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Les syndicats britanniques : déclin ou renouveau?

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### Craig Nelson, Thomas Paine. Enlightenment, Revolution, and the Birth of Modern Nations, London: Profile Books, 2007

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limites de « l'histoire orale », et c'est avec mesure et pertinence que sont utilisés leurs témoignages dans le corps du texte. Au carrefour de plusieurs genres, certains établis de longue date, certains encore discutés, l'ouvrage se situe en plein dans ce que nous appelons au sein de l'Université française la « civilisation britannique » et mérite pleinement de figurer dans toutes nos bibliothèques.

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**Craig NELSON, *Thomas Paine. Enlightenment, Revolution, and the Birth of Modern Nations*, London: Profile Books, 2007, xvi + 397 pages, ISBN – 10: 1 86197 638 0; 13: 978 1 86197 638 3.**

Thomas Paine's lived through key periods in British, American and French history, and he was the most popular author of the eighteenth century. After thirty-seven not very successful years in Britain he came to America in 1774 just as the colonists were organising serious resistance to the British government. He plunged into journalism and his 1776 pamphlet *Common Sense* gained a huge sale. Its appearance transformed the situation, for hitherto American independence from Britain was hardly considered but now it became the main issue. Although he also aroused dislike as impudent, obnoxious, self-absorbed, impetuous, conceited and quarrelsome, he played a key role in the American Revolution. He returned to France in 1787 to find *Common Sense* had made him a hero there too. He made friends with Condorcet and Brissot, and for the next few years divided his time between Paris and London. His support for the French Revolution and a French republic modelled on America led to the *Rights of Man*. This had a huge immediate sale, but its success was exceeded the following year by a second part, which became the biggest best-seller in British history and spread all over Europe. Facing prosecution he fled England to France and sat in the National Convention as an ally of the Brissotins, and suffered with them as they fell from grace before the Montagnards. Yet in 1794 his deist *Age of Reason* was another sensation and even outsold his earlier works. He fell foul of the Terror and narrowly escaped the guillotine, and emerged from a year in prison very ill. His spirit undermined, he sank into depression, drink and obsessive bitterness against the American government for not having sought his release from prison. He finally returned to America to find that for many his reputation had been destroyed by his writings against Christianity and the American hero Washington, and very few attended his funeral.

Nelson's book is a full and very informative biography that weaves deftly his personal life with political events, and is clearly aimed at a general readership that it deserves to gain. Certain characteristics follow from this. It is lively, entertaining, very well written and witty. There are not many references (only 21 pages) and these are not presented in the usual academic footnote format. But this is not to say that it is an unscholarly book, as it is well informed and based on a wide range of reading and research (despite the lack of Paine papers), although it is less sound on French history and cites few French sources. Paine's high self-esteem, vanity and egotism are recognised, as well as his lowly origins and bitterness at inequality. Little space is given to systematic analysis of his key writings, for in general Paine is seen as a true adherent of the Enlightenment, which the author enthusiastically puts centre

stage, stressing its social milieux and forms of communication as much as its assumptions. Paine is seen as derivative rather than distinctive in his ideas, which were widely shared. Even the notorious *Age of Reason* (which later converted Abraham Lincoln), was a reflection of contemporary mainstream Anglo-American religious discourse, written in reaction to French dechristianisation and opposed to godlessness and atheism. Paine is, in fact, seen as the great missionary of the Enlightenment, unusual not in his arguments but for the way he wrote and the artisan and trading milieux he reached. He used a plain, confrontational and oral style, and was seen as dangerous in Britain not because of extremism but for his plebeian readership and popularity.

The author is American and there is an American focus to his arguments, concerned with views and myths on the foundation and nature of the new United States of America. He stresses Paine's crucial role in the American Revolution. His insistence that Paine's works were not particularly radical or extreme and should be seen as core treatises of the Enlightenment complements his argument that the American Founding Fathers were more radical than they are now portrayed. Although they have been made safe by nostalgia and patriotism, many of them in fact spent their last years in bitter disappointment at the betrayal of their ideas and vision by the American Federalists. Given the general American veneration of their constitution and the Founding Fathers, this argument has a contemporary significance, and the author makes similar assessments of the present government and system in America, despite the widespread tendency for Americans to quote from Paine, among them Reagan and the leading neo-conservative Perle.