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Harvey J. Kaye. *Thomas Paine and the Promise of America.* New York: Hill & Wang, 2005. 262 pp. $15.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8090-9344-1; $25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8090-8970-3.

Reviewed by Matthew Hale (Department of History, Goucher College)
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In the Beginning There Was Paine

Thomas Paine and the Promise of America is an ambitious, passionate book. According to author Harvey J. Kaye, "this work is not simply an attempt to do justice to Paine. It is about the democratic currents that have run through American experience–currents that Paine did so much to bring forth, that later generations did so much to sustain, and that we continue to feel" (p. 14). Having set forth this expansive agenda, Kaye brings into relief various aspects of Paine's achievements and historical reputation. Nevertheless, Kaye's ambition and passion too often undermine the analytical force of specific passages, as well as the larger argument.

Kaye begins with a four-chapter treatment of Paine and his times. Although there is little in these chapters that will be new to historians of the early republic, they offer a number of elegant statements regarding Paine's revolutionary labors. Paine "grasped the originality of American life," asserts Kaye in one instance. "And inspired by it, he would make Americans aware of themselves as Americans, a people possessed of exceptional purpose and promise and capable of creating a free, equal, and democratic nation-state that would become an 'example to the world'" (p. 41). These sentences precede an astute assessment of *Common Sense* and the way in which it "made clear that the problem was not the current king or government but the very structure and character of Britain's political and social order" (p. 43). Equally smart is the assertion that "Paine's great mischief ... was to democratize ideas that had previously circulated only among the higher social ranks by making them understandable and accessible to laboring folk" (p. 84). Blending biographical description with brief summaries of Paine's major works, Kaye thus provides an accessible, thoughtful account of the man John Adams considered in 1805 to be the single most influential figure in "the last thirty years" (p. 94).

Subsequent to the sections on Paine and his times are four chapters discussing Paine's historical reputation. Chapter 5, "Freedom Must Have All or None," considers the ways in which social utopians, transcendentalists, novelists, abolitionists, women's rights activists, and Abraham Lincoln read and used Paine. Chapter 6, "When, in Countries That Are Called Civilized," outlines Paine's place among Gilded Age farmers, anarchists, labor unions, immigrants, industrialists, social reformers, and Progressive politicians. In chapter 7, "Tyranny, Like Hell, Is Not Easily Conquered," the reader confronts the status of Paine within the writings of Woodrow Wilson, World War I advocates, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, scholars Carl Van Doren and Vernon Parrington, and Popular Front activists. Finally, chapter 8, "We Have It in Our Power," offers remarks about Paine's connection to Henry Steele Commager, C. Wright Mills, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, the House Committee on Un-American Activities, and the New Right.

Taken together, chapters 5 through 8 comprise the most original and provocative portion of the book. No other scholar has uncovered the degree to which Paine's words and ideas resonated in nineteenth- and twentieth-century American society. Indeed, it is a testament to Kaye's impressive research skills that he can marshal vivid details like a 1926 *Better Homes and Gardens* reference to Paine's New Rochelle cottage and a World War II pilot who named his airplane *Tom Paine* (pp. 206, 221). In addition, Kaye clearly shows that Paine's legacy has been hotly contested from the early nineteenth century to the present. To be sure, leftist, secular radicals have shown the greatest and most abiding affinity for the author of *Common Sense* (1776) and *The Age of Reason* (1794), but various conservatives and centrists have also found value in Paine's work and ideas.

Unfortunately, the depth and breadth of Kaye's research on Paine and his legacy leads to a number of problems. For one thing, the presentation of evidence sometimes overwhelms the analysis. Quotes and examples are listed at length, but Kaye too frequently fails to plumb

the historical meaning of the material provided. (See, for example, the first full paragraph on page 218.) Along the same lines, the author does not always distinguish between those individuals who read and commented on Paine in a serious, sustained manner and those who casually and opportunistically cited one of Paine's sparkling phrases.

