

SELECT WORKS OF EDMUND BURKE

VOLUME 1

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A NEW IMPRINT OF THE PAYNE EDITION

VOLUME 1

THOUGHTS ON THE CAUSE OF THE
PRESENT DISCONTENTS

THE TWO SPEECHES ON AMERICA

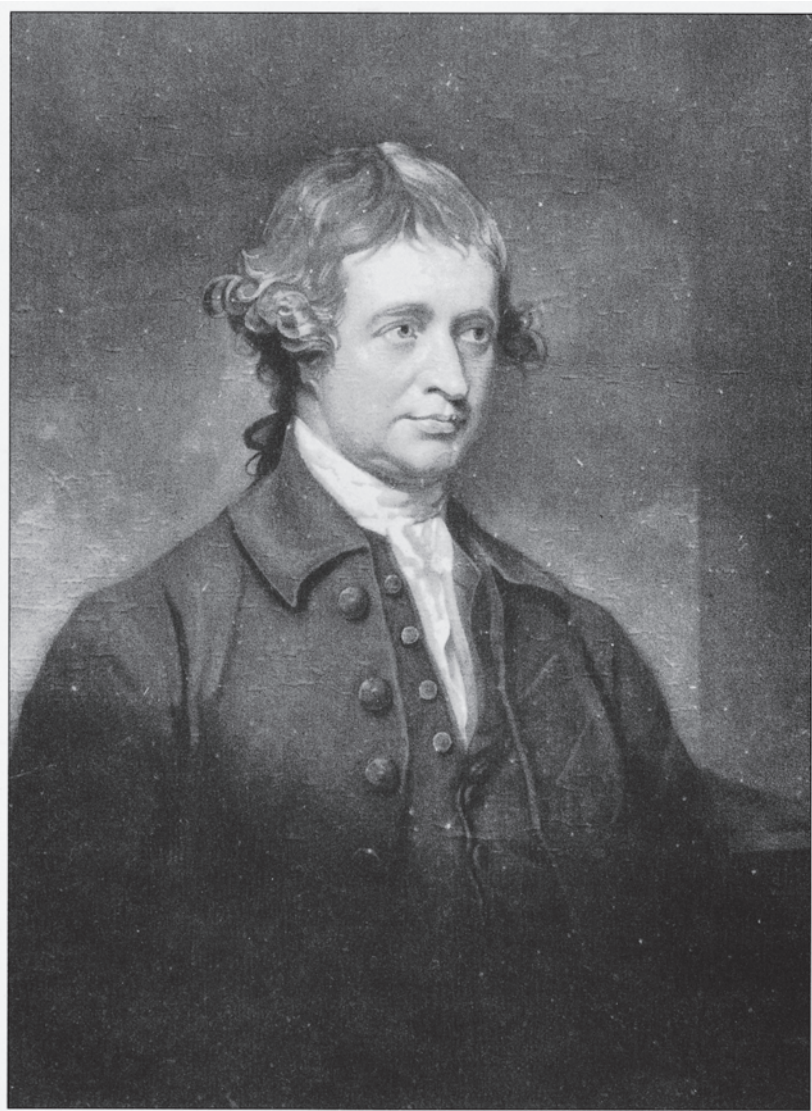
VOLUME 2

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EDMUND BURKE

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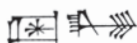
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Foreword and Biographical Note by Francis Canavan

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LIBERTY FUND
INDIANAPOLIS

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EDITOR'S FOREWORD

The first three volumes of this set of *Select Works* of Edmund Burke, fully edited by Edward John Payne (1844–1904), were originally published by the Clarendon Press, Oxford, from 1874 to 1878. Liberty Fund now publishes them again, with a fourth volume of additional writings by Burke. The original set has been praised by Clara I. Gandy and Peter J. Stanlis as “an outstanding critical anthology of Burke’s essential works on the American and French revolutions”; and they went on to say: “The scholarship and criticism is perhaps the best on Burke during the last quarter of the nineteenth century.”¹

E. J. Payne was born in England to parents “in humble circumstances,” as the *Dictionary of National Biography* phrases it. No doubt for that reason, the *Dictionary* goes on to say that he “owed his education largely to his own exertions.”² Nonetheless he was able at age twenty-three to matriculate at Magdalen Hall, Oxford, from which he transferred to Charsley’s Hall. He graduated B.A. in 1871, with a first class in classics. The following year he was elected to a fellowship in University College, Oxford. He was married in 1899 and therefore had to resign his fellowship, but was re-elected to a research fellowship in 1900. To the end of his days he took an active part in the management of College affairs.

