

## Thomas Paine, Privateersman

ONE element in Thomas Paine's life has never ceased to intrigue me: his claim to having sailed on a British privateer during the Seven Years' War with France. He mentioned the adventure in Part II of his revolutionary *Rights of Man*, written in 1791:

At an early period, little more than sixteen years of age, raw and adventurous . . . I began the carver of my own fortune, and entered on board the *Terrible* privateer, Captain Death. From this adventure I was happily prevented by the affectionate and moral remonstrance of a good father. . . . But the impression . . . began to wear away, and I entered afterwards in the *King of Prussia* privateer, Captain Mendez, and went in her to sea.<sup>1</sup>

Paine's story appears reasonable; in reflecting upon his youth, he exhibits not bravado but faintly amused candor. In fact, he counts the adventure among the "inconveniences" which beset his early life. Had a flaw not appeared in the fabric of his tale—his having given his age as sixteen—Paine's anecdote, though a rare personal revelation, would have received even less attention than it has to date.

In the days before privateering was abolished, belligerent governments commissioned privately-owned ships of war, or privateers, to prey upon the vessels of an enemy power. Only after a state of war existed between the two countries could a privateer obtain such a commission.<sup>2</sup> When Thomas Paine turned sixteen in January 1753, England had been at peace for several years. The ensuing war with France did not formally begin until three years later, in May 1756. While the London newspapers occasionally mentioned privateers fitting out in anticipation of war, nowhere is the *Terrible* privateer mentioned until some months after war was declared. Thus Thomas

<sup>1</sup> Philip S. Foner, ed., *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine* (New York, 1945), I, 405, hereinafter, *Writings*.

<sup>2</sup> E. P. Statham, *Privateers and Privateering* (New York, 1910), 6.

Paine was nineteen years of age when the *Terrible* sailed in November 1756, and we have no reason to believe that the privateer had begun fitting out three years earlier, before war with France appeared imminent. Paine's defamatory biographer, George Chalmers, quite readily noted the discrepancy in Paine's age: "how little Pain[e] is to be trusted," he wrote, "when he does pretend to give a passage of his own life."<sup>3</sup>

To understand the error in Paine's version, we can choose one of several explanations. Paine's memory failed as he recounted in 1791 an experience thirty-five years in his past. He had mistaken the name of the *King of Prussia's* Captain, Menzies, for "Mendez." As a rule, however, Paine's friends and acquaintances attributed to him an amazing memory even in his old age; more important, one wonders how Paine could confuse his nineteen-year-old self with a boy three years younger. Second, Paine's hand may have made the error, or, third, perhaps the typesetter was at fault. In either case, the error could easily have escaped detection until after it appeared in print, owing to the somewhat unusual circumstances of the book's publication. The first printer to whom Paine entrusted his manuscript for *Rights of Man, Part the Second*, abandoned the project, perhaps for fear of prosecution for sedition, more likely because he had been bribed or threatened. In doing so, he ruined Paine's original plan to circulate the work just as Parliament was convening.<sup>4</sup> Anxious that his proposals reach the public as quickly as possible, Paine may not have taken sufficient care in examining the proof sheets to catch the error.

While Chalmers' insinuation that Paine was lying must be admitted as another explanation, Paine's claim to a voyage on the *King of Prussia* is eminently more credible than the notion that he made the story up. "I fear no consequences," Paine wrote. "Fortified with that proud integrity that disdains to triumph or to yield, I will advocate the Rights of Man." Paine felt he had, even from "such a beginning, and with all the inconveniences of early life" against him, helped to establish a "new empire" in America and had risen to "eminence in political literature."<sup>5</sup> Feeling himself well

<sup>3</sup> Francis Oldys [George Chalmers], *The Life of Thomas Pain*, 7th ed. (London, 1793), 4n.

<sup>4</sup> Paine describes the incident in the work's Appendix. *Writings*, I, 455-456.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 405-406.

