

Moncure Conway/Thomas Paine: Unlikely Connections
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Moncure Conway's name is well known among us, but far too little else. That portrait on the wall back there gives no hint of breadths and depths that challenged the South on its own turf, in nearby tiny Falmouth. Abolitionists were more numerous here than history leads us to believe, but most of them questioned the *economics of slavery*, arguing paid labor as less costly than cadres of impoverished dependents. Whereas, Conway raised everyone's sights; deeming it a moral issue, deeply troubling to Christian principles, and to America's vaunted concepts of egalitarianism. Just as his hero, Thomas Paine, had called the cause of America "...*the cause of all mankind*," so Conway saw the issues of slavery putting himself well beyond the pale of established Southern convention. One historian calls him, THE "...*most thoroughgoing white male radical produced by the ante-bellum South*," His self-assessment echoes that with just a hint of amusement, calling himself "...*a natural radical, one to whose soul radicalism was as air to a bird*."

Nothing in this portrait hints at that, however - and little in his lineage, either.

He was born in 1832, into a genteel family - slave-holders - (his farmer-father had fifty); earliest years steeped in Christian certitudes, mother deeply religious, Moncure Daniel Conway whose descendancy from First Families of Virginia included Washingtons, a Declaration signer, minister, Supreme Court Justice, federal and state legislators - few to no radicals there. Plenty of conservatives, though; among whom human trafficking sustained an economy, in which established religion piously concurred. Radicals like Conway disagreed.

But there is more to our descendancy than endless lines of "begats". What I have in mind here is *Intellectual descent ? What about that?* Currents of custom and thought, poured into the lifestream of human character - which, with time, define it. An ongoing flow which, in final analysis, may mean as much to our make-up as any variant of genetic code.

In which sense, Moncure Conway was Gulliver - Falmouth was Lilliput - and he had to break away. As *intellectual descendant* of populations who shaped first The Enlightenment and then the Age of Reason, the taproot of *his* character was nourished by tributaries flowing from *those* times.

When it was time for college, his family sent him to Dickinson, a methodist university up in New Jersey, confident that they had chosen well. From which point, however, the parochialism of early Southern Methodism was overtaken by something then and now called *Freethought* - broadly expressed in the ministries of New England, notably Theodore Parker, who from a Unitarian pulpit in Boston addressed much of the nation. Throughout the nineteenth century, the chiefest contribution of *Freethought* to entrenched religiosity was to break from scriptural dogma and challenge people to *think*.

Bible based religion doesn't encourage thought, and replaces reason with faith. But Freethought - something else again - moved beyond, into the realms of polemics and a clerical activism whose pulsing core was reformist and deeply humanitarian. In support of which, by 1850, New England's burgeoning Transcendentalism had brought rising tides to a powerful Northern Abolitionist Movement, to which Ralph Waldo Emerson lent content. Sweeping the youthful Gulliver out of his Methodist pulpit where, for two years, he'd held forth, into the realms of Harvard Divinity School; a challenging and life changing event.

From whence - in the fullness of time - a newly minted Unitarian burst forth; one who had met,

and was moved by, the singularity and spirituality of Walt Whitman, Henry David Thoreau, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Margaret Fuller - a roster of social reformers. Actual study with Emerson was his particular joy, and a somewhat goulsh post-mortem contact with social activist - Founding Father Thomas Paine, which underscored his research for Paine's extensive biography.

It comes as no surprise that Harvard Divinity propelled their promising grad into another ministry, though the setting may: the gilded cage of Washington's prestigious First Unitarian Church, still going strong up there. Then and now, a pulpit with a national audience. For two years Conway distinguished himself, fulfilling predictions he'd soon be lauded and applauded. Some in such a millieu would've found content as the pet of an influential social set, but they had taken on a firebrand.

A growing public presence as ministerial gadfly made him a target for the press. Heedless of which - (he did not suffer fools) - and vastly impatient with the lingering conservatism of entrenched biblical perspective - he badgered D.C. parishioners to "Take a public anti-slavery stance!" Going so far - at the Western Unitarian Conference - as to drop yet other bombshells: rejecting the relevance of the Bible, denying miracles and the mythos of Jesus, introducing Charles Darwin, whose ORIGIN OF SPECIES so rattled western complacencies. Conway wanted thoughtful souls to re-consider their perspectives: evolution as growth - what place might that hold in God's scheme? Fair question. Parker and Emerson urged thought upon their followers.