He was called to the bar at Lincoln’s Inn in 1874, but devoted himself mainly to research and writing, especially

1. *Edmund Burke: A Bibliography of Secondary Studies to 1982* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1983), no. 916.

2. Second Supplement (1912), 3:85.

on English colonial history and exploration, on which subjects he published rather widely. He also wrote on music, and was an accomplished violinist. His introductions and notes to these *Select Works* show him also to have been well versed in English, French, Italian, and classical literature as well as in history.

The first of these volumes contains Burke's great speeches on the crisis between Great Britain and her American colonies, *On American Taxation* (1774) and *On Conciliation with the Colonies* (1775). They are preceded by his pamphlet *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents* (1770), which sets forth the political creed of the Whig faction led by the Marquis of Rockingham, for whom Burke acted as spokesman. The unifying theme of all three documents is Burke's fear of arbitrary power divorced from political prudence. In the *Present Discontents* it was the power of the Crown and in the American speeches it was the sovereignty of the Mother Country that he argued were being exercised in an arbitrary and foolish manner.

The second volume is devoted wholly to Burke's best-known work, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790); the third, to his *Letters on a Regicide Peace* (between Great Britain and revolutionary France), which were written in 1796 and 1797. In these volumes he again expresses a detestation of arbitrary power, in this case of the sovereign people, which in practice was really the power of an oligarchy posing as a democracy.

The fourth volume contains writings that express Burke's views on representation in Parliament, on economics, on the political oppression of the peoples of India and Ireland, and on the enslavement of African blacks.

One of the attractive features of Burke's political thought is his keen awareness of the way in which reason operates in political judgments. He so heavily emphasized the roles of tradition, even to the point of calling it prejudice, and of

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sentiment and emotion in politics that it is easy to overlook his insistence that it was reason, not will, that should govern in the affairs of men. Mere will was arbitrary; reason recognized and took into account the complexity of reality. But it was practical, prudential reason, not abstract ideology, that should determine political decisions.

Thus, in his American speeches, while he did not deny Great Britain's right to tax the colonies, he severely questioned the wisdom of trying to do so without the consent of the colonists. His objection to the French Revolution, and to the British radicalism that agreed with it, was not to democracy in the abstract (though he thought it unsuited to any large country), but to the doctrine of the "rights of men," which the new French government had stated early in the Revolution in these terms: "The Representatives of the people of France, formed into a National Assembly, considering that ignorance, neglect, or contempt of human rights, are the sole causes of public misfortunes and corruptions of government, have resolved to set forth in a solemn declaration those natural imprescriptible, and unalienable rights."

Noble as that sentiment may be, it presumes that the purpose of politics and of the state can be reduced to a question of rights. The end of all political associations is the preservation of rights, and denying or ignoring them is the sole cause of public misfortunes. It follows that if a nation were to get its conception of rights straight, it would have solved all the problems of society. Burke was a strong and sincere defender of people's rights in other contexts, but he was repelled by the ideological simple-mindedness of the French *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen* (1789).

Despite what Burke often seems to mean in his denunciations of "theory" and "metaphysics," he did not reject principles or an overarching natural moral order. On the contrary, he often appealed to them, particularly in his arguments against political oppression in India and Ireland. His

objection was to the ideological mind that reasoned in politics as if it were engaged in an exercise in geometry, proceeding from an initial principle to practical conclusions that followed with necessary logic, without regard to "the wisdom of our ancestors," present circumstances, and the nature of the people as conditioned by their history. "For you know," Burke wrote to Sir Hercules Langrishe in 1792, "that the decisions of prudence (contrary to the system of the insane reasoners) differ from those of judicature; and that almost all of the former are determined on the more or the less, the earlier or the later, and on a balance of advantage and inconvenience, of good and evil."³ But the decisions of prudence were nonetheless rational judgments that should not be considered irrational because they were not modelled on mathematics.

