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Why Edmund Burke is Important



by Keith Sewell

In a recent contribution to *Pro Rege*, I drew attention to the enthusiastic remarks made by the Anti-revolutionary leader Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) concerning the thinking of Edmund Burke (1729-97).¹ Kuyper was fulsome: “Edmund Burke was an Anti-revolutionary through and through.”² In this instance, Kuyper derived much of his admiration for Burke from Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer (1801-76), who, in his seminal *Unbelief and Revolution* (1847), said that Burke

had no equal in setting forth the nature and action of the Revolution ideas and the successful means to combat them. In his *Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs* he brought to light the contrast between the true and false liberty; in the *Reflections on the Revolution in France* he flung his

thunderbolts at what many were still applauding as a blessing; in his *Remarks on the Policy of the Allies* he laid bare the misguided spirit that caused all their measures to fail; and in the *Letters on a Regicide Peace* he vented his final indignation at any rapprochement with the Revolutionary Regime. Burke, endowed with the ability to detect in the seemingly tangled fabric of present things the thread of the future, predicted ... the rise of a dictator and, after his fall, the restoration of the old dynasty.³

It was the Swiss reformed historian Jean-Henri Merle d’Aubigné (1794-1872) who first advised Groen to study Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790).⁴ So, who was this man whom Merle d’Aubigné, Groen van Prinsterer, and Kuyper all commended so enthusiastically?

Edmund Burke was born in Dublin, Ireland. His mother was a Catholic, his father, Richard, a member of the (protestant) Church of Ireland. Burke also was an Anglican, although his detractors later sometimes portrayed him as a Jesuit! As a youth he attended an exceptionally good school in Ballytore in County Kildare run by Abraham Shackleton (1696-1771), a Quaker from Yorkshire, England. From there he went to Trinity College, Dublin. As a student he was particularly fond of history and poetry. He was initially intended for the legal profession and departed Dublin for London in 1750 to enrol in the Middle Temple, which at that time provided an education in the law. However strong these intentions might have been, they gave way to the attractions of a literary life and a calling to politics.

Once established in London, Burke moved in

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a circle that variously included Joshua Reynolds (1723-92) the painter, Samuel Johnson (1709-84) the writer, James Boswell (1740-95) his biographer, Adam Smith (1723-90) the economist, Oliver Goldsmith (1728-74) the novelist and poet, and David Garrick (1717-79) the great Shakespearean actor and producer. In no way was Burke an uncultured reactionary. In 1757 he married Jane Mary Nugent (1737-1812), a Catholic. By the early 1760s Burke was on the edge of high politics.

Across the intervening two and a half centuries, there have been three prime difficulties impeding

Burke correspondence was the problem. After his death, much of Burke's surviving correspondence was eventually placed in the custody of William Wentworth-Fitzwilliam (1748-1833)—the Fourth Earl Fitzwilliam. There they were held (along with other papers) at Wentworth Woodhouse in Yorkshire, and for a century beyond the reach of researchers. The only significant exception to this dearth was the publication of a very restricted selection of the Burke correspondence in 1844.⁹ The situation only started to change in the 1930s, as some researchers gained initial access to certain of the

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the furtherance of Burke studies. The first of these has been the secularisation of the western mind, with its consequential tendency to filter out of the biographical or historical narrative the foundational role of religion, and especially the Christian religion. In the case of Burke, his Christian commitment is highly relevant. However, his most distinguished Victorian biographer was the Liberal statesman John Morley (1838-1923). Morley was of the more secular-rationalist wing of liberalism, with affinities to John Stuart Mill (1806-73), and his writing on both Burke and Gladstone tended to obscure the centrality of the Christian religion in the thought and politics of both men.⁵ This tendency eventually weakened. After the Second World War, the English author Ernest Reynolds (1894-1980) addressed the entirety of Burke's politics explicitly in terms of his professed Christianity.⁶

The second problem arose from the lack of scholarly access to Burke's full correspondence—so important for ascertaining the immediate context of his literary output. The early biographers, such as James Prior (1790-1869) and Thomas Macknight (1829-99), certainly did their due diligence.⁷ They benefitted from the appearance of the "Rivington Edition" of *The Works*, beginning in 1803.⁸ The non-availability of by far the greater part of the

large private archives kept in the country houses in which English aristocracy were still ensconced. In truth, and as later became clear, the initial results by Philip Magnus (1906-88) and Dixon Wecter (1906-50) only touched the surface of what was to eventually become available.¹⁰

The publication of *Our Eminent Friend Edmund Burke* in 1949 by the American scholar Thomas W. Copeland (1907-79) helped prompt some important developments.¹¹ The same year, Eric Spencer Wentworth-Fitzwilliam (1883-1952)—the ninth Earl Fitzwilliam—placed the extensive Burke and other correspondence he had inherited in the Sheffield Central Library, Yorkshire. At about the same time, a smaller but still important volume of original documents, previously privately housed in Milton, was deposited with the Northamptonshire Record Society in England. These developments ensured that an immense trove of original documents was thereby opened up for scholarly research.¹² Copeland subsequently published a *Checklist* and went on, as general editor, to produce a new and definitive edition of Burke's *Correspondence*.¹³ The result has been a massive enrichment of Burke studies on both sides of the Atlantic.