“fortified” with courage and integrity, Paine had no need to manufacture this otherwise rather farfetched tale, in which he cited no specific act of courage in battle, to prove his bravery or virility. His further claim to “disinterestedness that compelled respect” is inconsistent with his confession to having been a sea-going mercenary, or privateer. Paine clearly felt that his violent introduction to manhood was a handicap he overcame. Had he chosen to lie, Paine would hardly have done so in a fashion so inconsistent with the rest of the work, in which he condemns the privateering trade. Paine describes the British law of primogeniture—“a law of brutal injustice”—as “a sort of privateering upon family property”; and he regards privateersmen themselves as little better than pirates when he alludes to them as “the robbers of every nation.”<sup>6</sup> A recurring theme in *Rights of Man* is the militant barbarity of “monarchical governments” continually waging war for the sake of “plunder and revenue.” Privateers waged war on the high seas for the same purposes, and his own admitted motive for going privateering was to “carve his fortune.”

There exists no proof that Paine sailed on the *King of Prussia*. The ship’s log, if indeed Menzies kept one, appears to have vanished, and most official papers concerning the ship name only her captain and officers. On the other hand, no proof exists that Paine did *not* sail. I believe that he did. The episode fits perfectly into what we already know of Paine’s life from 1756 to 1758. It remains only to retell the story in full and to reconstruct the *King of Prussia*’s voyage.

Thomas Paine, aged nineteen, had left his Norfolk home, where he worked with his father making stays for women’s corsets, some time during the spring or summer of 1756. For a brief time, he found work with John Morris, a “very noted stay-maker” on Hanover Street in Long-Acre, London.<sup>8</sup> During the autumn of 1756, dissident journeymen staymakers and tailors were organizing to shorten their workday—6:00 A.M. to 8:00 P.M.—by one hour in

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 401, 414.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 355.

<sup>8</sup> [Chalmers], *Life of Paine*, 4. Earlier editions of this work state that “London did not enjoy long the honour of [Paine’s] residence . . . and few ladies had the happiness of being stayed by his skillful hand.”

the evening. John Morris and ninety-four other masters refused to hire any man who wouldn't work until 8:00 P.M.<sup>9</sup> Thus Thomas had no difficulty finding a job; keeping it, however, proved less than exciting. In early October, his first glimpse of a future that would satisfy his hunger for adventure appeared in the pages of the London *Daily Advertiser*: "To cruise against the French, the *Terrible* Privateer, Capt. William Death. . . . All Gentlemen Sailors, and able-bodied Landmen, who are inclinable to try their Fortune, as well as serve their King and Country, are desired to repair on board the said Ship. . . ." <sup>10</sup>

"Heated with the false heroism" of a schoolmaster who had once sailed on a man-of-war,<sup>11</sup> Thomas signed the ship's articles of agreement and waited for the privateer to sail. Some time before the *Terrible* left port, his father, Joseph Paine, a Quaker, after inquiring of his fellow tradesmen, located the youth and talked him into staying ashore.

As he continued his tedious employment with Morris, however, Thomas reconsidered his father's expostulations, and their effect upon him gradually diminished. The *Terrible* had left Execution Dock in mid-November. Thomas hadn't long to wait before his second chance appeared, as 1756 was drawing to a close. Once again he sought out a privateer that needed men and, on January 17 of the new year, the *King of Prussia* privateer, owned in London and commanded by Edward Menzies, "fell down the River . . . for a six Month's Cruize," with Thomas Paine aboard.<sup>12</sup>

Soon afterward, the first news of the *Terrible's* recent engagement with a French privateer named the *Vengeance* reached London: a three-hour battle "in the Chops of the Channel" had left the *Terrible* "much shattered."<sup>13</sup> As the *King of Prussia* neared the Downs off Deal, London received further word. The *Terrible* had lost more than 150 men. Paine wrote years later that the *Terrible* had "stood the hottest engagement of any ship" during the war;

<sup>9</sup> *Daily Advertiser*, Oct. 16, 1756, hereinafter, *Advertiser*.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, Oct. 2, 1756. The advertisement appeared almost daily for the two weeks following.

<sup>11</sup> *Writings*, I, 405.

