Preface

Tom Paine and William Cobbett were at the heart of the revolutionary changes that swept over the Atlantic world during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Both men came from the ranks of the "common people" in England, both found their identity as political writers in America, and both eventually became central figures in the English popular Radical movement. The differences between them were equally striking. Paine entered politics in America as the author of *Common Sense*, the most forceful and explicit argument for independence and republicanism ever to appear in the Thirteen Colonies. Cobbett began his career as a political writer eighteen years later than Paine and emerged not as a Radical but as a High Tory who attempted to revive pro-British sentiment in the new republic. He did not become a Radical until some years after his return to England in 1800, when he was converted in part by Paine's earlier writings. Yet, despite these differences, the broad patterns of Paine's and Cobbett's careers display remarkable similarities and interconnections that have never received the attention they deserve.1

This book places the parallel careers of Paine and Cobbett in their Anglo-American context. It not only discusses the relationship between their ideas but also examines how their early experiences affected their success in America, and the way in which their perceptions of America were woven into their subsequent political writings in England. Special attention is paid to four major themes in Paine's and

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Cobbett’s thought: the transformation of minority British Radical ideas into a democratic, republican, and revolutionary ideology in America; the eighteenth-century revolution in rhetoric which established new standards for the style and structure of persuasive discourse; the impact of the American and French revolutions on British popular Radicalism; and the American attempt to turn the United States into a new and powerful Empire of Liberty.

Any new work on Paine and Cobbett can only benefit from the immense literature on their careers. Of the two men, Paine has attracted more attention from historians; well over two hundred books, dissertations, and articles on Paine have appeared this century. One school of thought, influenced by the work of Harry Hayden Clark, has examined Paine’s writings in the light of eighteenth-century scientific deism, and perceives him as “essentially an ideologue or theorist” who applied popularized Newtonian notions of natural order to questions of politics and religion. Other scholars, recognizing that Paine’s writing style was central to his popularity, have concentrated on his rhetorical method. In a significant change of emphasis, Eric Foner’s *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America* has made an “early attempt” to locate Paine’s republicanism in its social context. And the recent work of Alfred Aldridge has attempted to analyse “the intellectual content of Paine’s writings between 1775 and 1787.”

In clarifying where my own work stands in relation to earlier interpretations of Paine’s thought and language, I would stress three points. First, my attempt to place Paine’s political formation within the process of Anglo-American ideological interchange has led me in different

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directions from those pursued by Clark and Aldridge. Clark’s emphasis on scientific deism as the key explanatory factor in Paine’s intellectual development not only projected views that Paine articulated later in life back onto his earlier writings and underplayed the pressure of events on his ideas, but also crowded out consideration of the influence of Anglo-American Radical traditions on Paine’s work. Aldridge, in contrast, was concerned to identify the ideological origins of Paine’s thought but looked for them in the wrong place. Whereas Aldridge embarked on a long and largely fruitless voyage to discover whether Paine was influenced by Locke, Rousseau, and Montesquieu, rejected the possibility that seventeenth-century republican writers may have affected Paine’s viewpoint, and ignored the contribution of Real Whig notions to Paine’s thought, I maintain that Paine’s democratic republicanism grew out of the very traditions that Aldridge dismissed or overlooked.

Second, my analysis of Paine’s use of language links his writing style to eighteenth-century theories of logic and rhetoric engendered by the scientific revolution. Although earlier scholars have examined Paine’s “rhetoric of revolution,” I have drawn on Wilbur Howell’s *Eighteenth-Century British Logic and Rhetoric* to argue that Paine’s style is best understood as part of a wider “revolution in rhetoric.” In taking this position, I cannot accept Eric Foner’s contention that Paine was “unique” in that he “forged a new political language” and “created a literary style designed to bring his message to the widest possible audience.” Paine did indeed aim at a wide audience. But to argue

7 In this respect my analysis of Paine has been influenced by the work of historians like Bailyn, *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*; and Wood, *Creation of the American Republic.*


9 This avenue of exploration was first suggested by Howell in his review of Boulton, *Language of Politics,* pp. 521–23. See also Howell, “Declaration of Independence,” pp. 464–84. The one attempt to apply Howell’s work to Paine’s writings, Betka, “Ideology and Rhetoric,” misinterprets Howell’s analysis of the new logic and rhetoric, and is thus of little value to students of Paine’s use of language.

