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Amy M. Sandidge
Ouachita Baptist University

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SENIOR THESIS APPROVAL

This Honors thesis entitled

**“I have lived long and variously in the World”:
The politics and rhetoric of Edmund Burke**

written by

Amy M. Sandidge

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requirements for completion of the
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and has been approved by the undersigned readers.

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“I have lived long and variously in the World”:
The Politics and Rhetoric of Edmund Burke

Submitted to Ouachita Baptist University
Carl Goodson Honors Program

by
Amy M. Sandidge

Introduction

In the words of Woodrow Wilson, the works of Edmund Burke are “stamped in the colors of his extraordinary imagination. The movement takes your breath and quickens your pulses. The glow and power of the matter rejuvenates your faculties.”¹ One cannot help but react viscerally to Burke; the brilliant, blustering Irishman demands attention and response. Some regard him as “the first and most important exponent” of the “theoretical reaction against... the tenets of liberalism... [which] came to be called conservatism.”² Coleridge called him “a great man;” Victorian liberals even considered him a fellow utilitarian and “the greatest thinker who ever devoted himself to English politics.”³ Others, however, regard Burke as a hypocrite who was governed by his own prejudices. These claims of pretence stem from ambiguities and ostensible contradictions in Burke’s writings, words, and actions.

Although Burke may appear hypocritical, a close examination of his works reveals a surprising consistence. Edmund Burke did not change his mind; the political circumstances around him changed. Though his opinions seem contradictory, they can be reconciled by examining both the historical and personal context in which Burke wrote. From his early works (specifically, *A Vindication of Natural Society*, *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents*, and *Conciliation with America*) to his later writings (represented by *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*, and *A Letter to a Noble Lord*), Burke maintains the same conservative principles: devotion

¹ Wilson, Woodrow, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 343.

² Nelson, Brian R., *Western Political Thought: From Socrates to the Age of Ideology*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1996), 261.

³ Kramnick, Isaac. *The Rage of Edmund Burke: Portrait of an Ambivalent Conservative* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 42.

to the constitution and Crown, reverence for tradition, and fear of irresponsible government. Burke cherished tradition, but championed reform-- careful reform. He supported the revolutionary efforts of the American colonists, but deplored those of the French—because the colonists sought rights within the existing system, while the French revolutionaries destroyed all vestiges of a system of government.

Burke said, “I have lived long and variously in the World.”⁴ The experiences and circumstances of his life strongly influenced him. Edmund was the middle son of a Protestant lawyer and his Catholic wife. Some of the ambiguity in Burke’s writings may stem from his youth. He was a sickly child whose condition was aggravated by the dampness of Dublin. Because of his poor health, he was sent to live with his mother’s relatives in southern Ireland.⁵ During these formative years Edmund received countless visits from his mother, but had little contact with his father. The influence of his mother must have impressed Edmund with a strong sense of justice for the oppressed (especially Irish Catholics). From his father, Edmund obtained the desire to be a proper English subject. This conflicting identity helps to explain some of Burke’s own ambiguity in his works.

Burke attempted to follow in his father’s profession. Upon graduation from Trinity College, Burke left Dublin for London to attend the Middle Temple law school. He abandoned his legal training in order to write and, eventually, pursue his own political ambition. Burke was acutely aware of his station but aspired to higher status, was

⁴ Edmund Burke, *A Letter to a Noble Lord*, as printed in *Burke, Paine, Godwin, and the Revolution Controversy*, Marilyn Butler, ed., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

⁵ Burke returned to his parents’ home for a short period before attending a Quaker boarding school in Dublin. He graduated from Trinity College, then left for London. There he attended the Middle Temple law school. At law school he became attached to Will Burke (apparently no relation). Edmund withdrew from public society for six years. When he married Jane Nugent, Will simply became a member of their household.

intensely interested in economics, and was of an enterprising nature. Kowtowing to the aristocracy did not always sit well with the “new man;” as soon as he could safely do so, Burke began to assert his political independence. This self-promotion resulted in sharp attacks on those whom he formerly protected. When, for example, Burke’s first patron, William Gerard Hamilton, was angered by Burke’s refusal to continue in his service, Burke penned an acrimonious rebuttal. He wrote, “I do not know that I have given you one just occasion of complaint... what you blame is only this: That I will not consent to bind myself to you for no less a term than my whole life... to circumscribe my hopes, to give up even the possibility of liberty, and absolutely annihilate myself for ever.”⁶ Burke “supported with very great zeal, and... some degree of success, those opinions,... those old prejudices, which buoy up... nobility, wealth, and titles.”⁷ In *A Letter to a Noble Lord*, however, Burke also wrote, “I have strained every nerve to keep the Duke of Bedford in that situation, which alone makes him my superior.”⁸

As he matured, Burke became a man of “seasonable energy.”⁹ The Duke of Richmond once suggested that Edmund Burke’s portrait should portray him “doing something.”¹⁰ Richmond’s opinion was based on the incredible effort Burke put into everything he undertook. Burke was quite industrious and, as a result, very busy. As private secretary to William Gerard Hamilton, then to Lord Rockingham, Burke pursued the interests of his patrons “with a vigour and alacrity and even an eagerness... never felt”

⁶ Edmund Burke, *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), 1: 180.