The third obstacle to a right appreciation of Burke was the immense influence of the historian

Louis Namier (1888-1960), who repeatedly discounted the place of ideas and principles in political life, setting financial interest and status above all else. Namier was a formidable researcher and was at the height of his influence in the 1930s and 1940s.¹⁴ Nevertheless, the outlook he exemplified never went unchallenged. In 1929 the historian Alfred Cobban (1901-68), in an early criticism of this approach, drew specific attention to Burke's thought and principles.¹⁵ In the period 1956-60, the Christian historian Herbert Butterfield (1900-79) launched a wide-ranging attack on the work of Namier, and specifically on his mode of reductionism.¹⁶ By that time, Charles Parkin had already published, with Butterfield's endorsement, a study of Burke's thought and ideas that culminated with an extended consideration of the Christian basis of his convictions.¹⁷ Butterfield's critique of Namier massively undermined what some called "Namierism."¹⁸

In short, the opening up of the archives, and the decline of the kind of reductionism represented by the Namier School, cleared the way for a more authentic and contextually grounded appreciation of Burke. The two-volume study by Carl B. Cone (1916-95), on *Burke and the Nature of Politics* (and particularly the second on the French Revolution), made it clear that a new and more instructive era was opening in the study of Burke and his times.¹⁹ Burke might still be on the receiving end of smears and misrepresentation, but these could now be more effectively answered with responsible scholarship.²⁰ The first full-length biography of Burke to be published since the complete publication of the *Correspondence* was that of Stanley Ayling, who was sympathetic to Burke's view of himself as "the defender of Christian civilisation." Moreover, Ayling recalled that when accused of madness by the radicals of his day, Burke responded with the words of Paul to the Roman Procurator: "I am not mad, most noble Festus, but speak forth the words of truth and soberness."²¹

The supreme achievement of recent Burke scholarship has been the now completed publication of the Clarendon Press edition of *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*.²² With the correspondence, speeches, and writings now at last available in reliable editions, the way is open for a greatly

deepened appreciation of not only Burke himself but also the tumultuous politics of the period from the 1760s to the 1790s.

As we take our bearings amid these riches, we need to address a pivotal question: Was Burke a Conservative? Certainly, many would answer in the affirmative. In the UK, conservative authors have long claimed Burke to be one of their own.²³ A Conservative member of the House of Commons recently suggested that Burke was the *first* Conservative!²⁴ In the US, conservatives such as Russell Kirk (1918-94) hailed Burke as an inspiration and the greatest of modern thinkers.²⁵ However, the answer, "Yes, Burke was a Conservative," is not a little misleading. Part of the difficulty arises from the reality that terms such as "conservative," "liberal," and "radical" have had a wide and changing semantic range. In Burke's day the prime political division was between "Whigs" and "Tories." The Whigs stood for the rights of parliament, trade, and commerce and were more willing to be tolerant towards "Protestant Dissent" (protestant denominations outside the state church in England and Wales). The Tories upheld the prerogatives of the crown, the landed interest, and the privileges of the established Church of England. Only in the nineteenth century did the Whigs evolve into Liberals, and the Tories into Conservatives.

Although after his demise Burke acquired the reputation of being a leading Conservative, a process that has been traced by scholars on both sides of the Atlantic, *in his day* Burke was *not* a Tory.²⁶ He was a man of Whig principles and was drawn to the Whigs of the "Rockingham Connection," that in the 1760s and 1770s centred on Charles Watson-Wentworth (1730-82)—the Second Marquis of Rockingham.²⁷ Rockingham was Prime Minister in 1765-66 and briefly again in 1782. The Rockingham Whigs *opposed* the policy of Lord North (1732-92) on America. Burke became Rockingham's private secretary in 1765, and in the manner of the times a seat in parliament was found for him in 1766. Eventually Burke was to define the role of a member of the House of Commons as a responsible representative, and not as the delegate of a sovereign people: "Your Representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment; and

he betrays instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion.”²⁸

The Rockingham Whigs opposed the Stamp Act of March 1765, and it was repealed in March 1766 during Rockingham’s first short tenure in office. That reversal was itself reversed by subsequent administrations, especially during the ill-fated prime ministership of Lord North from 1770 to 1782.

