

Ian Crowe examines the career and political thought of Edmund Burke (1730–97) – normally thought of as a Conservative philosopher, but a political thinker whose writing has much of relevance to Liberals.



BIOGRAPHY: EDMUND BURKE

Edmund Burke was born in Ireland in 1730, the second surviving son of Richard Burke, an attorney, and his wife, Mary. After graduating from Trinity College, Dublin, Burke travelled to London to train for the Bar at the Middle Temple; but by the mid 1750s his lukewarm interest in the legal profession had given way to an uncertain career in academic writing and journalism. His prospects brightened with the publication of two books of significance, *A Vindication of Natural Society* (1756) and *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), and his publisher, Robert Dodsley, commissioned him to edit a new venture, a periodical of current events, political and cultural reviews and essays entitled the *Annual Register*, which first appeared in 1759. By the time he was elected to parliament, in 1765, Burke had gained a secure reputation in literary

and academic circles: he was, for example, a well-respected member of Dr Johnson's circle and one of the founding members of 'The Club'.

Burke's political career began when he was appointed private secretary to William Hamilton, a wealthy and promising politician, some time around 1760. Hamilton became Chief Secretary to the Lord-Lieutenant of Ireland, the Earl of Halifax, in 1761, and Burke followed him to Dublin. Four years later, after an acrimonious break with his employer, Burke was appointed private secretary to the great Whig landowner Charles Watson-Wentworth, Marquis of Rockingham, and that December was provided with the 'pocket' parliamentary seat of Wendover through the favour of Lord Verney, a friend of his close friend, Will Burke (no family link has ever been proved).

Although he made an immediate impact on the House as a speaker, and consolidated his position among the Rockingham

Whigs with his *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents* (1770) – a defence of political party as a counter to supposed 'hidden influences' working close to the person of the monarch, George III – Burke really rose to prominence as a parliamentarian after he was elected to represent Bristol, then England's second port, in 1774. This was the occasion of his famous statement upon the duty of a member of parliament to his constituents: '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.' The statement, in hindsight, was highly unfortunate, for Burke's six years as the member for Bristol were neither entirely happy nor successful. His sympathetic judgment of the American colonists in their quarrel with parliament, his promotion of the relaxation of Irish trade restrictions, his support for Catholic Relief, and his absorption in the broader political struggles

at Westminster, produced tensions and enmities among his constituents that resulted in his withdrawal from the poll in 1780. For the remainder of his parliamentary career, until 1794, he sat for the Yorkshire seat of Malton.

Burke remained loyal to Rockingham up to, and well beyond, the latter's death in 1782, and his campaigns during this period were particularly directed at perceived encroachments of royal power upon the prerogatives of parliament. This impeccably Whiggish stand – liberal in its sensitivity to the preservation of constitutional liberty in Britain – was extended to a defence of the 'chartered rights' of the American colonists, criticism of the penal laws imposed upon Irish Catholics under the 'Protestant Ascendancy', opposition to the institution of slavery in the British Empire, and, from the early 1780s to 1794, an exhaustive attack on what he perceived as the arbitrary and tyrannical rule of East India Company officials over Britain's Indian subjects. One personal source of this commitment to justice within the nation's Imperial responsibility may be found in Burke's own upbringing in Ireland, the son of a Protestant father and Roman Catholic mother.

Burke held office (as Paymaster-General) for about twelve months in all: in 1782, during Rockingham's brief second administration, and for several months under the ill-fated Fox–North coalition, in 1783. After the collapse of the coalition in December 1783 and its replacement by Pitt the Younger's first administration, Burke was never to be in power again. He remained close to Charles J. Fox during the early years of the impeachment of Warren Hastings, Governor-General of Bengal, and through the first regency crisis of 1788–89, but broke with the Foxites in 1791 over their sympathetic reception of the French Revolution, ending his parliamentary life in the company of the less radical Portland Whigs.

Burke's most famous work, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, appeared late in his career, in 1790. Its penetrating attacks upon the French revolutionary philosophy of the 'rights of man' seemed to many of his contemporaries, and to some of his closest political friends, an inexplicable abandonment of his earlier commitment to liberty; but Burke set out to show in succeeding works – particularly in *An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs* (1791) and his *Letters on a Regicide Peace* (1795–97) – that he had consistently propounded an understanding of the rights and duties of man in society that was based not on abstract propositions but upon universal principles necessarily mediated through circumstances, history, cultural forms of social behaviour and inherited institutions.

The last years of Burke's life were filled with personal and professional disappointment. The impeachment of Warren Hastings failed, the revolutionary spirit appeared to pose increasing threats to Britain's heritage of chartered liberties and rights, and Burke's only surviving son, Richard, died weeks after being elected as the new member for Malton. Burke's grief was only relieved by the consolations of his extremely successful and happy marriage to Jane Nugent.

In many ways, Burke's legacy, and with it his significance for modern-day liberalism, has been distorted by the extraordinary success of the *Reflections*. For example, Burke's critique of the French Revolution has been taken as an assault on the Enlightenment, or 'Modernity', and a defence of monarchy, aristocracy, and feudalism. But his criticisms of British policy in Ireland, America, and India, his observations on slavery and economical reform, and his close parliamentary association with the Rockingham Whigs and their successors, all suggest a mind that thought radically about social injustice and, in its balance of reason and passion, was well within

the broad and varied traditions of eighteenth-century Enlightenment thought.