<sup>12</sup> Departure of the *Terrible*: *Advertiser*, Nov. 19, 1756; of the *King of Prussia*: *London Chronicle*, I, 70, No. 9, Jan. 18-20, 1757, hereinafter, *Chronicle*.

<sup>13</sup> *Advertiser*, Jan. 25, 1757.

one wonders if he would have sailed with Menzies if he had heard in time the full extent of the *Terrible's* injuries. Captain Death and every other officer but one were killed. Sick and wounded men lying below deck were left there by their captors to die. Only seventeen men survived. Her adversary, the *Vengeance*, also suffered, losing her captain, her second-in-command, and two-thirds of her crew.<sup>14</sup> Small wonder that Paine felt he had been "happily prevented" by his father from making the *Terrible's* disastrous voyage.

After stopping off Dover to pick up "16 or 20 Dutchmen," the *King of Prussia* began her cruise from Falmouth on February 12.<sup>15</sup> Soon after leaving port, Menzies would have conducted exercises in working the ship, preparing for battle, cannonading a target. The function of privateering was to capture or destroy the enemy's maritime commerce. Merchants and other private individuals found this pursuit a lucrative business, and the government encouraged it for the significant contribution "commerce destroyers" made to the financial injury to and psychological subjection of the enemy. Though it resembled piracy in some respects, privateering generally employed more humane methods of warfare and was both legal and respectable. The privateer's captain was legally bound by his instructions from the Crown to treat his prisoners well and to seize only enemy vessels. These differences cannot, however, mask the basic similarity in motive between the two professions: most privateersmen, like their piratical counterparts, sailed not for the glory of King and country, but for profit. Generally more lucrative than naval service, privateering attracted the best seamen available, and the usually large complement of inexperienced men aboard did not seriously diminish the ship's efficiency, as the majority of the men were needed primarily for fighting and not for handling the vessel. Besides, as Paine later wrote, "a few able and social sailors will soon instruct . . . active landsmen in the common work of a ship."<sup>16</sup>

The *King of Prussia* had been at sea only a few weeks when she secured her first prize. In company with the *Tyger* privateer of

<sup>14</sup> "The hottest engagement," in *Common Sense, Writings*, I, 33. For an interesting account of the battle, see Statham, *Privateers*, 106-111.

<sup>15</sup> *Chronicle*, I, 129, No. 17, Feb. 5-8, 1757, and I, 165, No. 21, Feb. 15-17, 1757.

<sup>16</sup> *Common Sense, Writings*, I, 33. Concerning makeup of crew, see James G. Lydon, *Pirates, Privateers and Profits* (Upper Saddle River, N. J., 1970), 192.

Bristol, she captured *Le Bien Acquis*, bound for Mississippi in mid-March. Her cargo and supplies included "1346 Casks of Flour, 60 Barrels of Gunpowder, three 24 Pounders [*cannon*], three 18 Pounders, 60 Bombs, Bomb-Shells, Ammunition, Soldiers Cloaths, &c."<sup>17</sup> When two privateers acted in concert, the spoils were divided between them according to the number of men aboard each ship when battle commenced. For this reason, among others, a privateer usually shipped a larger crew than its size would normally accommodate. A deck crowded with armed men could induce the captain of a potential prize to surrender more quickly. Cargo might have to be moved from the prize's to the captor's hold, and the prize must be manned and the prisoners guarded. The *King of Prussia*, weighing 340 tons, probably 150–200 feet long, had left London with about 250 men, giving her a manpower advantage of at least five or six to one over any merchant vessel. The biggest disadvantage in such a large crew, given the personalities involved, was the threat of mutiny if the cruise were not successful. A "true privateersman," according to one authority, "was a sort of half-horse, half-alligator with a streak of lightning in his composition—something like a man-of-war's man, but much more like a pirate. . . ."<sup>18</sup> His character suited his profession, in which an estimated one-third to one-half the men involved suffered injury, imprisonment, or death.<sup>19</sup> Young Paine, having grown up in a Quaker household without male siblings, probably had no little difficulty adjusting to his shipmates in such cramped quarters.