With affairs in America moving to a climax, and the Rockingham Whigs out of office in Westminster, Burke made some of his most elo-

quent speeches on American affairs. In 1770 he became the London Agent for the New York General Assembly. Burke went out of his way to be well informed on American affairs and understand the mind and culture of the colonists. His speeches on America exhibited understanding and wisdom. In 1774 he subjected the taxation of the American colonies to scathing criticism.²⁹ In 1775 he pleaded for “Conciliation with America.” Burke called for “Peace sought in the Spirit of Peace.”³⁰ We know what happened. Lord North and his followers ignored the advice of the Rockingham Whigs. The “Olive Branch Petition” (1775) was spurned, independence was declared (1776), and General Cornwallis eventually surrendered at Yorktown (1781). Lord North lost office in 1782, but not before John Dunning (1731-83) had powerfully (although contestably) expressed, in his motion to the House of Commons, the view that “the influence of the crown has increased, is increasing, and ought to be diminished.”³¹ Lord Rockingham became Prime Minister briefly in 1782, insisting at the time that George III (1738-1820) accept American independence. Peace came by the Treaty of Paris (1783).

For the Rockingham Whigs the whole American affair was never only about America. The bungling of relations with America was but one

outcome of what they saw as George III’s subversion of parliamentary government by effectively controlling a sufficient number of members of the House of Commons. In fairness, George III, whose reputation for tyranny has been vastly over-stated, saw himself as an opponent of Whig corruption—the word was “jobbery.”³² He was possibly influenced by *The Idea of a Patriot King* (1749), written by a critic of the Whigs, Henry Bolingbroke (1678-1751).³³ The Rockingham Whigs did not criticise George III directly—rather, they made frequent references to the deleterious influence of “the Court” in the counsels of the nation. These problems preceded the American crisis and had already been addressed by Burke in his *Thoughts on the Present Discontents* (1770), in which he opposed faction and corruption and offered a now classic description of a legitimate political party: “Party is a body of men united for promoting by their joint endeavours the national interest, upon some particular principle in which they are all agreed.”³⁴ Burke was committed to wise administration and public righteousness. This pervaded every issue he addressed. As much as he delighted in the British constitution, his youthful experience in his native Ireland had taught him that British policy in other lands could go seriously wrong.³⁵ Corruption at the heart of government could lead to follies and abuses overseas that might then spread by a kind of contagion back to the public life of the British homeland. If royal absolutism were to triumph in America or elsewhere, then it might come to prevail at home also—and this helps to explain why so many Whigs were deeply sympathetic to the American cause.

It also helps to explain why Burke came to wage such a massive campaign against the conduct of the British East India Company in the person of Warren Hastings (1732-1818), the effective Governor-

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General of Bengal 1772-85. The impeachment and trial of Warren Hastings lasted from 1787 to 1795. The documents relating to India take up three large volumes in the *Writings and Speeches*.³⁶ The issues were immense. In contention were the principles that should apply in the governance of places and peoples long distant and very different from Great Britain. In his opening speech Burke insisted that

God forbid...when you try the cause of Asia in the presence of Europe, there should be the least suspicion that a narrow partiality, utterly destructive of justice, should so guide us that a British subject in power should appear in substance to possess rights which are denied to the humble allies, to the attached dependants of this kingdom, who by their distance have a double demand upon your protection, and who, by... trust in you, have stripped themselves of every other resource under heaven!³⁷

Here Burke opposed exploitative notions of empire derived from pre-Christian Rome, and anticipated ideas of imperial trusteeship that were to develop further in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The struggle was intense and protracted, for the British East India Company had formidable wealth and immense influence at its disposal. Eventually Hastings was acquitted, but not before much corruption, extortion, and malfeasance had been exposed. Burke lost his case, but he most emphatically made his point. That colonial expansion entailed moral responsibilities was a theme that British evangelicals were to take up with fervour in the nineteenth century.

Moreover, it was in this context that Burke asserted that the lawful exercise of authority did not arise from some presumed human autonomy, but was granted by Almighty God and subject to his law:

Every good gift is of God; all power is of God; and He who has given the power, and from whom alone it originates, will never suffer the exercise of it to be practiced upon any less solid foundation than the power itself.³⁸

Moreover:

All power is of God: and if it be, it is bound by the eternal laws of Him that gave it which no human authority can dispense neither he that exercises it nor even those who are subject to it...³⁹

These were the fixed principles that permeated Burke's political thinking. However, even before the trial of Warren Hastings had reached mid-point, events in Paris in June and July 1789 marked the initial phases of the French Revolution. Although he did not rush into print, Burke had his doubts from the outset. However, many English Whigs were quick to see events in Paris as the opening phases of a French counterpart to the great British constitutional struggles of the seventeenth century. The prominent Unitarian preacher Richard Price (1723-91) advanced this view. Concurrently, Charles Depont (1767-96), a politically engaged French acquaintance of Burke's, wrote to him seeking his opinion on French affairs.