Burke's later assault on 'Jacobinism' was, in fact, a defence of the intellectual currents of his time against an emerging heresy that placed a potentially disastrous reliance upon abstract and rationalist thought to the exclusion of other vital facets of human nature and social intercourse. In particular, Burke feared the consequences of its atheistic assumptions when applied to politics, and this helps to explain his hardening attitude, towards the end of his life, as regards the toleration of dissenters in Britain (although he maintained his earlier latitudinarian position to his death and remained a strong promoter of relief for Roman Catholics).

During the nineteenth century, admirers of Burke included figures as diverse as Coleridge and Gladstone, Croker, Macaulay, and Morley: Disraeli's early writings clearly owe much to the spirit of Burke, and Matthew Arnold found in him a vital source of wisdom. Yet, inasmuch as the contours of Victorian Britain were defined by confidence in material progress and imperial power, and by the growth of industrialisation and parliamentary democracy, Burke was an awkward paradigm for both Conservatives and Liberals. Between Burke the romantic reactionary and Burke the proto-Utilitarian, there appeared to be little space in which to embrace the sheer breadth and complexity of his genius.

Nowadays, Burke's anti-ideological stand is particularly appealing to many conservatives, but it should be equally relevant to liberals; his faith in the naturalness and benefits of integration and coexistence among diverse cultures, and his insistence that there is more to the political and social animal than mere rational formulae, can help us to appreciate more fully the enduring human impulse for liberty, while also understanding the vital importance of community life,

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civic duty and a respect for the wisdom of tradition in the preservation of that liberty. These are all facets of the human condition that have, in the past, been central to the liberal heart, and they may still convey a sense of the inherent dignity of the human individual far surpassing that to be found in the writings of the many 'scientific' humanitarian planners who have emerged since Burke's death.

In large part, recent developments in Burke scholarship have stemmed from the disintegration of the ideological context within which Burke's thought had come to be analysed in the decades after the Second World War – i.e., the Cold-War world – when Burke's significance as a thinker was often debated in a way that identified Communism as a twentieth-century form of Jacobinism. Conor Cruise O'Brien's Introduction to his famous biography of Burke, *The Great Melody* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1992), offers, perhaps, the final serious contribution to this debate. Since the end of the Cold War, attention has turned increasingly to the recovery of aspects of Burke's thought that transcend the anti-Jacobin stance of his later years. These include his campaigns against British corruption in India, his understanding of the social and moral significance of custom, tradition, and culture in relation to a 'science' of human nature, and

the origins and political context of his religious beliefs.

Several recent, outstanding, scholarly publications have helped to chart these new paths in Burke studies, opening up fresh perspectives on his life and the relevance of his thought: F. P. Lock's biographical study, *Edmund Burke, Volume One: 1730–1784* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998); David Bromwich's anthology of Burke's writings, *On Empire, Liberty, and Reform: Speeches and Letters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); and, most recently, J. C. D. Clark's new edition of Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Stanford University Press, 2001). The appearance of the *Viking Portable Edmund Burke*, edited by Isaac Kramnick (Harmondsworth, 1999), and of *Edmund Burke: His Life and Legacy* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1997), a collection of essays by scholars, politicians and journalists published to commemorate the bicentenary of Burke's death, also illustrate the continuing vibrancy of interest in Burke's thought.

A really sound introduction to Burke and his thought remains to be written, but Peter Stanlis's introduction to *Edmund Burke: Select Writings and Speeches* (Washington, D.C., 1963) covers the ground very effectively, and Russell Kirk's *Edmund Burke: A Genius Reconsidered* (Arlington House, 1967, revised and updated by the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, Wilmington, 1997) provides an accessible and often penetrating study for the interested reader. Also helpful is the commentary of Nicholas Robinson in his collection of contemporary prints and cartoons *Edmund Burke: A Life in Caricature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996). More difficult, but highly rewarding of perseverance, is Gerald Chapman's *Edmund Burke: The Practical Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967). A recent publication of interest is *Edmund Burke of Beaconsfield* by Elizabeth Lambert (University of Delaware Press, 2003) which

is an absorbing study of Burke's domestic life, focusing particularly on his relationship with his wife, Jane. Readers would find it highly instructive not only about aspects of Burke's personality but about the wider context of the life of the landed gentry in late-eighteenth-century England.

For those interested in reading Burke's original writings, there are a number of options. Besides the anthologies mentioned above, there are very good, affordable selections available from Liberty Fund, Inc., Indianapolis, USA, (including a new imprint of E. J. Payne's three-volume *Select Works of Edmund Burke*, which first appeared in the 1870s). The Oxford University Press edition of the *Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke* (general editor Paul Langford) is largely excellent, particularly those volumes edited by P. J. Marshall and containing Burke's Indian writings. In selecting original works of Burke, readers should seek out, in particular, the 'Speech on Fox's East India Bill' (1783), the 'Speech on Conciliation with the [American] Colonies' (1775), the 'Letter to the Sheriffs of Bristol' (1777), the posthumously published 'Tracts on the Popery Laws in Ireland', and Burke's opening speech at the impeachment trial of Warren Hastings (1788).

For discussions of Burke's thought in the contemporary context, see Jim McCue's trenchant and well-wrought *Edmund Burke and Our Present Discontents* (London, 1997) and Terry Eagleton's short but stimulating article 'Saving Burke from the Tories,' which appeared in the *New Statesman*, 4 July 1997.

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