Burke believed in a common human nature created by God as the supreme norm of politics. But he knew that human nature realizes itself in history through conventional forms, customs, and traditions, which constitute what he called the second nature of a particular people. Convention can and often enough does distort our nature, but it is not of itself opposed to it. Burke would have agreed with the remark of the late Sir Ernest Barker: "Once oppose Nature to Convention, and the whole inherited tradition of the ages goes by the board."⁴ Convention, made as it should be to satisfy the needs of nature, is not nature's enemy, but its necessary clothing. The statesman must therefore frame his policies with a practical wisdom that understands his people, their history, their traditions, their inherited rights and liberties, and their present circumstances. To do otherwise is to court disaster.

Burke thought that in the French Revolution it was the National Assembly that was courting disaster; in the Ameri-

3. *Letter to Sir Hercules Langrishe*, in *Miscellaneous Writings*, the companion volume to *Select Works of Edmund Burke* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1999), p. 202.

4. *Greek Political Theory: Plato and His Predecessors* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 4th ed., 1951), p. 75.

can Revolution it was the British government. He never favored America's independence from Britain, because he always strove to be an enlightened imperialist for whom the British Empire could and should be a blessing to all its member countries. But when American independence came, he was able to accept it gracefully, and he even praised the new Constitution of the United States. Or so, at least, he is reported as saying in the House of Commons on May 6, 1791: "The people of America had, he believed, formed a constitution as well adapted to their circumstances as they could." It was, to be sure, a republican constitution, but, given the circumstances of the Americans, it had to be one: "They had not the materials of monarchy or aristocracy among them. They did not, however, set up the absurdity that the nation should govern the nation; that prince prettyman should govern prince prettyman: but formed their government, as nearly as they could, according to the model of the British constitution."⁵

In regard to France, however, he was uncompromising. There he saw the Revolution as an attack not only on monarchy and aristocracy, but on the religion, morals, and civilization of Christendom, inspired by a rationalistic ideology—"rationalistic" because it was founded not on reason, but on intoxication with abstract theory.

Nor did Burke divorce reason from emotion. On the contrary, he held that our reason can recognize our nature through our natural feelings and inclinations. To cite but one example, he is reported to have said in the Commons on May 14, 1781, that the obligation of kings to respect the property even of conquered enemies "is a principle inspired by the Divine Author of all good; it is felt in the heart; it is recognized by reason; it is established by consent."⁶ Burke

5. *The Parliamentary History of England* (London: Hansard, 1806-1820), 29:365-66.

6. *Ibid.*, 22:230.

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was well aware, of course, that man is subject to disordered passions as well as to natural feelings. But for that reason he said that "the wise Legislators of all countries [have] aimed at improving instincts into morals, and at grafting the virtues on the stock of the natural affections."⁷ Reason cultivates rather than tries to exterminate natural affections, because it is through them that it recognizes our natural good.

Man of his times though he was and defender of a now-defunct aristocratic order of society, Burke still speaks to us today. Harold Laski was a Marxist who did not mourn the demise of the aristocratic order; nonetheless he said that Burke "wrote what constitutes the supreme analysis of the statesman's art" and was "the first of English political thinkers." Laski therefore concluded that "Burke has endured as the permanent manual of political wisdom without which statesmen are as sailors on an uncharted sea."⁸ This set of Burke's *Select Works* offers a valuable introduction to that wisdom.

FRANCIS CANAVAN

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7. *First Letter on a Regicide Peace*, in *Select Works of Edmund Burke*, vol. 3 (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1999), p. 127.

8. *Political Thought in England from Locke to Bentham* (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1920), pp. 15, 26, 172.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Since E. J. Payne does not furnish the details of Edmund Burke's biography, it will be useful to the modern reader to include a brief sketch of Burke's life here. (See also the chronological table in volume 2 of this edition.)