10 Foner, *Tom Paine,* p. xvi. It is true that Foner acknowledges in passing that Paine “was not the first writer of the eighteenth century consciously to address himself to a wide readership” (p. 84), but he ignores the broader implications of his own observation. Rather than probing the similarities between Paine and earlier exponents of the plain style, and viewing such writers against the background of changes in rhetorical theory, Foner prefers to see Paine as the pioneer of a democratic literary
that his style was unique is to ignore the influence of the new rhetoric on him. Once this influence is recognized, it is difficult to view Paine’s approach to language as essentially the product of his political position. In any case, Paine acquired the basic characteristics of his style well before he became a democratic republican writer in America.

The third area of difference is largely one of emphasis. Foner and Aldridge were primarily concerned with Paine’s place in the American Revolution. From this perspective, Foner has provided a superb analysis of Paine’s republicanism, although his attempt to link Paine to a distinct “artisan constituency” in Philadelphia is less successful. Aldridge has written a detailed account of Paine’s arguments and attitudes in America, and has assessed the strengths and weaknesses of his views on such matters as the origins of government, the relationship between society and government, and the role of providence in political developments. Rather than focusing on Paine’s American career, I have stressed the relationship between his English and American experiences and have analysed Paine’s political writings within an Anglo-American framework.

A similar perspective lies behind my approach to Cobbett’s work. Until recently, most books on Cobbett concentrated on his career as a Radical journalist in early nineteenth-century England; his Tory origins in late eighteenth-century America have generally been neglected or treated as an aberration. In G. D. H. Cole’s view, for example, Cobbett’s American experiences “were from the political standpoint wander-years,” and when Cobbett finally joined the English Radical movement the “prodigal son had come back to his own people.” Other biographical and analytical studies of Cobbett skated lightly over his American career, implicitly indicating its lack of importance. Yet America played a central role in shaping Cobbett’s distinctive ideology; his Radicalism in England was organically connected to his Toryism in America.

To some extent, this excessive preoccupation with Cobbett’s English style, and portrays Paine’s approach to writing as being more innovative than it actually was.

11 For a perceptive critique of Foner’s attempt to correlate Paine’s ideology with the attitudes and aspirations of Philadelphia’s artisans, see G. Wills’s review of Foner, *Tom Paine*, pp. 21–23.


writings has been redressed by the two latest biographies of Cobbett. Both George Spater's *William Cobbett: The Poor Man's Friend* and Daniel Green's *Great Cobbett: The Noblest Agitator* pay careful attention to his American career.\(^\text{14}\) Spater's book, in particular, has unearthed much valuable new material about its subject and is rapidly establishing itself as the authority in its field. In Spater's view, Cobbett was a personal romantic but a political realist, a man who may have portrayed his frequently troubled family life in terms of idyllic domestic bliss, but who retained a hard, practical grip on contemporary political developments.\(^\text{15}\) Accordingly, Spater downplayed Cobbett's glorification of the past, and stressed his political Radicalism in England rather than his social nostalgia. "Those who claim that Cobbett was looking for the restoration of a golden age," asserted Spater, "are talking nonsense. . . . Cobbett never had the slightest notion that the poor should be made rich."\(^\text{16}\)

In contrast to this viewpoint, I argue that not only Cobbett's personal life but also his political outlook was fuelled by a dynamic tension between the ideal and the real, and that his ambivalent relationship to Paine and the United States is crucial to understanding his complex and often contradictory career. I also take issue with Spater's contention that Cobbett was not striving to restore an English Golden Age. Although it is undoubtedly true, as Spater pointed out, that Cobbett did not desire social equality, he nonetheless wanted his country to return to the mythical past of honest patriotism, honour, and decency that supposedly preceded the corrosive influence of the public finance system and the spread of commercial values.\(^\text{17}\) With this in mind, I differ in my approach from Spater and from Cobbett's other histo-


\(^{15}\) Among other things, Spater discovered that, while Cobbett in *Advice to Young Men* was portraying an idyllic picture of his family life, in reality his wife had attempted to commit suicide and his family was turning against him. The contrast between his self-image and his actual behaviour could not have been more striking.