Menzies and Captain Griffin of the *Tyger* sent *Le Bien Acquis* into Bristol, where, after condemnation by the High Court of Admiralty, her cargo would likely be sold at auction and the vessel itself perhaps fitted out as an English privateer. A second prize soon arrived at Falmouth, this one a French snow (a small ship resembling a brig) named *Le Montreal*, bound for Bordeaux from Martinique.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> *Chronicle*, I, 302, No. 38, Mar. 26–29, 1757. Prizes' names given as listed in Prize Assignment Books, High Court of Admiralty records, Public Records Office, London.

<sup>18</sup> Gomer Williams, *The Liverpool Privateers* (Liverpool, 1897), 5.

<sup>19</sup> Lydon, *Pirates*, 208. Concerning overcrowding, see Donald B. Chidsey, *The American Privateers* (New York, 1962), 40.

<sup>20</sup> *Chronicle*, I, 318, No. 40, Mar. 31–Apr. 2, 1757.

In early April, *La Flore*, a large merchantman sailing home from the West Indies, lay almost within Menzies' grasp when another privateer, the *Lion* of Bristol, which had been chasing the same ship, was seen approaching. No sooner had *La Flore* capitulated to the *King of Prussia* than the *Lion's* Captain How sent out a boat to board the prize. Menzies, unwilling to concede that the *Lion's* presence had helped induce the ship to surrender, threatened to sink the *Lion's* boat. Captain How did not press the matter at sea, awaiting instead his chance in court, and Menzies escorted *La Flore* into Falmouth, to ensure her safe arrival there. The owners of the *Lion*, after persisting with their claim for two years, received one-fifth of *La Flore's* value of £10,400.<sup>21</sup>

For two months, the *King of Prussia* met with no further success. During long periods such as this, battle exercises and sailors' chores and games occupied the crew, staving off boredom and discontent. As a young and inexperienced crewman, Thomas Paine would have been assigned numerous menial tasks; if his superiors knew of his staymaking skill, he may also have been given work mending sails. As many commanders awarded a bonus to the sailor who first sighted the enemy, Thomas may have spent his spare moments staring at the horizon, hoping to glimpse a sail in the distance. Finally, in June, the privateer spotted the *Handy* of Limerick, which had been in French hands for some months.<sup>22</sup> Following his King's instructions to assist all friendly vessels, Menzies overtook and captured the ship, sending her into King Road, near Bristol, and would later be given half her value—a steep price for her Irish owners, but considerably less than her permanent loss to the French.

Joining the *Defiance* of Bristol, the *King of Prussia* next captured a large snow bound for Cape Breton. Both privateers then joined the *Tartar* man-of-war, Captain Lockhart, known for his victories over French privateers, and all three set out "in chace of the French Fleet."<sup>23</sup> Though the *King of Prussia* sailed with twenty-eight carriage and twenty-four swivel guns, Menzies' most important weapons were speed, strategy, and his crew's seamanship. His purpose—to capture his prize with as little damage as possible resulting

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 391, No. 49, Apr. 21–23, 1757. Prize Assignment Books, Public Records Office.

<sup>22</sup> *Advertiser*, June 28, 1757.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, July 5 and 6, 1757.

to either ship—was best served by deceiving, outmaneuvering, or intimidating his opponent into surrender without a prolonged fight. Menzies' strategy might include disguising his nationality until his proximity gave him the clear advantage in the chase. If possible, he approached his enemy's stern, as she could not effectively return fire upon him, and as he might be able to damage her steerage and thus prevent her escape.<sup>24</sup> Few merchant vessels had either the manpower or the gunpower to hold off a privateer for long, but in most instances they made at least a token resistance. Once close upon her, if her captain had not paid much mind to the broadsides fired from the *King of Prussia*, Menzies would "pester" his victim's decks with volleys of small shot, damaging her sails and inflicting casualties. When her captain had had enough, the prize's colors would descend, signalling capitulation. Menzies' men would board the prize, secure officers and crew, and a detail would remain aboard the captured ship to sail her into the nearest friendly port.

