

SELECT WORKS OF EDMUND BURKE

MISCELLANEOUS WRITINGS

SELECT WORKS OF EDMUND BURKE

A NEW IMPRINT OF THE PAYNE EDITION

VOLUME 1

THOUGHTS ON THE CAUSE OF THE
PRESENT DISCONTENTS

THE TWO SPEECHES ON AMERICA

VOLUME 2

REFLECTIONS ON THE
REVOLUTION IN FRANCE

VOLUME 3

LETTERS ON A REGICIDE PEACE

MISCELLANEOUS WRITINGS



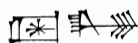
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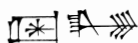
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by Francis Canavan



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EDITOR'S FOREWORD

In the three volumes of Liberty Fund's new edition of E. J. Payne's *Select Works of Edmund Burke* are writings in which Burke expounded his Whig theory of limited (and party) government, his views on the imperial crisis that led to American independence, and his views on the great Revolution in France, which he saw as a crisis of Western civilization. This companion volume includes writings that present Burke's views on three additional themes: representation, economics, and the defense of politically oppressed peoples. These themes are touched upon in many of his writings, but the documents selected for this volume are among the clearest examples of his thought on these subjects.

The first theme is Burke's understanding of representative government. Although he was skeptical of democracy as a form of government for any but small countries (and not optimistic even there), he did believe that government existed for the good of the whole community and must represent the interests of all its people. But, as he explained in his *Speech to the Electors of Bristol* after his election there, his idea of representation was not the radically democratic one that saw representation as a mere substitute for direct democracy and a representative as a mere agent of the local electorate whose duty it was to carry out its wishes despite his own best judgment.

As Burke said in his own words in this speech, while he surely would listen respectfully and seriously to his constituents, he rejected the idea of "*authoritative* instructions; *Mandates* issued, which the Member [of Parliament] is bound blindly and implicitly to obey, to vote, and to argue for,

though contrary to the clearest conviction of his judgement and conscience.”¹ (In his *Speech on the Reform of the Representation of the Commons in Parliament*, which follows this speech in the present volume, Burke explained the political theory that lies behind the view of representation that he rejected at Bristol.) Rather, he argued in his Bristol speech, a representative was to act for the interest of his constituents, to be sure, but as part of a larger national whole, in accordance with the enlightened judgment that could be exercised only at the center of government and in possession of the knowledge available there. If nothing were at issue in politics but the question of whose will should prevail, clearly the will of the electors should. But for Burke, political judgment was a matter of reason: prudent, practical reason.

This view of the function of representative government was compatible with the aristocratic theory of civil society that Burke set forth in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* and in its sequel, *An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs* (which may be found in Daniel Ritchie's *Further Reflections on the Revolution in France*, published by Liberty Fund). The British constitution that he admired and loved was a prescriptive one, not based upon the democratic theory of the rights of men, but legitimated by its long service to the welfare of the people. It is explained here in a speech that Burke neither delivered nor published, but which his literary executors found among his papers and included in the first set of his *Works*: the *Speech on the Reform of the Representation of the Commons in Parliament*. Burke's political theory derived the powers of government from the consent of the people, as he had explained in his early and never-completed *Tracts relative to the Laws against Popery in Ireland*. But both there and in this speech, the people's consent was demanded and controlled by their moral obligation to obey a government that served

1. See below, p. 11.

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their welfare. It was not derived from Everyman's original right to govern himself in the "state of nature."

The second theme dealt with in this volume is economics. Since Burke never wrote a formal treatise on that subject, his views on it are found in relatively brief form scattered throughout his works. Two examples of them are included here.

The first is *Two Letters to Gentlemen in Bristol on the Trade of Ireland*, which Burke wrote to merchants in Bristol while he was that city's Member of Parliament. He had voted for certain relaxations of the legislation that restrained Ireland's right to export goods to Great Britain. The Bristol merchants, typically, saw Ireland's gain as their loss and wrote to protest Burke's vote as hostile to their interests. Burke replied that trade is not a zero-sum game but a two-way street, the traffic on which benefits both parties.

One must not exaggerate what Burke says in those letters and make him out to be a free-trader *tout court*. He was addressing a particular question, the trade between the two kingdoms under one crown of Great Britain and Ireland. He had no desire to have the British Parliament relinquish its power to regulate commerce within and outside the Empire. In the debate on British policy toward the American colonies, he had accepted the Navigation Acts by which Britain severely restricted American trade because the Americans derived real benefits from their membership in the Empire, and he was content to argue that the Acts were a reason for Britain not to tax the colonies. Nor did he propose opening all of Britain's possessions to international trade on even terms.