Burke's reply revealed his initial thinking and anticipated what was to come. He set a high value on the legal security and freedom of expression of all citizens. He wished to be assured that "a simple citizen may decently express his sentiments upon public affairs, without hazard to his life or safety, even though against a predominant and fashionable opinion...." Burke feared the dictatorship of the mob. He acknowledged that France might need to find its own path to an ordered liberty, but already saw too much in the French proceedings that was lawless and arbitrary, declaring, "I must delay my congratulations on your acquisition of liberty. You may have made a revolution, but not a reformation. You may have subverted monarchy, but not recovered freedom." Long before "the terror" took place, Burke foresaw tempestuous times in France. The changes in France were not grounded in history, were excessive, and thereby sowed the seeds of instability:

Whatever they do will be in extremes; it will be crude, harsh, precipitate. It will be submitted to with grudging and reluctance. Revenge will be smothered and hoarded, and the duration of schemes marked in that temper, will be as precarious as their establishment was odious.⁴⁰

In February 1790, Burke warned parliament that the mounting instability in France posed a threat to Great Britain.⁴¹

Burke's famous *Reflections on the Revolution in France* was no impromptu production. It was based on a careful application to the emerging French

situation of principles that Burke had already embraced and enunciated. His intended audience was twofold—the French themselves *and* those Whigs and radicals in Great Britain who saw Paris 1789 as a French version of the English “Glorious Revolution” of 1688/89.⁴² Accordingly, Burke focused his critique of the French revolution (as at late 1790) in terms of his understanding of the English “Glorious Revolution” of 1688/89. The “Glorious Revolution” took place when James II was effectively obliged to quit England, and William III of the Netherlands (1650-1702) and his consort

Burke’s contention was that the French revolutionaries were intent on counter-historically reconstituting the whole of society from the ground up. By contrast, he insisted that what Englishmen had inherited were “the gifts of Providence,” and that “in what we improve we are never wholly new, [and] in what we retain we are never wholly obsolete.”⁴⁸ The English had received their polity and its constitution as a “trust,” a “partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born.”⁴⁹ This was not the “superstition

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Mary Stuart (1662-94) were jointly offered the throne by parliament, which they accepted.⁴³ The obvious point of comparison was between the resulting 1689 “Petition of Right”⁴⁴ and the French Revolutionary “Declaration of the Rights of Man” of 1789.⁴⁵ Burke acknowledged that there was an important change in England in 1688/89, but he emphasised that care was taken to ensure that the changes made were minimal.⁴⁶ In 1660, when the monarchy was restored, and in 1688/89, there was a strong disposition to preserve the continuities:

A state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation. Without such means it might even risk the loss of that part of the Constitution which it wished the most religiously to preserve. The two principles of conservation and correction operated strongly at the two critical periods of the Restoration and Revolution, when England found itself without a king. At both those periods the nation had lost the bond of union in their ancient edifice: they did not, however, dissolve the whole fabric. On the contrary, in both cases they regenerated the deficient part of the old Constitution through the parts which were not impaired.⁴⁷

of antiquarians,” but an outlook that bound up “the Constitution of our country with our dearest domestic ties,” thereby “adopting our fundamental laws into the bosom of our family affections.”⁵⁰ Burke’s commitment to the settlement of 1688/89 was clear, although his view of the struggles of 1640-58 remained less well defined. It is encouraging to see this area now being explored in depth.⁵¹

Burke was well aware that the situation in France was different. The rise of monarchical absolutism had resulted in the eclipse of parliaments. Yet Burke insisted that among the French all had not been lost:

Your privileges, though discontinued, were not lost to memory. Your Constitution, it is true, whilst you were out of possession, suffered waste and dilapidation; but you possessed in some parts the walls, and in all the foundations, of a noble and venerable castle. You might have repaired those walls; you might have built on those old foundations[.] ... you had the elements of a Constitution very nearly as good as could be wished.⁵²

Nevertheless, the French revolutionaries had chosen not to re-connect with their deeper past. Rather than avail themselves of as much continuity

as was possible, they, under the influence of late-enlightenment philosophy, chose to embrace a raft of speculative and untried abstract ideas. From the outset they repudiated the French past, even as they misused it in ways that risked a repeat of the barbarous ways in which the followers of John Calvin had been treated in the past. The revolutionaries perverted the very history that they repudiated.⁵³