Even more seriously, *Thomas Paine and the Promise of America* falters because the author is too eager to find Paine's influence in every nook and cranny of American history. Kaye asserts that *Democratic Review* editor "John O'Sullivan and his associates exuded optimism about America's prospects, and in that vein Paine's arguments regularly resounded," but that type of claim is too vague to be convincing; patriotic optimism about the future of the United States was a broad cultural phenomenon that transcended Paine's writings and influence (p. 142). In similar fashion, the statement that "just as *Common Sense* ... led the way to July 4, [Ralph Waldo Emerson's] *Nature* paved the way to 'The American Scholar"' is highly questionable (p. 141). Both *Common Sense* and *Nature* provoked controversy, to be sure, but beyond that they shared little in terms of their content and cultural impact: the former was a popular political tract written during a time of imperial crisis, while the latter was an esoteric philosophical treatise written for a narrow religious and scholarly elite. Finally, the idea that Paine "apparently ... turned" Abigail Adams "into a feminist democrat" is at best dubious (p. 52). Kaye quotes Adams's famous "Remember the ladies" letter, but that difficult-to-interpret missive does not offer convincing proof that Adams had become a "feminist democrat." Nor does it provide evidence that Paine's writings functioned as a catalyst for Adams's plea on behalf of the "ladies."

Kaye implicitly acknowledges a tendency to see Paine in everything when he makes statements like "consciously or otherwise, [Woodrow] Wilson made Paine's conception of America's world-historical role his own" and "conceivably influenced by Common Sense, [Elizabeth Cady] Stanton herself drafted ... the gathering's 'Declaration of Sentiments,' which she modeled directly on the Declaration of Independence" (pp. 198, 151-152). Yet those subtle concessions–and others like them (see pp. 121, 169, 179, 197, 213, 223-24)–do not stop Kaye from wanting to attribute virtually every kind of reformist and radical action to Paine. By the end of the book, in fact, classic 1960s texts like Michael Harrington's *The Other America*, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, and Ralph Nader's *Unsafe at Any Speed* are linked to Paine (and to each other) by the imprecise and doubtful introductory comment, "it might have seemed that Paine himself had returned, for despite the power of television, 'pamphlets' were playing a critical role in fomenting political action" (p. 243).

Given the propensity to read Paine's influence into a wide variety of texts and historical movements, it is both odd and problematic that Kaye authoritatively insists that "not all of us are Painites ... conservatives do not–and truly cannot–embrace him and his arguments" (p. 259). In the first place, there is no explanation offered as to why conservative claims about the need for small central government and ardent patriotism, which mesh nicely with many of Paine's writings, are less true to Paine's legacy than various arguments offered by liberals. More importantly, the notion that only one modern political group can justly lay claim to Paine's legacy risks the rather ahistorical assumption that late eighteenth-century ideas are easily translatable to different eras. That assumption does not seem to bother Kaye, however, and the author goes so far as to assert that he knows how Paine would have responded to the crisis of Union in the 1850s and to the first and second New Deals in the 1930s (pp. 150, 211). But can Kaye really presume to know this? And is it really the job of the historian to speculate about such matters?

Kaye can perhaps be excused for straying rather far from the realm of the historian because, in many ways, this text strives to be so much more than a history book. In the middle of chapter 8, Kaye writes that "C. Wright Mills more than admired Paine–he wanted to be Paine" (p. 237). Something similar could be said of Kaye. This book reads less like a traditional monograph than a political tract, and the reader senses throughout that Paine and his legacy are simply useful springboards for a populist call to democratic, even revolutionary, reform. "We must rediscover and reinvigorate the optimism, energy, and imagination that" inspired Paine, Kaye writes, and "we have good reason not only to hope but also to act" (pp. 261-262). Apart from historians' judgments, therefore, perhaps the ultimate measure of this book will be whether it stimulates readers to "rediscover and reinvigorate" the democratic "promise of America."

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