WILLIAM JACKSON AND THOMAS PAINE

I

THE book-lover whose simple pleasure it is to spend an hour or two exploring the stalls, barrows, and second-hand shops scattered among the eighteenth-century houses which line the Dublin quays may one day linger over a slim ill-printed volume whose contents may appear dull enough until curiosity is intensified by closer perusal of the title-page, which reads thus—"Observations in Answer to Mr. Thomas Paine's 'Age of Reason', by the Rev. William Jackson, Now a Prisoner in the New Prison, Dublin, on a charge of High Treason. Dublin, printed for G. Folingsby, No. 59 Dame St. 1795." We have all heard of Thomas Paine the freethinker, and champion of the Rights of Man, but who was William Jackson, and "que diable fait-il dans cette galère"?

Thomas Paine's *Age of Reason* is one of the world's best-known books; for over a century it has been the text-book for many a soap-box atheist or Hyde Park orator. In cheap reprints it has seduced the ignorant, while many who knew better encouraged its circulation, hoping that in the spirit of Voltaire it might serve "pour écraser l'infame". In the excellent edition published by Paine's American admirer Moncure Daniel Conway in 1896 we are told of the history of Paine's book, and something about the replies made to it. Conway mentions that the first reply was that of Dr. Watson, Bishop of Llandaff, in 1796 (of which a very early edition was printed in Cork). This Dr. Watson is described by Dr. J. B. Bury as 'one of those admirable eighteenth-century divines who admitted the right of private judgement and thought that argument should be met by argument and not by force". The same tribute might have been paid to Jackson, though few would regard him with admiration. Conway does not appear to have heard of his work, which in virtue of its date is the earliest criticism of Paine, and was obviously composed under circumstances of peculiar poignancy.

The interest aroused recently by the "Godless" congress in

London, an assembly in which, doubtless, the name of Paine was held in high honour, quickens the mind in relation to Jackson, while his purposes and tragedy claim the sympathy of at least one Irishman. The story is a long one, and practically unknown,[1] though while material was being gathered for this paper—another enquirer, Mr. Frank MacDermot, B.L., Senator of Eire, published in the March 1938 number of *Studies* an article on Jackson in relation to the career and intrigues of Theobald Wolfe Tone, the United Irish Conspirator; a Protestant who entered political life as secretary to the Roman Catholic bishops in their efforts to secure relief from the restrictive legislation of the day.

II

William Jackson was born in Ireland in 1737 of a very respectable family. His father was for many years an official of the Prerogative Court in Dublin, a man of excellent character, and his mother was a daughter of a Colonel Gore of Co. Sligo, an elder brother, Dr. Richard Jackson was an eminent civil lawyer, and vicar-general to the Archbishop of Cashel. He went to Oxford where he shewed great ability in both classics and science, and became a close friend of members of the Hervey family (the head of this family was the Earl of Bristol). In 1766 the 2nd Earl of Bristol, whose chaplain Jackson had become, was appointed Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, and he sent Jackson to Ireland as his private secretary, recommending him to Lord Farnham, in whose house he resided, " universally loved and admired for his amiable qualities, his rectitude of conduct, and pleasing conversation ". Unfortunately Bristol resigned without having come over to Ireland, and Jackson's bright prospects ended, for it was common practice on the part of the Irish viceroys to nominate their chaplains to vacant Irish bishoprics. Thus Jackson, the State prisoner in Newgate, could reflect that had circumstances differed but a little he would have graced the Irish episcopal bench rather than the bar of the Criminal Court. At the end of his *Observations in Answer to Paine* Jackson refers to this great disappointment. " Mine is not a professional faith; it arises from having searched into the evidence at an adult period, unshackled by any church

[1] J. Chartres Molony's *Ireland's Tragic Comedians* is an example of the prevailing ignorance about Jackson. Molony appears uncertain that he was a clergyman, suggests that he was an atheist, and misrepresents the situation.