Burke maintained that in England a degree of religious toleration had arisen, not because of religious indifference but because religion was viewed there as being supremely important.⁵⁴ He wrote as a Christian:

We know, and, what is better, we feel inwardly, that religion is the basis of civil society, and the source of all good, and of all comfort." Moreover, he continued, "we prefer the Protestant: not because we think it has less of the Christian religion in it, but because, in our judgment, it has more. We are Protestants, not from indifference, but from zeal."⁵⁵

Indeed, religion lay at the heart of the issue, and in the twenty-first century his words can hit us with the power of their contemporary relevance:

man is by his constitution a religious animal ... [and] if, in the moment of riot, and in a drunken delirium from the hot spirit ... which in France is now so furiously boiling, we should ... [throw] off that Christian religion which has hitherto been our boast and comfort, and one great source of civilization amongst us ... we are apprehensive ... that some uncouth, pernicious, and degrading superstition might take [the] place of it.⁵⁶

The initial tolerance of the revolution towards non-Catholic worship was deceptive.⁵⁷ At its heart it was opposed to the faith. It put the sovereignty of man in place of the sovereignty of God; it promoted statism (*étatisme*) as it rejected the kingship of Christ; it trumpeted abstract rights as it closed its ears to the words of the Holy Spirit speaking in Scripture. Burke warned that a public repudiation of the Christian religion would not lead to a bland, vacuous secularity. It would open the door to deeply anti-Christian evils. Long before the event, in a remarkably prescient passage, Burke anticipated the emergence, out of revolutionary chaos and confusion, of an all-powerful military dictator:

In the weakness of one kind of authority, and in the fluctuation of all, the officers of an army will remain for some time mutinous and full of faction, until some popular general, who understands the art of conciliating the soldiery, and who possesses the true spirit of command, shall draw the eyes of all men upon himself. Armies will obey him on his personal account. There is no other way of securing military obedience in this state of things. But the moment in which that event shall happen, the person who really commands the army is your master ... the master ... of your king, the master of your Assembly, the master of your whole republic.⁵⁸

This must stand as one of the most astute predictions in all political literature. It is important to remember that the *Reflections* was published in late 1790, *before* the execution of Louis XVI, *before* the rise of the Jacobins, *before* "the terror," *before* the Directory, and *before* the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821).

In the conclusion to his *Reflections*, Burke implied that he expected little immediate support. In the longer term, Burke's critique received wide-ranging endorsement from diverse quarters. Burke persuaded many. His acquaintance, the historian Edward Gibbon (1737-94), was in early agreement.⁵⁹ James Mackintosh (1765-1832), a lawyer by profession, published one of the most cogent critical responses to the *Reflections* in his *Vindiciae Gallicae* (1791).⁶⁰ Mackintosh later retracted his view and generously acknowledged this in a letter to Burke.⁶¹ The poet William Wordsworth (1770-1850), who had initially hailed the French Revolution ("Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive / But to be young was very heaven"), reversed his view and honoured Burke in his latter days.⁶² Others in England were soon disabused of their initial optimism. In 1793 the poet William Cowper (1731-1800)—(author of "God moves in a mysterious way / His wonders to perform")—wrote that events in France "have made me weep for a king of France, which I never thought to do, and they have made me sick of the name of liberty, which I never thought to be."⁶³ Not least, George III himself, often no friend of the Whigs, twice stated his approval of Burke's *Reflections*.⁶⁴

However, in the short term, the *Reflections* pro-

voked considerable controversy amongst Burke's fellow Whigs, many of whom were sympathetic to the French revolutionaries of 1789-90. Burke found himself somewhat isolated in a group of "conservative" Whigs who opposed the French Revolution. He insisted on drawing a strong distinction between the English "Glorious Revolution" of 1688/89 and the French Revolution of 1789. This was the same distinction drawn by Abraham Kuyper in his *Stone Lectures on Calvinism*.⁶⁵ In contrast, the radical Whig Charles James Fox (1749-1806) took the pro-French revolutionary side, and the disagreement between the two erstwhile friends was the occasion

example, that "As the ancient catholic religion is to be restored for the body of France, the ancient Calvinistic religion ought to be restored for the protestants with every kind of protection and privilege."⁶⁹ In the *Letters on a Regicide Peace* (1796), he warned that the allies confronted an implacable enemy dedicated to the violent imposition of its militant ideology:

To them, the will, the wish, the want, the liberty, the toil, the blood of individuals, is as nothing. Individuality is left out of their scheme of government. The state is all in all. Every thing is referred to the production of force; afterwards