But Conway's people thought it a bit much. His candid self-perception as a radical resonated poorly among them, opening a schism into which about half of them plunged, forming a new fellowship...in a separate building. A crisis of some magnitude, no doubt. Still he went on, trouncing and denouncing the institution of slavery as a national disgrace, deeming it a matter exceeding the limited concerns of politics and economics. A national **moral issue with inherent religious obligations**, calling for confrontation by reticent congregations. In effect, an open and direct demand telling each and all: "*Take a stand!*"

Which they soon did. One year after the welcome mat went out - it went in. But it was Washington, right? Not precisely Brobdignag, few giants among them - just parishioners variously serving the realms of politics, and Mamon, with services to God and Country, well - negotiable. As it is now , so it was then - *ad infinitum*.

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His life had gone off balance but he wasn't left to beg on the street. Twenty-nine years before his birth - back in 1803 - Freestate Ohio had conferred manumission on all who were formerly enslaved.. So he flew the gilded coop to Cincinnati where the Unitarian welcome mat was out, took another pulpit, and a wife. Ellen Dana - feminist and member of his congregation. Whom he took to Lilliput soon thereafter, to introduce her to family, but the welcome mat was pulled in there, as well. His earlier exodus from Southern methodism virtually insured that, father having all but disowned him, telling him, "*I'd rather you had turned to drink.*" Then, poor Ellen widened the rift, hugging and kissing a slave child, openly offending entrenched local taboos. Social gaff? Implied rebuke?Whichever; rapproachment was 17 years in coming. Families can do that to each other.

Through the long, contentious 1850's, abolitionist views found ample coverage with the national press lauding or lambasting the radical Conway's increasingly pacifist perceptions, he framing it as unassailable premise: **that war - any war - degrades humankind**. Another of those interesting ideas whose time is yet to come; people agree in principle, but fail to back it up with civil action.

So he turned his broadsides on the North:
Dragging their feet over emancipation put northern credibility at stake.

Free and Slave State issues posed as much a threat to the Union as looming and protracted Civil War.

But even Ohio Unitarians debated moralist perspectives, forcing him farther afield. Visiting the White House and Lincoln, Conway urging emancipation as the war's core issue, predicting it would end it in weeks; but martial perspectives prevailed. War was two years underway before The Emancipation Proclamation that "...a nation cannot live half slave and half free." Which conferred a moral purpose on the conflict, but a paler version of what Conway had hoped for, more than one historian noting that knotty issues of Equal Rights were left for the 20th century to resolve.

So now his social activism took on torque - putting his life on the line as surely as if he'd picked up a commission, which he did not. **Conway Colony** - another indelible marker - soon came into being with a long and dangerous trek back here to Falmouth, which rounded up thirty of his father's former slaves, conveying each and all in safety back to Ohio's tiny town of Yellow Springs. Implicit to which, the history of this time and place tells us that the compliance of Baltimore and Ohio Railway underwrote this risky venture. Riskier by far had they all done it a-foot. Human trafficking so attracted rapacious bounty hunters, that even freed blacks were kidnapped and sold into servitude again. The colony wears its old name today; but many there proudly trace their lineage to those who came with Conway.

Prompting his bitter conviction, though, that the north - for all its posturing - really was more interested in conquest. Deeply discouraged and doubtful of the future as well as his earliest beliefs - wholly estranged from family - he was no longer at home in America. At which point, facing the draft, his pacifism led him to apply for a Grand Army of The Republic deferment. Available for \$600. Somehow, he raised the severance cash, and pulled up stakes.

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Turning his sights and insights on England, he and Ellen took themselves to London, whose South Place Chapel welcomed them and offered him a pulpit with Brits as parishioners now. A dissenting Universalist Church - more like an ethical society - South Place was peopled by those for whom FREETHOUGHT was a basic component of social activism. Feeling himself finally at home - Conway continued writing and speaking in that same vein which had so distanced him from all the old parochial perspectives.

Forty-five ex-pat years went by, nearly another lifetime - throughout which, it's fair to think that South Place perceptions underwrote those of the present. Among the Brits of today, non-believers now comprise 63% of population, and 83% blame religion as a cause of harmful global divisiveness. In terms of intellectual descendants, these could well be Conway's. Heirs, at the very least, to his legacy of books and publications, of which - what summons our attention is his lengthy LIFE OF THOMAS PAINE.