system, and totally unconnected with profession. This search was prosecuted for my own satisfaction, and going a different way to work from Mr. Paine I arrived at an opposite conclusion. At my early outset in life I came to this country (Ireland) as one of the suite of Lord Bristol, appointed Lord Lieutenant. He engaged himself to do everything for me I could wish. After waiting some time for his arrival, a change took place in England, and he was superseded; there began, and there ended, my professional views." This statement presents a slight difficulty if we take it to imply that Jackson never officiated as a Church of England clergyman. He certainly never officiated as a Church of Ireland clergyman, but he was at some period Curate of St. Mary le Strand, London, and preacher at Tavistock Chapel. John Taylor (*Records of My Life*, 1832, vol. ii) states that Jackson was never beneficed; he adds: " I have been told that his matter in sermons was solid, and his manner dignified and solemn." It seems probable that his ministry in England was previous to his coming to Ireland in 1766. Assuming that he took orders at the age of twenty-three (i.e. in 1760), he had six years in which to exercise his ministry in London. His language would seem conclusive enough that his career after the collapse of his ambitions in 1766 was mainly secular.

As an unattached clergyman of abilities and attractive manner who had contact with aristocratic life, and who had to secure a livelihood, Jackson found many openings in the diversified life of London. At some point he became a member of the household of Elizabeth Chudleigh, the Duchess of Kingston who figured in the famous trial for bigamy. She had been secretly married to the 3rd Earl of Bristol, and afterwards to the Duke of Kingston. Her extravagances and fantastic career need not be dwelt on here. Jackson's defence of her against a scurrilous attack by Foote the dramatist led to a libel action by Foote against Jackson. Foote's death closed a discreditable business. The next activity of Jackson would seem to have been journalism. He edited a paper called *The Public Ledger*, and made the acquaintance of one Leonard Macnally, an Irish barrister who was beguiling himself in London with drama and literary criticism. Jackson was also for a time editor of *The Morning Post*, and as he took up the cause of the revolted American Colonies, and upheld their independence, he found occasion to write in reply to Samuel Johnson's *Taxation No*

Tyranny. These journalistic pursuits were not carried on in a highly abstract manner: evidence is available that under the pseudonym *Curtius* he levelled serious charges against David Garrick. Letters which passed between them will be found in the Garrick Correspondence (1832, vol. ii). Yet Jackson must have been a man of tolerant and generous temper, for an actor who took a part in caricature of Jackson in one of Foote's comedies, Palmer, became his friend, and co-operated with him in a business venture, the founding of the Royalty Theatre; a venture whose failure constrained Jackson to retire to France to avoid prosecution for debt.

III

Jackson's character during this literary period in London has been sympathetically portrayed by Taylor whom we have already quoted. Taylor writes of him that he was " One of my earliest friends, as I derived much advantage from his conversation and counsel during intercourse of many years ". He speaks of Jackson's great affection for his first wife, though he adds that he was a very gallant man, and much favoured by the ladies, which led to occasional jealousy on Mrs. Jackson's part. He notes also that Jackson's close friends included such men as General Oglethorpe (founder of the State of Georgia) and Horne Tooke. " Mr. Jackson was a staunch friend of popular freedom long before the French Revolution. Besides a natural love of liberty he caught the flame of freedom from the American Revolution." We may thus conclude that Jackson was a genuine liberal, in full sympathy with the opinions of that other ex-clergyman Horne Tooke, and prepared (like many dissenting divines of the day), to protest against the narrow character of public and political life. Thus he had a good deal in common with Thomas Paine, and was ready to fulfil the part which landed him in Newgate in 1794. The influence of American ideas and principles, in the shaping of which Paine had a fair part, was widespread in England on the eve of the French Revolution, and caused great alarm to the Government. The trials for treason of Horne Tooke and William Stone, among others, showed the acute nervousness of the political leaders. The outbreak of the French Revolution with its universal principles of liberty for all, and its intrigues and agencies in other lands, the constant fear of revolution in

England and in Ireland, the threat of invasion, all contributed to form an atmosphere in which the restless and liberty-loving Jackson who had found himself at last without resources in England could make a bid for fortune along lines in no way inconsistent with his convictions. He left England about the end of 1790 for France, came back, probably very privately, in 1792, and finally in the early part of 1794 arrived in England as the secret agent of the French revolutionary Government to test the possibilities of a rising, aided by France. His policy was to try English sentiment first, and if it proved unfavourable, to go over to his native land. He had received a commission from Nicholas Madgett and John Hurford Stone to undertake this work. Probably he met Stone through Stone's brother, William, who was tried for high treason in Westminster in 1796. Jackson no doubt knew William and had introductions to John who had lived since 1792 in France, had become naturalised, and an ardent revolutionary in the French Government's confidence. Nicholas Madgett was a native of Kinsale, Ireland, who early in life sought a career in France where many of his Irish co-religionists were in the public service. He became an official of the Foreign Office in Paris, and devoted his energies to the liberation of Ireland by French aid. He was often confused with another Nicholas Madgett, Superior of the Irish College in Paris at the time of the revolution, who became an English secret agent.

