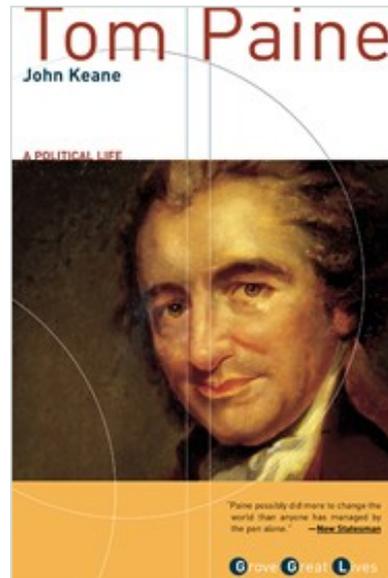


A tale to revive the passion in democracy

Dan Carrier meets political - historian John Keane, whose - biography of Tom Paine looks set to become a great motion -picture epic

SIR Richard Attenborough liked the book so much that as soon as he finished it, he contacted the author and bought the film rights



Daniel Day-Lewis agreed to play the lead, and although financing has held up the project – Attenborough is still looking to raise the estimated £80-odd million needed – it is one that Sir Richard says will be the most important film of his long and illustrious career.

But the [bio-pic of the 18th-century rabble rouser Tom Paine](#), based on the book written by Kentish Town-based politics professor John Keane, does not immediately sound like the stuff blockbusters are made of. It is, after all, a heavyweight political biography.

But as you read the book it becomes apparent that not only was Paine one of the most important political figures the English-speaking world has ever produced, but his life was so exciting that it would make a great, tragic-heroic film.

John Keane is professor of politics at the Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin and at the University of Westminster where he established the Centre for the Study of Democracy. He has written numerous books, but it is [his story of Tom Paine](#) that catapulted him to the bestseller charts.

Professor Keane explained that when he was looking for a topic for a book, Paine seemed like the natural option.

“I was casting around for a serious political heavyweight who would make a good biography. I looked at modern political leaders: I thought at first I would choose some one who was living, like Jim Callaghan. But, to be frank, I decided there was no one interesting enough.

“Tom Paine quickly became an obvious choice. The last major biography was written in the 19th century by the American Moncur Conway, who was a fan of Paines. It was full of exaggerations.”

Because Paine’s philosophy had split the political world in two, there was much

disinformation about him which Professor Keane had to wade through to create a believable picture of his subject.

Monarchists, Anglicans and defenders of the British Empire had always hated his rebellious stance: his lucid explanations of the evils of despotic governments meant opponents did their best to discredit him. He was said to be in league with the devil and his drinking singled out as a sign of his unreliability. The chances are that he did drink, says the professor: "He suffered terribly from gout and other ailments. There were no painkillers in those days, except a bottle of good gin."

But it is the action-packed life that appealed to the movie-makers. The young Paine fled his Thetford home and signed on to a privateer – the aptly named *Terrible* – where he saw various action on the high-seas. He then became an excise man chasing smugglers across hidden coves on the east coast, but was sacked after allegations of fraud – he was framed. He got his job back and then lost it again after representing his fellow workers campaigning for a fair deal from their government pay masters.

It was during this time he developed a knack of the simply written political treatise that would appeal to large numbers. Then he married and settled down in Kent, running a store. But his wife died in childbirth. He continued to write and then had to flee to America to find his fortune and escape political oppression.

In the States he became a leading figure in the battle for independence, and was then sent to France to help foment revolution there too. Paine narrowly avoided the reign of terror – he was locked up in the Bastille while Robespierre stalked its corridors, sentencing people to death.

He returned to the States where he continued to write explosive pieces, including leading a battle to ban slavery.

No wonder it took Professor Keane seven years to write and research the story. "The hardest thing was filling in the first half of his life," he recalls.

Paine was born in Thetford, Norfolk, the son of a corset maker, who worked in Lewes and Sandwich.

Little information survived, but Professor Keane's detective hunt was greatly helped by local history society's in the area. The writer retraced his steps and picked up information along the way.

He also found fugitive documents relating to Paine that had never previously been published – "It was extremely exciting," admits Professor Keane. "I found 70 documents and letters in Pennsylvania that had not been used before.

"It was fascinating to consider how this humble son of a corset maker could become this literary lion of the 18th century, the man who wrote the three

biggest-selling books – The Age of Reason, Common Sense and The Rights of Man – of a hugely important period.” They were to become three of the most important political tracts ever written.

He is now putting the finishing touches to his latest book, which is a detailed history of democracy. Coming in at around 1,000 pages, he is in the laborious process of trimming it back. Called The Life and Death of Democracy, it is a comprehensive study of the history of democratic state organisations.

“It is the first full-scale history of democracy for more than a century,” he says. And he has uncovered some facts that dispel commonly held beliefs.

“The origins of democracy can be found in the East. Iraq and Iran had the first assemblies. It was Syria and Mesopotamia who had democratic systems, 2,000 years before Athens. The Greeks were inspired by them and then they claimed it for themselves – the cheek.”

He hopes that by shedding light on the growth of democracy, we may be able to put right some of the problems he believes we face today. “The point of the book is to try and get a handle on the mishaps that I see today. I want to put eyes in the back of our heads to see what is going on today and consider what can be done to rejuvenate it.”

He is worried about the idea of electronic voting – who owns the rights to the software, he asks – and tells of how trustworthy a piece of paper and pen is. “The Protestants in Australia liked the idea of secret ballots. You would be on your own, by yourself in the booth, and have to be true and honest to your own beliefs.

“In a way it was like prayer, or communing with God. It was about a pact between the individual and the deity. That is what they felt voting should be about – something between just you and your conscience.”

He believes we are living in a time of unprecedented political crisis. This is partly to do with an ailing economy, but also partly to do with an apathetic society who do not trust politicians or parties and are not aware of how to change the systems that run their state.

But he has found some silver linings, like the establishment of a Scottish parliament and an elected mayor for London.

“They have helped reinvigorate politics and give people a stronger sense of ownership,” he says.

“These have been the most important constitutional change since the 1832 Reform Act – and they were not really planned as such. They did not expect Ken Livingstone to become mayor. And decentralisation is also positive – some problems can only be solved at local level.”