Tom Paine’s little book caused a huge commotion. People read it and passed it to their friends. Everywhere they argued about his fiery ideas.

Why did Common Sense cause such excitement? Tom Paine chose just the right words to express the ideas everyone was already thinking.

People were startled by these brave words. But their response was “Yes, yes!” “He’s right, that’s how it is!” The American Revolution began like a brush fire, smoldering away, growing hotter and smokier. Paine’s words acted like a breeze, fanning the fire until it exploded into uncontrolled flames.

What did Paine say to light the fire of revolution? Paine began with ideas most people already agreed with: “Society is a blessing, but government, even in its best state, is . . . a necessary evil.”

Long ago, Paine said, there were no kings and no wars. Kings threw things into confusion. A man became a king only by being born to it. Paine said this ancient custom caused most of the trouble in the world. He argued that the colonies did not need such a ruler.

He gave reasons: “The nearer any government approaches to [independence], the less business there is for a king.” He criticized what kings do: “In England a king hath little more to do than to make war and give away places . . . A pretty business indeed for a man to be [paid] eight hundred thousand sterling a year . . . and [be] worshipped [in] the bargain!”

Paine complained that the distance between the mother country and the colonies added more problems: “To be always running . . . four thousand miles with a [story or a question], waiting . . . five months for an answer, which, when [received], [needs] . . . six more to explain it, will [soon seem ridiculous]. There was a time when it was proper, and there is a proper time for it to cease.”

He said England was too small to rule over a huge country like America. “There is something absurd in supposing a continent [can be] governed by an island.”

Finally, he said it was too late to turn back. He dared people to believe in their absolute right to freedom and independence.

“The sun never shined on a cause of greater worth,” Thomas Paine wrote. Some of his final words were: “The last cord now is broken . . . Everything that is right or reasonable pleads for separation . . .

“The weeping voice of nature cries, 'TIS TIME TO PART’.

The thought of independence was frightening, shocking, and terribly risky. What if it didn’t work? What would the king do to people who opposed him? Such serious questions had no simple answers.

As Common Sense spread through the colonies, more and more copies were needed. Paine gave the printing rights to the new colonial government in Philadelphia. He could have become rich selling it himself. By letting the government print and sell almost half a million copies of the booklet for two shillings each, he donated nearly one million dollars to America’s struggle for freedom.

Thomas Paine

Thomas Paine was a man who dared to write what other people were afraid to say. In England he wrote a pamphlet criticizing the low pay of customs agents. In 1774 he came to Philadelphia as a writer for Pennsylvania Magazine. His articles on improving education and care for the elderly were so popular that readership tripled in three months. Late in 1775 he wrote a history of the conflict between the colonies and England. It was a forty-seven-page booklet he called Common Sense. In 1776, thousands of copies were printed and read by every colonist who cared about freedom.