After parting from the man-of-war in early July, the *King of Prussia*, still in company with the *Defiance*, subdued *Le Saint Peter* and *Le Saint Martin*, both bound for Canada, and *La Minerve*, laden with "Wine and Provisions."<sup>25</sup> Privateering's "fringe benefits" included somewhat better fare than that aboard a naval vessel, the right capture supplementing the usual rum, beer, salt beef, pork, biscuits, oatmeal and cheese. Each sailor might take, in addition to his share of the winnings at the voyage's end, whatever clothing and other effects he desired from the prisoners, and sometimes also portions of deck cargo aboard the prize.<sup>26</sup>

Once again the *King of Prussia* rescued a friendly vessel, the *Pennsylvania*, which had fallen victim to a French privateer on her voyage to London from Philadelphia. Her commander, Captain Charles Lyon, had somehow concealed from his recent captors a packet intended for the Court of St. James, which Menzies forwarded to London upon his arrival, with the *Pennsylvania*, at Dartmouth on August 20.<sup>27</sup>

There the *King of Prussia* ended her six months' cruise. There is

<sup>24</sup> Charles W. Kendall, *Private Men-of-War* (New York, 1932), 160.

<sup>25</sup> *Advertiser*, July 19, 1757.

<sup>26</sup> Kendall, *Men-of-War*, 163-165.

<sup>27</sup> *Advertiser*, Aug. 25, 1757.



no mention in any London newspaper of the privateer having sailed again, though she may certainly have been sold and renamed. Her owners met in London "on particular Business" in late November, presumably for the division of the spoils.<sup>28</sup> It is difficult to estimate the financial reward Paine reaped from his voyage. Court costs accounted for about one-tenth of the prizes' total value, after which the privateer's owners claimed one-half.<sup>29</sup> Captain, officers, and experienced seamen took the largest shares of the remainder, leaving perhaps one-half of one percent of what was left to each "gentleman volunteer." The *King of Prussia's* cruise should have paid Paine at least £5 per month at sea, or £30 minimum total. Even this amount would seem a fortune to a young man accustomed to poverty. The relative wealth with which he concluded his adventure may explain most satisfactorily Paine's decision not to make a second voyage. He had "carved his fortune" as well as could be expected; though he had escaped injury and imprisonment this voyage, he might not be so fortunate again; he could now enjoy the company of women, and of men with whom he shared more common interests; and, by nature somewhat indolent, Paine could hope for a less arduous existence ashore.

Paine became in his later years an outspoken admirer of God's creation, but he was not, judging by the absence of sea imagery in his praise of nature, especially fond of the unfathomable deep. He enjoyed studying the firmament, and, inspired perhaps by the order and beauty of the stars that shone so tranquilly upon the ocean, Paine later attended the lectures of Newtonian philosophers in London, becoming acquainted with Dr. John Bevis of the Royal Society, "an excellent astronomer."<sup>30</sup> Paine once told a friend that he had "seldom passed five minutes . . . however circumstanced, in

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, Nov. 11, 1757.

<sup>29</sup> Lydon, *Pirates*, 124, 197.

<sup>30</sup> "As soon as I was able," Paine wrote in *The Age of Reason*, "I purchased a pair of globes, and attended the philosophical lectures of Martin and Ferguson, and became afterward acquainted with Dr. Bevis, of . . . the Royal Society, then living in the Temple. . . ." *Writings*, I, 496. As Bevis took up residence in the Middle Temple in 1764, Paine clearly knew him while in London circa 1766, and not, as one recent biographer has suggested, during his sojourn there in 1772-74, by which time Bevis had died. Paine hadn't the financial resources to pay for globes or lectures upon his arrival in London in 1756, nor could he have attended the lectures while he worked for John Morris, as they usually took place between 6:00 and