In his final years Burke was heavily engaged in the anti-revolutionary struggle. In his *Thoughts of French Affairs* (1791), he warned his fellow countrymen against underestimating the subversive character of the revolutionary regime across Europe.⁶⁸

of a painful and public break. Burke paid a personal price for his stand on principle. He upheld and defended his distinction between 1688/89 and 1789 in *An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs* (1791). Burke maintained that the Whig party had to choose between its historical principles and "the doctors of this modern school."⁶⁶ This question eventually fractured the entire Whig party, and as the French threat increased, it was Fox who found himself outmanoeuvred and at a disadvantage.⁶⁷ In due course, some of those Whigs who had agreed with Burke supported the Tory administration of William Pitt the Younger (1759-1806), who was Prime Minister for most of the time between 1783 and 1806. This helps to explain why Burke and his Whig supporters came to be viewed as conservatives.

In his final years Burke was heavily engaged in the anti-revolutionary struggle. In his *Thoughts of French Affairs* (1791), he warned his fellow countrymen against underestimating the subversive character of the revolutionary regime across Europe.⁶⁸ In his *Remarks on the Policy of the Allies* (1793), he exposed the failings of the allies. There ought to be no return to past injustices. He insisted, for

everything is trusted to the use of it. It is military in its principle, in its maxims, in its spirit, and in all its movements. The state has dominion and conquest for its sole objects; dominion over minds by proselytism, over bodies by arms [sic].⁷⁰

The revolution had promised "liberty, equality, and fraternity," but had resulted in demands for ideological conformity and a state massively geared to the waging of war.

Burke died long before the final defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo in 1815. Nevertheless, for at least a century, Burke's subtle but pervasive influence on British politics ran ahead of serious scholarly study. In the nineteenth century, the outstanding British Foreign Secretary George Canning (1770-1827), the Conservative Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli (1804-81) and his arch-rival William Ewart Gladstone (1809-98) all read Burke with awe and respect. Another Prime Minister, Robert Peel (1788-1850), declared to Prince Albert (1819-61) that "every line that Mr Burke ever wrote on any subject" was well worth reading.⁷¹ Burke's critique of the French Revolution reinforced the widespread acceptance among Englishmen of the principles of 1688/89, and was consistent with the anti-revolu-

tionary temper of the early Wesleyans.⁷²

The result was that in the long nineteenth century—an era of unprecedented change—Englishmen were cautious as to *progress* and shunned *revolution*. At the same time they engaged on all sides in *improvement* and committed themselves to *peaceful reform*.⁷³ Great Britain went through all the stresses and strains of immense agricultural and industrial developments, successive reforms of parliamentary representation, and vast changes in communications and travel. Morbidity declined as health advanced, towns grew into great cities, and Protestant Dissenters and Roman Catholics had many of the disadvantages they had long endured revoked. Thanks to the efforts of Granville Sharp (1735-1813), William Wilberforce (1759-1833), Thomas Clarkson (1760-1846), and a whole host of others, the slave trade was suppressed (1807), and eventually the institution of slavery itself was abolished (1833) across the British Empire. All this was done without revolution or civil war.

It is sometimes forgotten that during the War of Independence, Great Britain found herself also at war against France, Spain, and the Netherlands. Against these continental European powers she prevailed. British North America was also retained. The siege of Gibraltar was withstood (1779-83). The history of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Ontario testifies to the role of the “United Empire Loyalists.” Even before the War of Independence, James Cook (1728-79) had circumnavigated New Zealand (1769); entered Botany Bay, Australia; and explored the Great Barrier Reef (1770).

The loss of the thirteen colonies enabled Great Britain to pursue more fully other fields of endeavour, in some of which she was already engaged. The historian Vincent Harlow (1898-1961) described the emergence of this “second British Empire” in impressive detail.⁷⁴ The British recovered from 1776, and, to put it mildly, “carried on.” Eventually the remaining North American and newer Australasian colonies became self-governing. Later, the self-governing colonies of British North America became the Dominion of Canada (1867), and the self-governing colonies of Australasia became the Commonwealth of Australia (1901) and the Dominion of New Zealand (1907). Their status was further defined by the *Statute of Westminster*

(1931). These countries enjoy multi-party parliamentary government on the Westminster model, are wholly independent, and conduct their own foreign affairs. They never had to fight wars of independence against the British Crown because successive governments in Westminster had managed to absorb enough of the wisdom of Burke’s advice on America and had acted accordingly.