He was born in Dublin on January 12, 1729, of a Roman Catholic mother and a father who, according to the most likely account, had conformed to the Established Anglican Church of Ireland (whose head, as in England, was the King of Great Britain and Ireland) in order to be able to practice law, a profession forbidden to Catholics under the Penal Laws. Of the children of that marriage who lived to maturity, the boys, Garrett, Richard, and Edmund, were raised as Protestants; the one girl, Juliana, as a Catholic.

Since Edmund was a somewhat sickly child, he was sent to live from 1735 to 1740 with his mother's Catholic relatives, the Nagles, in the country air of County Cork. He maintained cordial relations with them throughout his life. If Burke had a personal religious problem as a result of this mixed religious family background, he solved it by maintaining that all Christians shared a common faith which subsisted in different forms in the several nations of the commonwealth of Christendom. The points on which they differed were the less important ones which could be left for the theological schools to argue about. When the French Revolution came, Burke found it easy to insist that all Christian kingdoms and churches must forget their quarrels and unite against what he called "an armed doctrine" hostile to all religion and civilization. (On a visit to France many years earlier, in 1773, he had been shocked by the rationalism and even atheism that he encountered in Paris.)

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From 1741 to 1744, he attended a school in County Kildare that was conducted by a Quaker, Abraham Shackleton. Again, Burke maintained friendly relations with the Shackleton family for many years. In 1744, he entered Trinity College, Dublin, the intellectual stronghold of Irish Protestantism; he graduated with an A.B. degree in 1748 and received an M.A. degree in 1751.

By that time, he had gone to London to study law in the Inns of Court. But although in later life he displayed a considerable knowledge and understanding of law, he found the method of study distasteful and, much to his father's annoyance, abandoned the law for a literary career.

He began this with two books that attracted much attention: *A Vindication of Natural Society*, a satire on the Deism of the Enlightenment, in 1756; and a treatise on aesthetics, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, in 1757. In the latter year, he married Jane Nugent, the daughter of a Catholic doctor; Jane herself may or may not have been brought up as a Catholic and, if she was, may or may not have continued to practice that religion after her marriage to Burke. In any case, the two children of the marriage, Christopher and Richard (who alone survived to maturity), were brought up in their father's religion.

In 1758, Edmund became the editor of a yearly review of events and literature, the *Annual Register*, which continues publication to the present day. He also became private secretary to William Gerard Hamilton and went with him to Dublin in 1761 when Hamilton became Chief Secretary (a powerful post) to the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland. It was there that Burke began, but never finished, his *Tracts Relative to the Laws against Popery in Ireland*. He returned to London with Hamilton in 1764 and, after a bitter break with him, became private secretary to the Marquis of Rockingham in 1765. The Marquis, one of the wealthiest men in both England and Ireland, was the leader of a Whig faction that resisted the efforts

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of the new young king, George III, to reassert the personal power of the monarch.

In 1765, a reluctant King George appointed Rockingham First Lord of the Treasury (Prime Minister). In the same year, Burke was elected to the House of Commons from the nomination borough of Wendover through the influence of Lord Verney, with whom the Burke family had become friendly. Burke immediately made a reputation in the Commons as an orator. The Rockingham administration fell from power in 1766, after it repealed the Stamp Act that had so outraged the American colonies. Burke remained one of Rockingham's followers, however, and so spent most of the rest of his parliamentary life in opposition. In 1768, Burke bought an estate in Buckinghamshire, which made him a country gentleman but kept him in debt to the end of his days.

In the Commons, he quickly became the intellectual spokesman for the Rockingham Whigs. In that capacity, he wrote the party's creed, *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents*. During the American crisis, he argued for the Rockingham Whigs' position and against the British government's policies in his great speeches on American taxation and on conciliation with the colonies, and in other documents, such as his *Letter to the Sheriffs of Bristol*.

