**Edmund Burke: Philosopher, Politician, Prophet**

*by Jesse Norman*

(William Collins, 2013)

"Edmund Burke is both the greatest and the most underrated political thinker of the past 300 years", writes Jesse Norman on the first page of his biography of Burke. Despite his evident knowledge of and enthusiasm for his subject, Norman is not persuasive on this bold claim. Nevertheless, in making his case for Burke as a great political thinker he raises important questions, both concerning the relationship between political ideas and practice, and the credibility of conservatism as a serious contemporary political philosophy.

The book is structured in two halves: the first 170 pages cover Burke's life, placing his writings and speeches firmly in the context of his distinguished political career. The remaining 120 pages present his political thought more systematically, and make the case for his continuing importance as a political thinker. Burke's political activity consisted mostly in organising opposition to the governments of his day - his thirty years in parliament included only two during which he held office - and most of his great speeches were condemnations of policies he opposed. His life therefore tends to read as the story of a man whose greatest achievement was to demonstrate the lack of achievement by others.

In this respect, Burke belongs to that great tradition of Irish writers who relocated to England and found fame and success by pointing out the absurdities of the ruling elite: Swift before him; Sheridan and Goldsmith his contemporaries; Wilde and Shaw a century later. It is harder to argue for Burke as a member of that tradition of political thinkers who played a substantial and meaningful role in the improvement of the governance of their communities. Locke and Bentham, for example, both achieved a greater influence on British policy-making, despite never holding elected political office. Thomas Jefferson, Burke's contemporary, wrote better speeches, founded a more successful political party,[[1]](#endnote-1) and served eight years as the third President of the world's first representative democracy.

In his essay, "On the Character of Burke", written in 1807, ten years after Burke's death, William Hazlitt writes, "The truth is, that he was out of his place in the House of Commons; he was eminently qualified to shine as a man of genius, as the instructor of mankind, as the brightest luminary of his age; but he had nothing in common with that motley crew of knights, citizens and burgesses".[[2]](#endnote-2) Thus the judgement that Burke should best be remembered as a great speech-maker, skilled in exposing the cant and culpability of the British ruling class, rather than a successful political thinker, has a two-hundred year pedigree. For any admirer of Burke this ought to give pause for thought: what grounds are there for overturning the settled verdict of previous generations?

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Norman suggests that "[I]n general Burke's thought is remarkably stable and consistent, even as it develops throughout his life" (p.188). This is more likely to be the mark of an influential political thinker than an influential political practitioner; perhaps it is for this reason that Norman makes the claim. The obvious objection to it is that the central themes of Burke's early political career - opposition to slavery, sympathy for Irish Catholics, fierce condemnation of abuses of power by George III and his circle, support for the American colonialists during the War of Independence, and the development of the concept of parties based on principles rather than factions based on personalities - were all somewhat undermined by his most famous political campaign: against the revolution in France.

Burke's obsessional pursuit of Warren Hastings, the Governor General of Calcutta, during the late 1780s, culminating in impeachment proceedings that lasted seven years but ended in acquittal, is suggestive that his judgement was fading. There is little doubt that the exercise of British power in India was at times arbitrary and corrupt, nonetheless Burke's vendetta against Hasting was a poor choice of instrument by to instigate reform.[[3]](#endnote-3)

His response to the overthrow of the Bourbon monarchy in France confirmed his decline. In retrospect it is easy to present Burke as wise and prescient: unlike the American revolution, the French revolution precipitated a decade of terror followed by fifteen years of war in Europe. However, as Thomas Paine observed at the time, the principles upon which both revolutions were founded were near identical. Burke had expressed sympathy and support for the Americans in their struggle for independence; but, to quote Paine, when it came to France "he pities the plumage but forgets the dying bird".

When Burke published his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, in November 1790, it was not yet clear that the French revolution was likely to follow the course that it eventually did. Nor was it clear that there was a great difference in principle between the American colonialists throwing off the yoke of a British king and the French people throwing of the yoke of a French king. If anything, the French had a great deal more to complain about and the Americans a great deal more to lose.

That France might become politically unstable - and at some points almost ungovernable - for the next thirty-five years was a clear possibility; and such a possibility should have given any responsible politician reason to doubt the wisdom of the revolutionaries. The same might also have been said - and surely was - about the America revolutionaries in the 1770s. Their refusal to settle the debate over of slavery led - inexorably - to a bloody civil war. Which side would Burke have taken in 1861? The young Burke would, no doubt, have supported the anti-slavery Northerners, whereas the aging Burke would, perhaps, have lamented the destruction of the traditional Southern way of life.