Yet we can say that he had a bias in favor of freeing trade from mercantilist restraints. After the controversy over the trade between Britain and Ireland, he wrote to a member of the Irish Parliament that his aim had been "to fix the principle of a free trade in all the parts of these islands, as

founded in justice and beneficial to the whole, but principally to the seat of the supreme power.”² The regulation of trade, however, would remain with the supreme power.

Nor should we exaggerate the import of the next document, *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*. It, too, addresses a narrow question—whether government should subsidize the wages of agricultural laborers in a period of bad harvests—and is not a general treatise on economics. It is cast, nevertheless, in broad terms that strongly reflect Burke's Whig desire to limit the power of government, particularly over private property, which he regarded as the strong bulwark of liberty. Its meaning, therefore, cannot be limited to the question of agricultural wages, and it implies a laissez-faire theory of economics.

On the other hand, Burke was not always unwilling to have government intervene in economic matters. The next document included here, the *Speech on Fox's East India Bill*, shows that, having earlier defended the chartered rights of the East India Company against efforts to bring it under greater control by the British government, Burke had changed his mind and now advocated stripping the Company of independent power to govern the parts of India that it controlled. The interested reader may also consult the Ninth Report of the House of Commons Select Committee on India, of which Burke is the acknowledged author, for his free-market views, but should be careful not to make him out to be a Manchester liberal before his time.

The third theme is Burke's genuine concern for oppressed peoples. Burke always claimed to be a reformer, and in many ways he was one. For example, one of the actions that cost him his seat as M.P. for Bristol was his support of a bill for the relief of insolvent debtors. The documents selected here, however, demonstrate his concern for peoples outside Great

2. *Letter to Thomas Burgh, Esq.*, New Year's Day, 1780, *W&S* 9:550.

Britain but under British rule. Burke was always an imperialist but an enlightened one who believed that the Empire could and should be a blessing to all the lands that composed it. Volume 1 of this set presents the arguments he used in favor of the American colonies and against the British policy that drove them into revolt. He did not favor American independence, but when it came he accepted it gracefully and even saw a benefit to the British people in it. If the British government had succeeded in suppressing the American revolt by force, he feared, the result would have been a vast increase in the power of the Crown, and no Whig could approve of that. "We lost our Colonies"; he therefore said, "but we kept our Constitution."³

The other great imperial topics he dealt with were India and Ireland. The first of these is the subject of Burke's *Speech on Fox's East India Bill*, which is a lengthy indictment of the East India Company's misgovernment of India. It was followed by his *Speech on the Nabob of Arcot's Debts*, the Ninth Report of the Select Committee, and the long series of speeches in the impeachment of Warren Hastings, the Company's Governor-General of Bengal, whom the Committee failed to convict.

Whether Burke was fair to the Company and to Hastings is a matter of dispute, as is the issue of whether the prosecution of Hastings had much effect on Britain's subsequent government of India. But there is little doubt of the sincerity of Burke's conviction that, as he said in his speech on the East India bill, "Our Indian government is in its best state a grievance,"⁴ or of his desire to relieve that grievance and do justice to the suffering people of India.

Burke himself was Irish and had been born into a family in which the father had conformed to the Established Church

3. *Letter to a Noble Lord* (1796), *W&S* 9:152.

4. See below, p. 126.

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in order to practice law (a profession forbidden to Catholics under the Penal Laws), while his mother remained Catholic. His relatives on his mother's side were numerous, and he remained in friendly contact with them throughout his life. He had an intense sympathy with their plight under the government of what came to be called the Protestant Ascendancy, and he labored long and with considerable success to relieve Irish Catholics of their legal burdens. His *Letter to Sir Hercules Langrishe* presents a good picture of their situation as it was in 1792 and of what more he thought should be done for them. The interested reader may also consult Burke's document *On the State of Ireland*, written in the same year, and his *Tracts relative to the Laws against Popery in Ireland*, written three decades earlier, when the laws against the Catholics of Ireland were even more severe.

Finally, while Burke did not take much part in the movement to abolish the slavery of African blacks in the British colonies, he did write a document, *Sketch of the Negro Code*, that outlined a typically Burkean plan for the gradual amelioration and eventual abolition first of the slave trade and then of slavery itself. Once again, it shows Burke's genuine concern for politically oppressed peoples. He admired and defended aristocracy, but he did so as a man who truly believed that *noblesse oblige*.

That phrase, *noblesse oblige*, explains what may seem to be a contradiction in Burke's attitude toward the poor and oppressed. He strongly opposed a government policy of relieving their lot in England by subsidizing their wages in a time of poor harvests. Yet he denounced Britain's government for its policies in America, India, Ireland, and the slave-owning colonies.