As first Canada, and then Australia and New Zealand, peacefully and gradually acquired all of the attributes of independent states: their course of constitutional advancement set out a path by which all British colonies could become self-governing and ultimately independent. In the long duration of history, heeding the advice of Burke helped set in train a process that opened the way to the Commonwealth of Nations.⁷⁵

What still needs to be explained is the continuing fascination with Burke on the part of so many American scholars.⁷⁶ Is Burke’s anti-revolutionary reputation like a matador’s red cape, exciting the charge of latter-day revolution-inclined academic bulls? Possibly, although for at least some Americans the pinch might be at 1776 rather than 1789. Perhaps it lies in the manner in which American independence was achieved. Although Burke exhibited great good will towards the (then) American colonies, and accepted their complete independence after the event, a unilateral Declaration of Independence was not a course of action that he could have sanctioned. His inclination was always towards continuity. His principles stood over and against the July 4th Declaration *and* the policies of Lord North’s administration.

Burke was the kind of man who cultivated a wide range of friends and interests. In conversation he was articulate, informative and engaging. An admiring Dr Johnson said of him, “Take up whatever topic you please, he is ready to meet you.”⁷⁷ As a farmer, he took advice from Arthur Young (1741-1820), the agriculturalist. At a decisive point, he gave financial support to the aspiring poet George Crabbe (1754-1832). He encouraged the prison reformer John Howard (1726-90). He publicly supported Wilberforce, when he first spoke against slavery in the House of Commons. After 1789, he gave aid and support to refugees from France.

Yet for all that, his latter years were troubled.

He endured what Demosthenes called an “Iliad of Woe.” He was ill used by Thomas Paine (1737-1809) in his *Rights of Man* (1791).⁷⁸ Burke was weighed down by thoughts of pending revolution in Ireland and trembled for its future. He feared revolution in England itself. So much seemed to be moving in the wrong direction. Burke’s elder son, Christopher, had died in infancy, and even more grievously his second son, Richard, died unexpectedly in 1794. He found himself without direct descendants. His brother Richard also died in the same year. Although his wife, Mary, still lived, and he was not completely without friends, he felt bereft. A year before his death he wrote: “The storm has gone over me; and I lie like one of those old oaks which the late hurricane has scattered about me. I am stripped of all my honours; I am torn up by the roots, and lie prostrate on the earth!” Here, he identified with the afflicted Job and echoed the words of the Psalmist: “I am alone, I have none to meet my enemies in the gate.” (Ps. 127: 5).⁷⁹ Given these circumstances, it is pleasing to record that at the very end of his days Burke read Wilberforce’s challenging *Practical View* with appreciation and respect.⁸⁰

Burke’s writings are of a style and depth not always appreciated in the twenty-first century. He does not offer crass slogans, but extended deliberations. The style is fulsome but rarely florid; abundant but only very rarely running to serious excess. He cannot be absorbed “at speed,” but will reward the steady reader. He wrote, for the most part, to address immediate and urgently pressing situations. Yet he left to succeeding generations a remarkable literary legacy, the fruit of sustained reflection exhibiting penetrating insight. He died at a time when the future looked very bleak. Yet his integrity and wisdom was to bear fruit for decades to come. He could hardly have anticipated that in the next century, across the North Sea in the Netherlands, Kuyper would say, “We Dutch Calvinists want to be like Burke.”⁸¹

Christian obedience in our own day may produce a harvest that we ourselves do not witness, but that in the fullness of time will be received with thankfulness by generations yet to come.

Endnotes

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3. Guillaume Groen Van Prinsterer, *Unbelief and Revolution* translated by Harry Van Dyke, (Bellingham WA: Lexham Press, 2018), 15.
4. Marie Elisabeth Kluit, *Het Protestantse Réveil in Nederland en daarbuiten, 1817-1854* (Amsterdam: H.J. Paris, 1970), 202.
5. John Morley, *Edmund Burke: A Historical Study*, and *Burke* (London: Macmillan, 1867 and 1882, respectively). What I have termed the secularist-rationalist weighting in Morley’s three-volume *Life of Gladstone* (1903) is ably redressed in David Bebbington’s *William Ewart Gladstone: Faith and Politics in Victorian Britain* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1993), esp. xii-xiii.
6. Ernest Edwin Reynolds, *Edmund Burke: Christian Statesman* (London: Student Christian Movement Press, 1948), esp. 34-36, 71-72, 95, 202-23.
7. James Prior, *Memoir of the Life and Character of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke*, 2 volumes (London: Baldwin Cradock and Joy, 1824-6, and later editions), and Thomas Macknight, *The History of the Life and Times of Edmund Burke*, 3 volumes (London: Chapman and Hall, 1856-60). See also the appreciation of Prior and Macknight offered by W.T. Laprade in: “Edmund Burke: An Adventure in Reputation,” *Journal of Modern History* 32.4 (1960), 321-32 at 328-9.
8. *The Works of the Right-Honourable Edmund Burke*, 16 volumes, edited by Walter King and French Laurence (London: F.C. and J. Rivington, 1803-27). This edition was supplanted by *The Works of Edmund Burke*, 6 volumes (London: Henry Bohn, 1855-6). In 1865-7, Little, Brown of Boston published the standard 12-volume American edition.
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10. Specifically, Philip Magnus, *Edmund Burke* (London: John Murray, 1939), and Dixon Wecter,