The reaction of Burke's contemporaries seems clear enough: his friends broke with him and his enemies embraced him. He had changed his tune and everyone noticed. For the practicing politician such behaviour is acceptable so long as the act of *volte face* does not become habitual. For the political theorist such a reversal poses a greater challenge, namely whether his lifetime of speech-making and writing can be thought to form a coherent whole. Norman thinks the reversals superficial and the work consistent; I take the opposite view.

This issue is particularly pertinent in any assessment of Burke's writings, not least because he is now, above all, associated with an idea warmly embraced by contemporary conservative thinkers: that the greatest insights are not to be found among the products of abstract rational thought, but in the slowly accumulated wisdom of the generations, embedded in the temper, manners, habits and - importantly - institutions that they have bequeathed us. For which reason, there is always cause to hesitate before making any change in the social order, or to social institutions; what has served us well in the past should not be put aside lightly. Our obligations to future generations include passing on to them the store of knowledge and good practice that was passed on to us by previous generations. We might tinker and adjust, as circumstances demand, but radical reform ("innovation") is always suspect.

This conservative philosophy is offered by Norman as Burke's great intellectual legacy, and a much needed corrective to the liberal individualism of contemporary Western societies. Norman thinks that in our enthusiasm for liberty we have been guilty of granting and taking licence; we have lost respect for traditional sources of value - the family, the local community, religious observance - and have become obsessed with the acquisition of wealth and status above all else. This is a familiar conservative refrain, which often relies upon a partial and condescending account of the character of modern society. To his credit, Norman avoids both partiality and condescension; instead he chides modern liberal societies for being too liberal.

There is no doubt that Burke was one of the earliest and most eloquent advocates of this modern conservative creed, but there is some doubt as to whether he is a suitable candidate for membership of the conservative pantheon. He defended the 1688 political settlement in Britain, which was the by-product of a revolution that had, in turn, been made possible by the victory of the Parliamentary Army in the Civil War and the subsequent regicide. He was no admirer of Cromwell, but he did not seek to return to the *status quo ante,* as the early Tories did. He was pragmatic in his reverence for tradition. He was also an early advocate of free trade, a policy that in the nineteenth century became the rallying point for liberals against conservatives.

Burke was himself an innovator: he set out to change the conduct of parliamentary politics, by introducing the idea of party as opposed to faction. The most convincing sections of Norman's book are those which describe Burke's efforts to build a principled political opposition to the policies of the King and his favourites. Burke was one of the great theorists of political parties and therefore a co-founder of the modern conception of multi-party democratic politics. Norman comments that, "[T]he cure for those who hate political parties is to visit countries in which there are no such parties, or only one" (p.217). To which one might add, the cure for those who think liberal individualism has gone too far is to visit countries in which it has not been allowed to go far enough.

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Jesse Norman has written an engaging and thoughtful book. His life of Burke is well paced and presents him sympathetically but not uncritically. Burke lived through great events and wrote and spoke about them in an exciting and illuminating way. As Hazlitt wrote, "if [grandeur] is not to be found in Burke it is to be found nowhere". The defence of Burke's thought is less convincing, mostly because the claims Norman makes for him are so great as to be unsustainable. Burke was an important political thinker and a significant political innovator; but he is not the most important political thinker of the past 300 years.

There is much about the past that should be admired and cherished, but the duties of modern democratic politician are owed to future generations, not to our ancestors. Some of the institutions we build will survive for many generations, others will need regular reform and some will need to be abandoned altogether when they outlive their purpose. The great skill in politics is the ability to judge when to preserve and when to create anew. In the first half of the eighteenth century resisting Jacobitism was the right decision, but by the end of the eighteenth century resisting Jacobinism was not. In our day resisting the call to subjugate the individual, in the name of the preservation of inherited values, is the right decision. This is why I am not, nor ever will be a conservative.

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October 2013

1. Richard Hofstadter, The Idea of a Party System, University of California Press, 1969.
 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. William Hazlitt, "On the Character of Burke", in The Works of William Hazlitt III: Winterslow, London, Grant Richards, 1902. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Boyd Hilton, A Mad, Bad, and Dangerous People? England 1783-1846, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2006. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)