It has often been said that Jackson was an extraordinary person to be chosen for such a purpose[1]. This opinion can only be the result of ignorance of his character and history. He was well equipped for such an undertaking.

In London he met his old friend, Taylor, who noted his rather military appearance (he was fifty-seven at the time), and invited him to dine. At dinner he spoke of his business in London, and said he was about to establish a commercial enterprise. He spoke contemptuously of the English Government, but said nothing apparently to indicate his real business, though Taylor says he consumed about four bottles of wine. This seems fair evidence of his discretion. The conspirator, however, met another friend of long standing—one Cockayne, an attorney who had acted for the Duchess of Kingston, and was in close contact with Jackson before he went to France. No doubt Cockayne had professed the liberal sentiments dear to

[1] See Miss Rosamund Jacob's *The United Irishmen.*

Jackson, otherwise we cannot suppose that Jackson would have revealed his intentions. Cockayne went to William Pitt, head of the Government, and told all. He was directed to accompany Jackson, and to report the progress of the conspiracy to the authorities. So the pair, after interviews with William Stone, came to Dublin where they landed on April 1st, 1794. Jackson lost no time in renewing acquaintance with Leonard Macnally now practising at the Irish Bar, and looked on as a patriotic Irishman, and a friend of the oppressed.

IV

At this time there was a distinguished political prisoner in Newgate, Archibald Hamilton Rowan (whose remains are in the vaults of St. Mary's Church, Dublin). Jackson heard of this gentleman and asked to be introduced to him. He was brought to Newgate, accompanied by Cockayne, and in Rowan's room was introduced to Wolfe Tone. Their dealings are carefully described by Mr. MacDermot in the quarterly *Studies* referred to earlier. Jackson knew something of Rowan already, for one of John Hurford Stone's fellow conspirators in France was a cousin of Rowan named Beresford. Tone was suspicious of Cockayne, and did not commit himself very deeply, but enough was said to settle Jackson's fate, for he was under secret surveillance, his letters being intercepted, and on April 28th, 1794, he was committed on a charge of high treason on a warrant of the Lord Chief Justice. Cockayne was the only witness. In England, by statute two witnesses were needed for a capital charge, but in Ireland one was enough, and after lengthy pleading for the Crown, and for the defence (in which appeared Leonard Macnally and the great orator John Philpot Curran) Jackson was found guilty. He came up for sentence on April 30th, 1795, and as he passed Macnally's seat in court is said to have whispered the words of Otway's character Pierre in *Venice Preserved*—"We have deceived the Senate". This cryptic remark had a deep significance. Counsel for the prisoner rose and kept on talking, holding the attention of the Bench until Jackson collapsed, and before sentence could be pronounced, died. He had taken arsenic, and dying before being sentenced, his property could not escheat to the Crown. Reading the account of that trial and its dramatic close is, even after a hundred and forty-three years, harrowing enough. Jackson

saved his property for his children. His papers contained a meditation upon the Psalmist's words, " Turn Thee unto me, and have mercy upon me, the troubles of my heart are enlarged ". He commended his family to the care of the French Government, and entrusted his will to his " true friend ", Leonard Macnally. He never knew that Macnally had been for years in the pay of the Government, and while acting as his counsel had been revealing all he knew to the Government lawyers.

The Answer to Paine's *Age of Reason*, as we have seen, was written in Newgate. Curiously enough, Paine had just finished writing the *Age of Reason* when he was thrown into the Luxembourg prison in Paris. W. H. Curran in his life of his father, J. Philpot Curran, suggests that Jackson wrote the reply in a vain attempt to placate the Irish Government, for Paine's book had aroused much horror by its profane and offensive character. Paine was held in great abhorrence. We think, however, that Jackson was not moved by any such desire, for instead of placating public opinion he must have brought much odium upon himself by stating in his answer: " Mr. Paine has been the founder of a reputation which will be transmitted to the ages. When the present and future generations shall be swept by the hand of time among the smouldering ruins of ancient worlds, the name of Mr. Paine will live in celebrity. This compliment is most willingly bestowed; it comes warm from the heart." Such language about a man whom the public wished to look on as corrupt and subversive of all good, could only add to Jackson's faults, rather than extenuate them.