\(^{16}\) Spater, *William Cobbett*, p. 201.

\(^{17}\) The problem here is that Spater confused a golden age with social equality. Cobbett's attempt to make nineteenth-century England conform with his ideal image of traditional English values envisaged an equality of respect but not of circumstances. It is clear that his social nostalgia struck a responsive chord among many of his English readers; in this sense, Cobbett's very lack of realism goes far to explain his popular appeal.
rians by focusing on the connection between his American and English careers, the influence of Paine's ideas on him, and the place of America in the blend of politically Radical and socially conservative attitudes which emerged in Cobbett's early nineteenth-century writings.

When discussing Paine's and Cobbett's careers, it is important to recognize and confront certain conceptual difficulties. One cannot always take at face value each man's statements about his past. Paine wrote little about his first thirty-seven years in England, and what he did write was frequently tailored to fit his self-image or literary persona. He portrayed himself as a man who only began writing with the outbreak of the American Revolution, and as a self-made political thinker who never troubled himself with other people's ideas. "I scarcely ever quote," he once commented; "the reason is, I always think." Yet Paine did publish material before the American Revolution, and was highly sensitive to contemporary currents of thought; indeed, he cited well over a hundred authors in his writing. Paine may actually have come to believe his own self-image; the historian, however, should not.

For his part, Cobbett was quite prepared to distort his past if it would help him win an argument. When he began his career as a Tory writer in America, for example, he cheerfully pretended to be an American to win support for his views. "I have frequented Christ Church [in Philadelphia] for near about thirty years," he told his readers in 1795; in fact, he had lived in Philadelphia for not much more than thirty weeks. Or again when he was a Tory he indignantly denied having written in his youth a "democratical" pamphlet entitled The Soldier's Friend, but after his conversion to political Radicalism he claimed authorship of the work. Given Cobbett's tendency to rewrite


21 Cobbett completely dissociated himself from the pamphlet in PR, 20 August 1803. In PR, 5 October 1805, he again denied authorship but was less critical of the
his own history according to his present concerns, it is important to approach his work with considerable scepticism.

This pragmatic element in Paine's and Cobbett's writings should alert us to the danger of treating both men as coherent philosophical thinkers. Paine and Cobbett were persuasive political writers embroiled in a series of fierce political debates; writing in specific situations with specific purposes in mind, they were more interested in winning arguments than in winning prizes for intellectual consistency. Paine often sacrificed logical coherence to immediate polemical advantage, and Cobbett contradicted himself so many times that a minor industry grew up using his early Tory arguments to counter his later Radical ones. Yet there were also broad consistencies within each man's approach. As Eric Foner pointed out, the chief components of Paine's republicanism were political egalitarianism, hostility to monarchy and aristocracy, an awareness of American potential, and faith in economic growth. And through Cobbett's shifting position on details, one can detect some general themes: the idealization and glorification of traditional English liberty and justice, hostility to the misuse and abuse of power, and a deep sense of human dignity. Just as it is wrong to elevate tactical statements by Paine and Cobbett into part of a philosophical system, it is also misleading to ignore the central assumptions and attitudes behind their arguments.

In assessing the relationship between principle and pragmatism in Paine's and Cobbett's thought, and in examining the forces that helped shape their political views, the question of "influence" must be considered. At one pole, there is the notion that ideas are transferred directly from one individual to another; from this perspective, evidence for such influence is often found by establishing close textual

pamphlet's sentiments. However, in PR, 23 June 1832, and PR, 28 December 1833, Cobbett stated that The Soldier's Friend was the first work that he wrote for the press. The content, style, and timing of the pamphlet, together with Cobbett's later statements, indicate that he actually was the author.