Burke lost his seat in Parliament when Lord Verney, strapped for money, had to sell it (a practice fully acceptable in that time). But, now well known, Burke was elected to the Commons from the city of Bristol, where he delivered his famous speech on the role of a parliamentary representative (see *Miscellaneous Writings*, published with this set). Burke's disagreements with his constituents on a number of issues (his *Two Letters to Gentlemen in Bristol* describe one of them) led him to withdraw from the Bristol election in 1780. The Marquis kept him in Parliament, however, by having him elected from the Yorkshire borough of Malton, a seat that Burke held until his retirement in 1794.

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A second Rockingham ministry came into office in 1782 to make peace with the rebellious Americans. Burke, who was never invited to sit in a Cabinet, became Paymaster of the Forces. The post was supposed to be lucrative to its holder, but Burke chose to reform it. He also carried on the Rockingham policy of combatting royal influence in Parliament with a bill designed to reduce the king's power of patronage. Unfortunately, the Marquis died in the same year, and Burke was again out of a job.

He became Paymaster again in 1783, however, when a coalition government led by Charles James Fox, who succeeded the Marquis as leader of the Rockingham Whigs, and the Tory Lord North, who had been King George's prime minister during the American war, had a brief period in power. During this time, Burke delivered his *Speech on Fox's East India Bill* (see *Miscellaneous Writings*).

Burke was again out of office when the coalition fell in 1783 and was replaced by a Tory ministry under the younger William Pitt. The following year, Pitt's Tories won a smashing victory in a general election and remained in power for the rest of Burke's life.

Two of the great causes that engaged Burke began in the 1780s: the impeachment of Warren Hastings, the Governor-General of Bengal, which began in 1788 and ended with Hastings's acquittal in 1795; and the French Revolution, which began in 1789. Burke's principal and most famous writing on the latter subject is his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. The most important of his other writings on that great cataclysm, *A Letter to Charles-Jean-François Depont*, *A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly*, *An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs*, *Thoughts on French Affairs*, and *Letter to William Elliot*, have been published by Liberty Fund in *Further Reflections on the Revolution in France*, edited by Daniel E. Ritchie. Burke's last and increasingly severe attacks on the Revolution are the *Letters on a Regicide Peace*.

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Burke was also active in Irish affairs during this period, mostly through private correspondence, and he had a significant influence in the continued relaxation of the Penal Laws against Catholics in Ireland. His *Letter to Sir Hercules Langrishe* is one piece of his writing on Irish affairs that was published in his lifetime.

Burke became a man without a party after his break in 1791 with Charles James Fox over the attitude to be taken toward the French Revolution. Burke's last years were sad and bitter ones. Rejected by his own party, he was not received by the governing Tories except as an occasionally useful ally. The Prime Minister, William Pitt, dismissed *Reflections on the Revolution in France* as "rhapsodies in which there is much to admire, and nothing to agree with." Burke retired from Parliament in 1794, having completed the prosecution of Warren Hastings, and was utterly disgusted, though not surprised, when the House of Lords acquitted Hastings in the following year. In 1794, Burke also suffered the loss through death of both his brother Richard and his son Richard, Jr. His son was the apple of his father's eye and had been, Burke said, his main reason for continuing to live after the end of his parliamentary career.

But Burke did keep on living and writing. Abandoned politically at home, he became through his writings, as a friend of his said, "a sort of *power*" in Europe as well as in England. The aristocratic order he so strenuously defended eventually died, and he can be praised or blamed only for having delayed its passing. But Burke lives on in his writings. Today it would be too much to say, as Payne did in 1874, that "the writings of Burke are the daily bread of statesmen, speakers, and political writers."¹ Yet they are still reprinted, read, and quoted, because each new generation finds something of lasting value in them.

1. P. 7 below.

EDITOR'S NOTE

In this volume, the pagination of E. J. Payne's edition is indicated by bracketed page numbers embedded in the text. Cross references have been changed to reflect the pagination of the current edition. Burke's and Payne's spellings, capitalizations, and use of italics have been retained, strange as they may seem to modern eyes. The use of double punctuation (e.g., , —) has been eliminated except in quoted material.

All references to Burke's *Correspondence* are to the 1844 edition.

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