But we must notice that Burke never proposed that government should support the poor in any of those instances. Even in regard to Negro slavery, his aim was gradually to abolish the slave trade and slavery while training the slaves to learn the social and economic skills necessary for freedom,

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to acquire property, and thus to be able to support themselves. So also in America, India, and Ireland. He wanted government to stop burdening the peoples of those countries with oppressive policies and to allow them the freedom to earn their own way. But, he thought, it was simply not the function of government to furnish them with their livelihood. Doing that in a period of hardship was a work of private charity and the Christian duty of the aristocracy of property owners, for whom "noblesse" did indeed oblige, not in justice but in charity.

Whether this policy would have been adequate after the Industrial Revolution had transformed Great Britain is a valid question. But although the Industrial Revolution got under way during Burke's latter years (perhaps as late as 1780), it did not hit its full stride until the following century. Burke did not see what it would do to the rural economic order dominated by the land-owning aristocracy, which he thought, rightly or wrongly, could handle the problem of poverty without government intervention in such questions as wages.

I have borrowed freely for the factual information in the footnotes to these documents, usually without explicit acknowledgment of the source when information could have been obtained from other sources as well. The sources I have used most frequently are the *Oxford English Dictionary*; the *Dictionary of National Biography*; The Loeb Classical Library; *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke* (general ed. Paul Langford); *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke* (general ed. Thomas Copeland); Carl Cone's two-volume *Burke and the Nature of Politics*; Thomas Mahoney's *Edmund Burke and Ireland*; and *Edmund Burke: A Bibliography of Secondary Sources to 1982*, by Clara Gandy and Peter Stanlis, as well as several encyclopedias and general reference works.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

The texts used in this volume have been chosen from their original publication in accordance with William B. Todd's *Bibliography of Edmund Burke* (Godalming, Surrey: St. Paul's Bibliographies, 1982). Burke's *Speech on the Reform of the Representation of the Commons in Parliament* and *Sketch of the Negro Code*, however, were not published in Burke's lifetime and were included by his literary executors in their New Edition of *The Works of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke* (London: F. C. and J. Rivington, 16 vols., 1808–27), from vols. 10 and 9 of which, respectively, they are taken here. *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* also did not appear in print in Burke's lifetime, but is taken here from the pamphlet under that title published by his executors prior to their publication of his *Works* (in vol. 7 of which it is reprinted).

Burke's speech at Bristol on November 3, 1774, is taken from *Mr. Burke's Speeches at His Arrival at Bristol and at The Conclusion of the Poll* (London: J. Dodsley, 2nd edition, 1775).

Two Letters from Mr. Edmund Burke to Gentlemen in the City of Bristol on the Bills Depending in Parliament Relative to the Trade of Ireland, 1st edition, was published in London by J. Dodsley in 1778.

Burke's speech on Fox's East India Bill is taken from *Mr. Burke's Speech on the 1st December 1783, upon the question for the Speaker's leaving the chair in order for the House to resolve itself into a committee on Mr. Fox's East India Bill* (London: J. Dodsley, 1st edition, 1784).

Burke's *Letter to Sir Hercules Langrishe* is taken from *A Letter from the Right Hon. Edmund Burke, M.P. in the Kingdom of Great Britain, to Sir Hercules Langrishe, Bart. M.P. on the subject of*

Roman Catholics of Ireland, and the Propriety of Admitting Them to the Elective Franchise, consistently with the Principles of the Constitution as Established at the Revolution (London: J. Debrett, 2nd edition, corrected, 1792).

Thoughts and Details on Scarcity, originally presented to the Right Hon. William Pitt, in the month of November, 1795, by the late Right Honourable Edmund Burke was first published in London in 1800 by F. and C. Rivington and J. Hatchard.

Burke's spellings (including in particular Indian and other foreign names), capitalizations, and use of italics have been retained, strange as they may seem to modern eyes.

I take this occasion to express my thanks to the staff of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University for providing the text of Burke's speech at Bristol, and to the staff of the Boston Athenaeum for providing the text of the two letters to gentlemen in Bristol. I owe special thanks to Ms. Carol Rosato of the Duane Library at Fordham University for her help in providing the texts of the speech on Fox's East India Bill, the letter to Sir Hercules Langrishe, and *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*.

I also thank my friends and fellow Burke scholars Professors Peter J. Stanlis of Rockford College and Daniel E. Ritchie of Bethel College for their very helpful comments on my work for these Liberty Fund volumes.

SHORT TITLES

THE ANNUAL REGISTER *The Annual Register* (began publication by J. Dodsley in London in 1758, under Burke's editorship, and continues publication to the present day).

CORR. 1844 Burke, Edmund, *Correspondence of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke between the Year 1744, and the Period of his Decease, in 1797*, eds. Charles William Wentworth-Fitzwilliam, 5th Earl Fitzwilliam, and Sir Richard Bourke. 4 vols. (London: Francis and John Rivington, 1844).

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