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11. Thomas W. Copeland, *Our Eminent Friend Edmund Burke* (Yale University Press, 1949). Published in England under the title *Edmund Burke: Six Essays* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1950).
 12. See Ross J.S. Hoffman, "The Wentworth Papers of Burke, Rockingham, and Fitzwilliam," and Thomas W. Copeland, "Problems of Burke's Letters," in the *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 94/4 (1950), 352-356 and 357-360 respectively, and also Thomas W. Copeland, "The Reputation of Edmund Burke," *Journal of British Studies* 1.2 (1962), 78-90, at 84-86.
 13. Thomas W. Copeland, *Checklist of the Correspondence of Edmund Burke* (Cambridge University Press for the Index Society, 1955), and as General Editor of *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, 10 volumes (Cambridge University Press and University of Chicago Press, 1958-78).
 14. For Louis Namier's approach see his *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III and England in the Age of the American Revolution* (London: Macmillan, 1929 and 1930 respectively). For "Namierism" see John Brooke, "Namier and Namierism," *History and Theory* 3.3 (1964), 331-47.
 15. Alfred Cobban, *Edmund Burke and the Revolt Against the Eighteenth Century* (London: George Allan and Unwin, 1929, second edition, 1960), vii-viii, 37-132.
 16. Herbert Butterfield, *George the Third and the Historians* (London: Collins, 1957), esp. 193-299. Butterfield's "George III and the Constitution," *History* (New Series) 43.7 (1958), 14-33, and "Some Reflections on the Early Years of George III's Reign," *Journal of British Studies* 4.2 (1965), 78-102 summarize his position.
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 18. Keith C. Sewell, *Herbert Butterfield and the Interpretation of History* (Basingstoke UK, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 181-197.
 19. Carl B. Cone, *Burke and the Nature of Politics*, Vol. I: *The Age of the American Revolution*, and Vol. II: *The Age of the French Revolution* (Lexington KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1957 and 1964 respectively).
 20. For an example of smear and misrepresentation, see Isaac Kramnick, *The Rage of Edmund Burke: Portrait of an Ambivalent Conservative* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), and the criticisms of its "sloppy scholarship" by Cone in the *American Historical Review* 83.3 (1978), 722-23.
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 22. *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, edited by Paul Langford, et al., 9 volumes (Oxford University Press, 1981-2015). Hereafter *WSEB*.
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 24. Jesse Norman, *Edmund Burke: The First Conservative* (New York: Basic Books, 2013), esp. 282-4.
 25. Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Santayana* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1953).
 26. See Drew Maciag, *Edmund Burke in America: The Contested Career of the Father of Modern Conservatism* (Cornell University Press, 2013), esp. 10-22 and 234-41, and Emily Jones, *Edmund Burke and the Invention of Modern Conservatism, 1830-1914* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 2-15, 163-171, and 226-232.
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 30. Burke, "Speech on Conciliation with America" (March 22, 1775). *WSEB*, Vol. III, 105-166, at 108.
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 35. See esp. Thomas H. D. Mahoney, *Edmund Burke and Ireland: The Lifelong Efforts of the Great Statesman to Help his Native Land* (Harvard University Press, 1960).
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 38. Burke, "Speech on the Opening of Impeachment" (February 16, 1788). *WSEB* Vol. VI, 350.
 39. Burke, "Opening the Impeachment: Appendix." *WSEB* Vol. VI, 470.
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 46. Burke, "Reflections" 1790. *WSEB*, Vol. VIII, 67-8. See also David T. Koyzis, *We Answer to Another* (Eugene OR: Pickwick, 2014), 156-157.
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 48. Burke, "Reflections" 1790. *WSEB*, Vol. VIII, 84.
 49. Burke, "Reflections" 1790. *WSEB*, Vol. VIII, 143, 147.
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 54. Burke, "Reflections" 1790. *WSEB*, Vol. VIII, 199.
 55. Burke, "Reflections" 1790. *WSEB*, Vol. VIII, 141-142.
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 60. James Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae: A Defense of the French Revolution, and its English Admirers Against the Accusations of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke* (London: Robinson, 1791).
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