To this day THE definitive biography.

And WHAT may we suppose prompted that?

Tom Paine - whose sun arced the heavens, before he fell from public grace, never to rise again. Their lives did not overlap, though a case can be made that their perspectives did. Born a century before, Paine came here at Ben Franklin's behest having met him in London. Franklin saying, "*Your best future lies out there with us.*" And he, a political animal, bred in the bone, *uncertain* of the future - *unhappy* with hereditary government, turned **his sights and insights** on the colonies saying, in effect, "*I'll go check 'em out.*"

Like Conway, he found his metier. His arrival on our side of the pond quickly had him underwriting colonial independence with clamorous articles; Philadelphia's widely read **Pennsylvania Magazine**, earning him a lively reputation. Livelier still with America's first Best Seller. **COMMON SENSE**. Half a million copies sold here and abroad, followed by the series titled CRISIS. Sixteen

widely ranging pamphlets. *These are the times that try men's souls...*" Remember?. Lots of us had to memorize those lines. Washington read them to his troops. Frenetic times. Paine's powerhouse perspectives - volatile and vast - shed their enlightenment on worlds old and new, garnering a public approbation which to all intents was global.

So the crash, when it came - was total, bordering annihilation, and ever thereafter his name was villified. Why?

Following the victory at Yorktown, pursuing fortune's perspectives, he crossed back to Europe, where ongoing struggles in England and France pitted emergent republicanism against entrenched monarchy. England impounding **THE RIGHTS OF MAN**, his next best-seller, calling it seditious, and would've clapped him in irons; but **that same book** had made him a hero in France. His narrow escape to Paris found him welcomed *"France, sir, calls you to its bosom - contribute by wise legislation, to the happiness of a people whose destinies interest **all who think...**"* He was delighted to accept; serving with courage and distinction; celebrated everywhere he went. The only American citizen/member of the Revolutionary Tribunal of France.

And then.... humanist principles led him to back the wrong horse: Louis Bourbon Capet. Paine putting *"Monarchy and not the man on trial!"* With that *moral high ground* quickly overcome by a public lust for butchery and blood. Denounced as a monarchist, sentenced to the guillotine, in filthy Luxembourg prison, he languished for months, during which the question was, which would get him first: typhus or the *National Razor?* (They actually called it that) All made moot with amazing luck when - with hours to spare - his jailer mis-marked his door. Drums rolled - the tumbrils left without him, and days later, a chilling karma sent Robespierre under the blade. Ending the carnage and Paine's long imprisonment as well. James Monroe, newly minister to France, earnestly worked for his release, whereas others who might have done so - Washington among them - all but ignored his plight and seemed simply to leave him to his fate. Almost as though his usefulness to them had waned. A murky bit of business still under dispute.

"With a hearty good will," he says, he cursed *"...the French (as) the authors of the terrible system that turned the character of the revolution I had been proud to defend."* Far too sick to go home, recuperation wore away a year. During which, the Monroes nursed him, having taken him in; James Monroe of whom Jefferson said, *"...you could turn his soul inside out and find no spot upon it."*

Jefferson as President, and Paine's longtime friend, offered a warship to come pick him up, but underground copies of **RIGHTS OF MAN** were still in circulation, and English raiders still patrolled the waters. Dicier yet, **THE AGE OF REASON** - helped by complicit friends - had gone into print preceding his return. Another huge best-seller, completed in jail - the book that finally did him in.

Aged and desperately frail - he reached the States by packet to find himself *persona non grata*. With even those indebted to his written contributions, nonetheless ignoring pleas for aid. Why? All but abandoned now - few options left and fewer places to go, he retired to his isolated farm in New Rochelle, where a small cottage sufficed. But few friends made their way to his door and as for neighbors, they were openly hostile. One winter night someone fired a shot through his window ; but he was no stranger to brutishness - the French had inured him to that.

This altogether troubling tale, grows even darker still with the news that - years after his death - Paine's bones, exhumed from their humble grave, were carried back to England, and irretrievably lost - presumably discarded with the rubbish. No rubbish filled his written contributions. Paine's reknown was flying high back then - sought and lauded - having devoted those risky colonial years to the new republic. **UNITED STATES OF AMERICA** - he is said to have coined the name. So, from the heights of public approbation, **what accounts for this public change of heart?**

That last and final blockbuster did it: so controversial and far ahead of its time, that even now the

world has yet to catch up.