22 A good example of Paine's pragmatism can be found in his first pamphlet, the Case of the Officers of Excise, where he argued in one breath that excise officers had no chance of getting alternative employment, and in the next that low wages drove officers to find work as accountants or teachers. See Case, 2: 7, 12. Anonymous works quoting Cobbett the Tory to attack Cobbett the Radical include The Cameleon; Elements of Reform; "Cobbett against Cobbett" in The Times, 14 November 1816; The Beauties of Cobbett; The Book of Wonders, and Cobbett's Penny Trash.

similarities between different writers, and the borrower is usually seen as a passive receptacle of earlier arguments. At the other extreme, the search for specific influences is dismissed as futile and misleading, and a writer is viewed as picking up ideas which are floating around "in the air." My own approach combines elements of both these positions. Writers like Paine and Cobbett were strongly influenced by the ideological atmosphere in which they moved, and they responded creatively to the ideas around them. The nature of this response and the degree of creativity depended on their particular experiences and personal capabilities. Specific influences could and did operate on specific works; direct borrowing coexisted with indirect influence. Thus in my discussion of Common Sense I maintain that Paine’s arguments were not only affected by Real Whig and republican traditions in general but also by particular works belonging to those traditions. And both Paine and Cobbett transformed eighteenth-century opposition thought into new ideologies as they were hurled into trajectories they could not always understand but felt compelled to explain. Paine and Cobbett were many things, but they were not the passive receptacles of other people’s ideas.

Finally, any study of Paine and Cobbett has to decide what to leave out. Interpreting their political writings from a transatlantic perspective, I make no claims that this book is comprehensive in scope or definitive in conclusions. Many important questions, such as the impact of Paine's Rights of Man on American politics, the nature of Cobbett’s critique of the English financial system, and the place of Paine and Cobbett in the British working-class movement, deserve full-scale studies in themselves rather than the relatively brief treatment they receive here. Major works like Paine's Age of Reason and Cobbett's Rural Rides are given less attention than obscure and un-influential pamphlets such as Paine's Case of the Officers of Excise and Cobbett's The Soldier's Friend. But since these comparatively unknown pamphlets throw valuable light on Paine's and Cobbett's attitudes shortly before their success in America, such an emphasis is considered justified here.

After a brief prologue establishing the importance of Paine's and Cobbett's careers and discussing the links between them, the book falls into two parts. Part One, which deals with Paine, is divided into three chapters. Chapter I examines Paine's social experiences in England, and explores the ideological, scientific, and literary influences on his intellectual formation before he left for America in 1774. Chap-
ter II analyses his impact on the Thirteen Colonies from the perspective of his English background; it focuses on his changing definitions of England and America in 1775, his transformation of eighteenth-century British Radical arguments into a new form of democratic republicanism, and the rhetorical style and structure of *Common Sense*. Chapter III discusses the way in which Paine's participation in the American Revolution affected the tone, content, and appeal of the *Rights of Man* in Britain.

Part Two examines the parallel Anglo-American pattern of Cobbett's career. Chapter IV shows how Cobbett's early experiences in England and New Brunswick turned him into a young Paineite republican, and Chapter V attempts to explain his subsequent emergence as a Tory pamphleteer and journalist in the United States. My discussion of Cobbett's American career emphasizes his attitude towards democracy, democrats, and Tom Paine, his use of language, and his attempt to strengthen Britain's position in the struggle between rival British, French, Spanish, and American imperialisms for hegemony in the New World. In Chapter VI, I discuss Cobbett's experiences back in England after 1800, his disillusionment with the English political system which he had glorified in the United States, his conversion to a species of Tory Radicalism, his changing perception of Paine's writings, and his increasingly ambivalent attitude to the American Empire of Liberty.

The epilogue summarizes the differences and similarities in Paine's and Cobbett's careers, examines their strategies for change, and discusses their ambiguous legacies to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. By this time, one central point should be clear: America played a pivotal role in the development of both Paine's and Cobbett's thought.