



Trenchard and Gordon: More Influential on the Founding Fathers Than John Locke, Yet You Have Never Heard of Them

Do you recognize the names John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon?

If not, I recommend you read this article and then immediately go to [this link](#) and begin reading the essays they wrote. You will thank me for it.

Written under the pseudonym “Cato” (in honor of the Roman hero and champion of liberty and republican virtue, Cato the Younger), Trenchard and Gordon wrote some 144 of these letters, ranging in topics from tyranny, to the dangers of a central bank, to the threat to liberty posed by political parties, to freedom of the press and speech, and everything in between. They are classics in the corpus of republican political philosophy.

But they are much more than that to Americans.

Cato’s Letters were so popular to the Founding Generation that they were “quoted in every colonial newspaper from Boston to Savannah,” as reported by noted historian Elizabeth Cook.

Additionally, historian Gary Nash records that:

John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon were the most important disseminators of ideas to Americans in the pre-revolutionary generations.

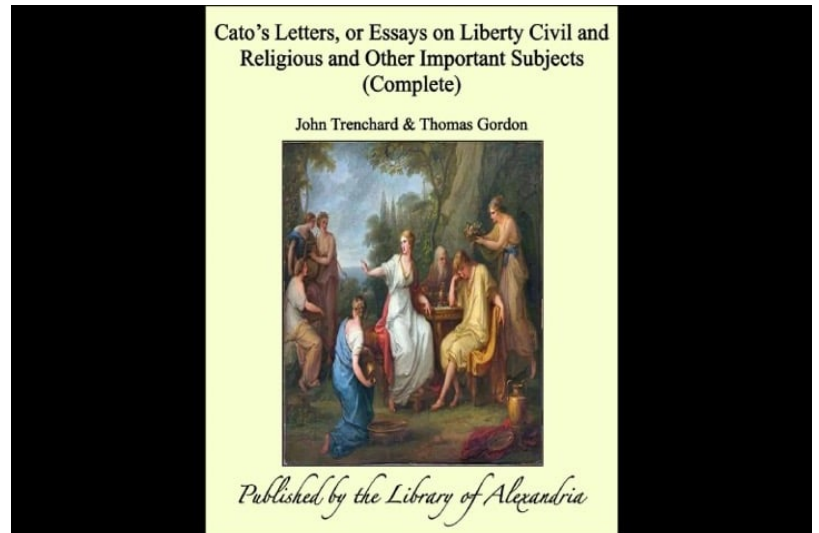
Likewise, renowned Founding Era historian Forrest McDonald asserts that:

Cato’s Letters ... was the most quoted book in all the Americans’ prerevolutionary writings.

Finally, in his book *Seedtime of the Republic*, Clinton Rossiter, Founding Era expert and prolific author of books and articles on the Constitution and the creation of the American union, wrote in abundant praise of *Cato’s Letters*:

No one can spend any time in the newspapers, library inventories, and pamphlets of colonial America without realizing that Cato’s Letters rather than Locke’s *Civil Government* was the most popular, quotable, esteemed source of political ideas in the colonial period.

Did you know that? Did you know that a survey of libraries and newspapers from the years leading up to



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Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on June 29, 2023

the Declaration of Independence showed that John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon were more widely read, respected, and quoted than John Locke?

As soon as you read the first of their *Cato's Letters* you'll see why that was true.

These essays appeared in London newspapers from 1720-1723, usually one a week. Although they were written 300 years ago, they touch on topics so familiar to us today that I want to present to you a few selections from these "impartial lessons of liberty and virtue."

Finally, dear reader and fellow patriot, perhaps if we read what our Founders read, we will have the courage to do what our Founders did and restore liberty to the states and the people of this union.

Note: the language is from the early 18th century and might be a little difficult to understand at first, but in light of their legacy and their immeasurable influence on our Founding Fathers, it is worth taking time to read and really comprehend *Cato's Letters*.