THE AGE OF REASON - fully committed to having it in print - death crowding his elbow - Paine doubtless feeling he'd nothing more to lose, spent the long prison time feverishly churning out pages passed surreptitiously to friends. The guillotine that loomed never got him; but this final protest - this "*Last hurrah*" - proved his bitter undoing, and nothing and no one thereafter could restore him to public acclaim.

And when again, we ask ourselves "Why?" The unholy answer is: because so powerfully - no holds barred - he smote institutional religion, casting his fate upon the wind. Hear him in his own words - a dose of 18th century *shock and awe*:

***I believe in one God and no more; and...hope for happiness beyond this life.
I believe in the equality of man...and that religious duties consist in doing justice, loving mercy, and endeavoring to make our fellow creatures happy.***

I do NOT believe in the creeds professed...by any church I know of. My own mind is my own church.

All national institutions of churches...appear to me no other than than human inventions set up to terrify and enslave mankind, monopolize power and profit...

Every national church or religion ...established itself by pretending some special mission from God, communicated to certain individuals....as if the way to God was not open to every man alike. Each of those churches shows ...books, which they call revelation, or the Word of God. Given by God to Moses...an angel from heaven...or by divine inspiration Each of these churches accuses the other of unbelief; and, for my own part, I disbelieve them all."

For this they called him atheist, "*loathesome reptile*" and worse. Tho' he says: "*I believe in ...God...*". And even a hereafter. Does that sound atheist to you? Or loathesome? Contrast that with this: "*...the most useful man who ever existed on the face of the earth.*" But those were Elihu Palmer's words, Paine's good friend, whose numbers had significantly dwindled.

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When, in full agreement with Palmer, Moncure Conway stumbled into Paine's afterlife it was via some personal relics which, we're told, a local history buff lent to an exhibition organized by South Place Institute. An adjunct of South Place Chapel. The relics, offered as memorabilia, comprised a lock of hair, and a small piece of the brain of Thomas Paine, blackened and hardened.

The man who first acquired these - an admirer named Cobbett - had planned a memorial in Paine's birthplace of Thetford. For which he succeeded in exhuming the body and actually brought the bones to England. But monies were not forthcoming and the plans soon languished. Then Cobbett died, and Paine's remains passed to Cobbett's secretary, a Mr. Tilly. From whom the trail grows cold. Fragments were retained as souvenirs, bones disappeared altogether. Presumably, as noted, into the *tip* - which is where the Brits toss rubbish, though that term may not fit the time.

The tale grows sketchy here but one recent account picks up the thread, telling us that near the end of the century, Conway apparently happened upon these and other relics in the atelier of yet another admirer of Paine. One Louis Breeze - a purveyor of nostrums and herbs - who, in his curious shop, displayed motley collections - mostly detritus. Conway added these relics to the South Place exhibition, eventually acquiring them from Breeze, and some while after, mailed them to New York. He himself arranging to have the bit of brain cemented into a monument now standing near the original gravesite, on Paine's old farm in New Rochelle. Anticipating death, he

had sought burial among the Society of Friends, but sadly they refused. His father - and he in his early days - had been Quaker. But public censure and a baying press had achieved such volatility, that fearing vandalism in a place of rest, even they in the end turned him away.

Beyond the long arm of coincidence, it's no great stretch to longitudes and latitudes where Paine's and Conway's paths intersect:

Both were social engineers, with powerful effects upon their times. Beyond which, Paine was also a mechanical engineer - self-taught - who designed and built innovative cast iron bridges. So maybe it's appropriate that his brand of **Freethought** - before it wore that name - bridged gaps between reality and reason. Having famously declared, "***We have it in our power to start the world over again!***" What a concept: *start the world over again*; constructing ideologies that each in his time - he and Conway - put into words and practice here and abroad.

So, what then does this mean to us?

This much at least: that WE here - as THEIR **intellectual descendants** - are custodians of **Freethought** whose visions and values are still at work shaping the world today. And **Freethought** is still under attack. Let Tom Paine address that: "***Freedom has been hunted around the globe - reason considered as rebellion - and the slavery of fear has made men afraid to think. But all it wants or asks is the liberty of appearing; of such is the irresistible nature of truth.***"

Bearing in mind this caveat, however - Conway and Paine concurring - that **DISSENT**: only the precious right of dissent.... makes this so.

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