet. Daniel Dulany wrote from Annapolis:<sup>68</sup>

A pamphlet has been lately published, at Philadelphia, in fav' of Independency, & it is said to be the Composition of Adams, one of the Boston Delegates. It is called *Common Sense*; but, I hope, the extravagant, nonsensical tenets, advanced in it, will have as little Influence in the other Colonies, as they have here, where they have reced their merited Contempt.

Likewise, John Adams wrote at this time:<sup>69</sup>

<sup>63</sup> William B. Reed, *Life and Correspondence of Joseph Reed* (Philadelphia, 1847), I. 148.

<sup>64</sup> Conway, *op. cit.*, I. 78, fn. 2.

<sup>65</sup> Reed, *op. cit.*, I. 180

<sup>66</sup> *Warren-Adams Letters Being Chiefly a Correspondence among John Adams, Samuel Adams, and James Warren* (Massachusetts Historical Society Collections, LXXII, 1917), I. 204.

<sup>67</sup> *Letters of Richard Henry Lee*, I. 175.

<sup>68</sup> Daniel Dulany to Robert Carter, Feb. 1, 1776, Chas. Gunther Collection.

<sup>69</sup> *Warren-Adams Letters*, I. 243.

"Common Sense," by his crude ignorant Notion of a Government by one Assembly, will do more Mischief, in dividing the Friends of Liberty, than all the Tory Writings together. He is a keen Writer but very ignorant of the Science of Government.

A number of years later in looking back, Adams extended his ideas in regard to Common Sense:<sup>70</sup>

It has been a general opinion that this pamphlet was of great importance in the Revolution. I doubted it at the time, and have doubted it to this day. It probably converted some to the doctrine of independence, and gave others an excuse for declaring in favor of it. But these would all have followed Congress with zeal; and on the other hand it excited many writers against it, particularly "Plain Truth," who contributed very largely to fortify and inflame the party against independence, and finally lost us the Allens, Penns, and many other persons of weight in the community.

However, the feeling of the people following this reached a point of development where they were ready to accept the Declaration of Independence. Henry Laurens wrote that the declaration<sup>71</sup>

Was proclaimed in Charleston with great solemnity . . . attended by a procession of president, councils, generals, members of assembly, officers civil and military, &c., &c., amidst loud acclamations of thousands.

To have such an effect, there had to be a great deal of feeling already developed. As early as January, 1775, Rivington's *Gazette* published an item stating that Connecticut had ordered three hundred barrels of gunpowder. "Nothing but a spirit of independence would suffer matters to be carried to such extremities."<sup>72</sup> Also, Adams wrote to a friend:<sup>73</sup>

The writers reason from topics which have been long in contemplation, and fully understood by the people at large in *New-England*, but have been attended to in the Southern Colonies only by gentlemen of free spirits and liberal minds, who are very few.

According to Tyler:<sup>74</sup>

The secret of his strength lay in his infallible instinct for interpreting to the public its own conscience and its own consciousness, and for doing this in language, which, at times, was articulate thunder and lightning.

So might many more quotations and examples of the widespread adoption of Paine's ideas be given.

<sup>70</sup> *Works of John Adams*, II. 509.

<sup>71</sup> "Correspondence of Henry Laurens of South Carolina," in *Materials for History Printed from Original Manuscripts with Notes and Illustrations*, Frank Moore, ed. (1st ser. New York, 1861), 25-26.

<sup>72</sup> *Diary of the American Revolution*, 13-14.

<sup>73</sup> *American Archives*, ser. 4, IV. 1183-84. <sup>74</sup> Tyler, *op. cit.*, II. 42.

It might be well to examine at least one pamphlet by an Englishman. I have chosen Richard Price's *Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty* as an example. Published first in February, 1776, it went through eight editions in the first six weeks and a total of at least sixteen editions in London during the year. It was also reprinted at Dublin, Edinburgh, Philadelphia, New York, Boston, and Charleston in 1776; further editions and revisions were made in 1777 and 1778. In reply, at least thirteen pamphlets were written, some by government writers such as Lind, Shebbeare, and Ferguson. It was well accepted by Americans such as Caesar Rodney who wrote to Thomas Rodney:<sup>75</sup>

I have sent you a pamphlet called Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty &c., wrote by Doctor Price in England. It is an excellent piece, and don't doubt (properly used), will tend to strengthen your patriotic or in other words independent party.

Other indications of Price's popularity are shown by the invitation of the Continental Congress in 1778 to Price to come to America to assist with colonial finances,<sup>76</sup> and a vote of thanks given by the City of London and its Mayor, John Wilkes.<sup>77</sup>

From the consideration of the various factors as outlined, certain conclusions in regard to the pamphlet literature may be drawn. A more extensive study of these angles and of others, that the study thus far may have suggested, may lead to other conclusions and serve to confirm these herein set forth more definitely.

Unquestionably, the pamphlet was considered of prime importance in forming and shaping the minds of the people. The number of pamphlets, the number of editions, the caliber of the men who wrote them, the interest of the governments and other things indicate this. The pamphlets of the colonial side did have a decisive effect, it seems, in educating the public. Other means, such as the pulpit, the handbill, and the newspaper, must be studied also in their capacity as educators of the people in the ideas of the leaders who were either opposing or in favor of Great Britain. I believe that the influence of the loyalist writings had very little effect before 1774, and, after that, the radicals had become so well organized that more telling arguments were

<sup>75</sup> *Letters to and from Caesar Rodney, 1756-1784*, George Herbert Ryder, ed. (Philadelphia, 1933), 98.

<sup>76</sup> Clark, *op. cit.*, 169.

<sup>77</sup> Preface to 8th edition of *Observations*.

necessary. There seems to be a lack of forceful writing in the colonies in favor of Great Britain prior to 1774. This is probably due largely to the fact that people were not required to make up their minds definitely to support one side or the other until the calling of a Continental Congress and the forming of an Association. On the whole, the effect of the pamphlets was probably more widespread from Virginia northwards because of the greater number of printers and booksellers, the closer concentration of people around such centers as Boston, New York and Philadelphia, and, perhaps, because of a better development of education. Whether the American Revolution would have been avoided if there had been no propagandist methods is difficult to state. However, it seems that it might very well have been delayed for some time without such writings as those of Samuel Adams, Thomas Paine and many others. The pamphlet, therefore, must be considered in a study of the American Revolution because of the place it occupied in presenting and forming the ideas and theories of the two sides in the many controversial questions which arose from 1763 to 1783.

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