If you do make the effort, you'll be rewarded by seeing just how eerily applicable these essays published 300 years ago are to our own day and our own fight for freedom.

I'll begin the selections with portions of **Letter No. 134**, which was published 300 years ago today (June 29):

It is surprizing what minute and contemptible causes create discontents, disorders, violence, and revolutions amongst men; what a small spring can actuate a mighty and many-headed multitude; and what mighty numbers one man is capable of drawing into his disgusts and designs. It is the weakness of the many; when they have taken a fancy to a man, or to the name of a man, they take a fancy even to his failings, adopt his interest right or wrong, and resent every mark of disfavour shewn him, however just and necessary it be. Nor are the resentments and fondness the less violent for being ill-grounded. If a man make them drunk once or twice a year, this injury is a kindness which they never forget; and he is sure of their hearts and their hands for having so generously robbed them of their time, their innocence, and their senses. They are grateful for the mischief done them; and in return, are ready to do any for him. He who restrains them from drunkenness, or even punishes them for it, is a greater and a real benefactor; but such a benefactor as they will never forgive, and he is sure to lose their good will, probably to purchase their hatred.

This shews how much their senses are stronger, than their understandings. They are governed not by judgment, but by sensations; and, one guinea in drink obliges them more than two in clothes; or in any other dry way. Liquor warms their hearts, and fills them with the man who is the author of so much joy. So that to instruct them, feed them, and employ them, are not such sure ways to win them, as to mislead and inflame them, and to waste their time.

So that in raising parties and factions, inflaming goes a thousand times farther than reasoning and teaching. A foolish speech, supported with vehemence and brandy, will conquer the best sense, and the best cause in the world, without anger or liquor. Sobriety and capacity are not talents that recommend to the crowd, who are always taken with shallow pomp and sound, and with men of little restraints. The debauched and the superstitious have great hold of them: Men who will sin with them, or men who can give them amulets against the vengeance due to sinning.

**From Letter No. 6:**

No experience or sufferings can cure the world of its credulity. It has been a bubble from the beginning; nor is it a bit wiser for this discovery, but still runs into old snares, if they have but new names, often whether they have or no.

Self-love beguiles men into false hopes, and they will venture to incur a hundred probable evils, to catch one possible good; nay, they run frequently into distracting pains and expences, to gain advantages which are purely imaginary, and utterly impossible.

Else men would not be such dupes, as every where they are. Whoever would catch mankind, has nothing to do, but to throw out a bait to their passions, and infallibly they are his property.

From Letter No. 13:

There must certainly be a vast fund of stupidity in human nature, else men would not be caught as they are, a thousand times over, by the same snare; and while they yet remember their past misfortunes, go on to court and encourage the causes to which they were owing, and which will again produce them.

Yet even in countries where the highest liberty is allowed, and the greatest light shines, you generally find certain men, and bodies of men, set apart to mislead the multitude; who are ever abused with words, ever fond of the worst of things recommended by good names, and ever abhor the best things, and the most virtuous actions, disfigured by ill names. One of the great arts, therefore, of cheating men, is, to study the application and misapplication of sounds—a few loud words rule the majority, I had almost said, the whole world.

From Letter No. 69:

Such as you shew yourselves, such will be your representatives: such as is the tree, such will be the fruit. Choose honest men, free and independent men, and they will act honestly for the publick interest, which is your interest. It is not to be expected, that criminals will destroy their own handiwork; that they will either reform or punish themselves; or, that men, who have brought our misfortunes upon us, will go about in good earnest to redress them, or even own that there are any such.

Let us not therefore, my countrymen, desert or deceive ourselves, or think we can be safe, if ever such men can get into power. Let us not again be deluded with false promises and deceitful assurances; but let us judge what men will do by what they have done.

Now, therefore, my best friends, is the time to help yourselves: Now act honestly and boldly for liberty, or forget the glorious and charming sound.



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