V

Jackson dedicated his book " to the Protestants, Catholics, Protestant-Dissenters and Christians of every Denomination ". As a product of the Age of Enlightenment, his previous status as a clergyman of the Established Church imposed no narrowness of ecclesiastical outlook. He had moved far from the days when he shone as a London preacher, but he had not abandoned his faith as a Christian. Politics, literature, journalism and the stage had been major interests with him for years. Yet, if we may judge by the frequent citation of theological works of the day, he had always been a student of theology. The fact that he apologizes for his inability to procure books in prison shows that he depended on his memory of his studies made in days of liberty.

In the preface he writes:

" I was at the house of a friend in Paris when Mr. Paine happened to pay him a visit, and among other discourse, he addressed me thus—' I am writing a book against all revealed religion; it is nothing but nonsense and imposition '. My answer was: ' I am sure, Mr. Paine, you are a man of too good an understanding to write on any subject you are not thoroughly acquainted with, and I shall be very glad to read your book '. After a perusal I found in it so much of ignorance and misrepresentation on a subject of infinite importance to mankind, that I set about and finished the following observations."

Before Jackson's observations can be properly valued it is necessary to give a brief outline of Paine's *Age of Reason*, which Paine described as " An Investigation of True and Fabulous Theology " (" by Thomas Paine, Secretary of Foreign Affairs to Congress in the American War, Paris, printed by Barrois, 1794 ". Dedicated to the people of the United States of America).

Paine writes:

" I believe in one God, and no more, and I hope for happiness beyond this life. I believe that religious duties consist in doing justice, loving mercy, and endeavouring to make our fellow-creatures happy." " The Virgin Birth was a bit of heathen mythology, and the Christian theory little else than the idolatry of the ancient mythologists accommodated to the purposes of power and revenue." Of the resurrection and ascension he says they are based on insufficient evidence. The whole thing has every mark of fraud and imposition stamped upon it; it is " a fable of absurdity and extravagance ". Yet Paine professed sincere regard for the man Jesus, who has been, he said, " too little imitated, too much forgotten, too much misunderstood ".

The Canon of Scripture was a matter of majority votes. Revelation is " a communication of something which the person to whom that thing is revealed did not know before. Revelation therefore cannot be applied to anything done upon earth of which man is himself the actor or the witness; and consequently all the historical and anecdotal part of the Bible is not within the meaning and compass of revelation, and therefore is not the word of God ". He objects to the supposed brutalities of the Old Testament, " a history of wickedness that has served to corrupt and brutalise mankind ". Prophecy is poetry, not prediction, and " it is somewhat curious that the three persons

whose names are the most universally recorded were of very obscure parentage—Moses, Jesus, Mahomet".

On the New Testament he observes that it is impossible to know the true authorship of the books, or what language they were written in. He points out the contrast between the pomp and wealth of the existing church, and the humility and poverty of the One whose name it bears. Purgatory, pardons, indulgences, etc., are revenue laws without bearing the name. He thinks the passages speaking of redemption were invented by the Church to make revenue. " Creation is the only word of God, and the age of ignorance commenced with the Christian system." He launches into astronomy, and speaks of the conceit of thinking that God would quit the care of millions of worlds to come and to die in our world. He derides miracle, and affirms that " mystery, miracle and prophecy are appendages that belong to fabulous and not to true religion ". " The moral duty of man consists in imitating the moral goodness and beneficence of God manifested in the creation towards all His creatures."

Part II of the *Age of Reason* was not published till October, 1795, so that Jackson's observations deal only with the first part. Part II, claiming that the whole work is irrefutable, is largely a detailed study of apparent contradictions and contrasts in the Old Testament. It need not concern us here.