which [he] did not acquire some knowledge."<sup>31</sup> The practical wisdom of his companions gave him what education he received during his months at sea, and in his writings we find hints of what he remembered. Having observed the men around him, and heard their stories, Paine wrote in 1779 that "men do not, in any great numbers, turn their thoughts to the ocean, till either the country gets filled, or some peculiar advantage or necessity tempts them out. A maritime life is a kind of partial emigration. . . ." Most of the men killed or wounded during the battles he witnessed had been injured "not by cannon balls, but by splinters from the inside of the ship that fly in all directions. . . ." In 1778, Silas Deane's reluctance to produce his financial records for Congress reminded Paine of "what the sailors call a boot account, so much money gone and the Lord knows for what."<sup>32</sup> In discussing the British government's reaction to his *Rights of Man*, Paine employed a number of nautical metaphors. The younger William Pitt's ministers, he observed, had initially regarded the book as "a gale that would soon blow over, and they forbore, like sailors in threatening weather, to whistle, lest they should increase the wind." The book's phenomenal sales, however, alarmed them as a "conspiracy of [the] elements" would alarm "a ship's crew," and, to Pitt's tune, "all hands were piped upon deck" to battle Thomas Paine and the menace of revolution.<sup>33</sup>

Paine may not, as biographers have been quick to assume, have altogether disliked his episode as a privateersman. It is not difficult to imagine Paine, a fountain of anecdotes when he sat among friends, telling tales of battles he had witnessed at sea, recalling his "boyish days."<sup>34</sup> Then what is the significance of Paine's voyage?

7:00 P.M. weekdays and Saturdays, during Paine's working hours. More important, if these lectures had the influence on Paine's religious code which most biographers eagerly ascribe to them, he would not afterward have run off to sea to "carve his fortune." Since Paine did not mention that James Ferguson, like Bevis, was a Fellow of the Royal Society, he probably studied with Ferguson before the latter's election to the Society in 1763, thus during his second stay in London, 1757-58, after returning from his voyage aboard the *King of Prussia*.

<sup>31</sup> Thomas "Clio" Rickman, *Life of Thomas Paine* (1819), in D. E. Wheeler, ed., *Life and Writings of Thomas Paine* (New York, 1908), I, 17.

<sup>32</sup> "Peace, and the Newfoundland Fisheries," *Writings*, II, 202; "Of Gun-Boats," *ibid.*, II, 1068; "To the Public on Mr. Deane's Affair," *ibid.*, II, 115.

<sup>33</sup> *Letter Addressed to the Addressers* . . . , *ibid.*, II, 471, 477.

<sup>34</sup> Rickman, *Life of Paine*, I, 55.

Much has been written concerning the influence of his father's Quaker beliefs on Paine's political theory. If he was aware of the violent nature of privateering when he volunteered, Paine clearly rejected the strict pacifist principle of Quakerism at an early age. In this respect, his voyage may have represented to Paine his first tangible break with authority, in ignoring his father's counsel. He retained, however, a strong moral objection to war for purposes other than self-defense, probably strengthened by his first-hand experience with bloodshed. The obstinacy of Britain's government in suppressing republican opinion persuaded Paine to overrule this objection in support of Napoleon's proposed invasion of England; he likewise appears to have supported an invasion of America when, during John Adams' presidency, similar suppression appeared there. Paine hoped, nevertheless, with typical optimism, for bloodless revolutions in both countries.

Paine's experience is important also in that it established more firmly the interest in maritime affairs natural to a young man from Norfolk, a county with a long seafaring tradition. Paine wrote numerous essays, and advised his political colleagues, on the construction of navies, the utilization of gunboats for invasion and defense, and the rights of neutral vessels in time of war.

After spending the winter of 1757-1758 in London, Paine moved on, when the money ran out, to Dover to resume staymaking. The independent spirit Paine had evinced in choosing his dream of adventure over his father's remonstrances, danger over boredom, marked much of his following career, in which he preferred the heat of controversy to the tranquility of mundane pursuits. As one friend noted, Paine "seemed to delight in difficulties."<sup>35</sup> In spite of the unhappiness, the failures, the poverty of the following seventeen years he spent in England—perhaps partially because of them—Paine retained that spirit, to which he owed his notoriety during the American and French Revolutions.

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<sup>35</sup> John Hall Manuscripts, Dec. 27, 1786, quoted in David Freeman Hawke, *Paine* (New York, Harper & Row, 1974), 160.