VI

In answer to Paine's claim that the Christian faith is the work of mythologists, Jackson points out that the resurrection and ascension were believed before there was a Church at all, and believed in by Jews " necessarily precluded by their religion from knowing anything about the mythological fables of the Gentiles ". On this point he believed Paine had ignorantly misled himself, as he believed him incapable of attempting to mislead others. He cites the Church Fathers, Polycarp, Papias, Ignatius, etc., to show that they were not mythologists, but humble secluded men who gloried in being ignorant of what they considered profane, and refers to Origen *Contra Celsum* as further proof. " Mr. Paine makes now and then a capital mistake in points relating to antiquity, but what are a few blunders when the object in view is the entire overthrow of every religious system under heaven? " He suggests that

the existence of the Jewish race forms a body of external evidence of the Old Testament's accuracy of some little weight, and asks if Paine knows anything of the Talmud, Targums and other Rabbinical books in defence of the Old Testament. He condemns Paine's definition of revelation, and says very wisely that " Revelation is not only that the author of our existence tells us something which we did not know before; but He tells us that which could not otherwise be known than by a communication from Him ". When Paine says he detests the Old Testament " this is only saying that if there be any excellence in the Hebrew writings it would be thrown away on Paine ". " In all ages there have been exemplary Jews; their belief has influenced their conduct."

When Mr. Paine says the prophets were itinerant poets and musicians, Jackson cites Jacob's prophecy over Judah as a true prediction, and adds: " If prophet ought to be poet or musician then we must read ' touch not mine anointed, and do my musicians no harm '; ' if ye believe not Moses and the makers of poetry . . . '; ' O Jerusalem, thou that killest the players of tunes on an instrument '—the substitution of these words and phrases for that of the prophets, the readers must perceive, gives a singular pertinency to the sense." Jackson points out that poetic form as in Jeremiah and Ezekiel cannot destroy prophetic character. He condemns Paine as a man utterly incompetent, through his lack of knowledge of ancient literature and Oriental languages, to write down the Bible. " If Mr. Paine be not mistaken, he is an infidel on such shallow grounds and with such flimsy arguments, that he may be fairly said to disbelieve through weak credulity."

Sacrifice, Jackson says, dates from Adam, who must have taught Abel. Jewish sacrifices were symbolic, heathen ones were literal. Pure Judaism is Christianity in figure. The Messiahship of Christ is a problem not faced by Paine, while his argument in part is only made possible on the assumption that Roman pontiffs were contemporary with Christ. " As to creation and nature revealing God, and preaching to all nations, how is it that millions have no more knowledge than the brutes of the nature and attributes of God? " " The author of the *Age of Reason* indiscriminately confounds the system of the Church with Christianity, and thus ascribes to the latter whatever may have been exceptionable in the former." He regards Paine's astronomical arguments as nonsense, since words like

'immense' and 'infinite' are nearly meaningless. He adds, "the volition of God is everything", and if Paine believes in God, has he escaped mystery? "Is the eternal and self-subsisting essence of Deity not the miracle of miracles?"

Jesus, he notes as against Paine's statement of His obscure birth, was of the race of David "a pedigree of forty-two generations", and Mahomet came of the most noble of all the tribes of Arabia.

"Paine has produced nothing of novelty; he has only said with more point and raillery what others have said before him—Hobbes, Spinoza, Bayle, Voltaire, Toland, Tindall, Collins, Morgan, Mandeville, Chubb, have anticipated everything to be found in *The Age of Reason*." (We note in passing that this list of names, chiefly eighteenth-century deists, is an indication of Jackson's intellectual equipment.) He concludes by asking for proof that planets are inhabited, saying that mere possibilities will not serve for argument.

The final passage speaks of the writer's personal and domestic sorrows which, he says, did not shake his religion. "I write in a prison after nearly eleven months' imprisonment. Out of the many books I wanted to consult I have only been able to procure one. I refer therefore from memory to productions which it is several years since I looked into. What Mr. Paine calls reasoning I consider speculation. . . . Such is the work I submit to the candour and indulgence of the Irish nation, from which I sprang, and for the real happiness of which I offer an ardent prayer to Him who disposeth the fate of empires."

On March 7th, 1795, Jackson finished his last literary work. On April 30th he died in the dock. A full account of his trial for high treason may be read in Howell's *State Trials*. On May 3rd he was buried with every outward indication of public sympathy in St. Michan's Churchyard, Dublin, the resting-place of many a Protestant patriot of those dark and evil days. His talents and abilities would have won him high place in the Church of his birth and ordination. That eighteenth century, *par excellence* the Age of Reason, had few more tragic or more interesting characters. Though he anticipated his sentence of death, he gave his last months to the defence of the faith, and among those who knew him well, left a memory of kindness, humour, wisdom and sincerity.

St. Mary's, Dublin. N. D. EMERSON.