⁷ Burke, *To a Noble Lord*, 52.

⁸ Burke, *To a Noble Lord*, 52.

⁹ Burke, as quoted by Mansfield, *Selected Letters*, 27.

¹⁰ Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr., *Selected Letters of Edmund Burke* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 1.

in his own affairs.¹¹ He was a conscientious Paymaster-General. And he was an active member in the House of Commons. Although Burke generally spoke “very late in the debate,”¹² his speeches were passionate and lengthy.

Burke used his age and experience not only to defend himself, but also to defend the British constitution and even England herself. At the end of his life, Burke would write,

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! There, and prostrate there, I most unfeignedly recognize the divine justice, and in some degree submit to it. But while I humble myself before God, I do not know that it is forbidden to repel the attacks of unjust and inconsiderate men.¹³

Like his life, Burke’s political theory is not one cohesive corpus; it is, rather, a collection of speeches, pamphlets, and letters which, combined, express Burke’s ideas about political society, government, the British constitution, gentlemanly virtue, colonial policy, and property. Burke was a staunch defender of the constitution, prescription, the nobility, and the revolutionaries in America, Ireland, and India. He worked tirelessly to preserve the unwritten document that made Great Britain great, and to extend its virtue to her holdings as well. This work has earned him recognition as the father of classical conservatism. Burke is identified with conservative ideology because he was one of the first to pen a theoretical response to the liberal philosophy of the French Revolution. Burke’s conservative doctrine stressed the organicism of society and the prescriptive rights bestowed by that society, a reliance upon experience rather than pure philosophy, and a reverence for tradition, which led him to support only thoughtful reforms. His ideology

¹¹ Burke, *Correspondence*, 165.

¹² Burke, *Correspondence*, 2: 253.

¹³ Burke, *To a Noble Lord*, 55.

has impacted political thought for over two hundred years, even giving rise to modern liberalism.

Edmund Burke was greatly concerned with consistency in words and consistency in action. Consistency is, in fact, a theme in his writings. He had a “plan of clear consistent conduct.”¹⁴ He emphasized virtue, both public and private throughout his writings. To one critic Burke replied, “[t]here are but few now in his Majestys service,... who can escape much better than I can, unless Error in Conduct is to be rectified by inconsistency of Character.”¹⁵ Over and over again, Burke explained his motivations and intentions in every speech, every letter, every deed.

A Vindication of Natural Society

In March of 1754 the *Philosophical Works of Lord Bolingbroke* were published as a whole. Bolingbroke’s *Works* attacked religion which espoused divine revelation and divine providence. In response to Bolingbroke’s assault on “artificial” (revealed) religion, Edmund Burke penned *A Vindication of Natural Society or A View of the Miseries and Evils sharing to Mankind from every Species of Artificial Society*.

The subtitle indicates that Burke’s contention is not a cheerful one. Although passionate and well-crafted, *A Vindication* makes a melancholy statement. In writing *A Vindication*, Burke drew from sources ranging from the ancient Greeks to his British

¹⁴ Burke, *Correspondence*, 1: 340.

¹⁵ Burke, as quoted by Mansfield, *Selected Letters*, 62. Burke wrote to Dr. William Markham in November 1771, as a request for relief from rumors spread by Markham’s friend Lord Mansfield that Burke had written anonymous attacks on the government. A quarrel between Burke and Markham ensued. This letter to Dr. Markham is Burke’s reaction to Markham’s reply, apparently an attack on Burke and his family.

contemporaries. In the style of Plato and Aristotle Burke advocated “natural reason.”¹⁶ He traced ancient historical accounts and often alluded to mythology and the Bible. He even quoted Machiavelli and Hobbes (on the state of nature, that is, a state of war). Burke skillfully combined their historical accounts and his own modern observations to make his case. The genius of Burke’s rebuttal to Bolingbroke’s *Works*, however, is the application of Bolingbroke’s logic to another artificial institution—political society. Burke argued that “[c]ivil Government borrows a Strength from ecclesiastical; and artificial Laws receive a Sanction from artificial Revelations. The Ideas of Religion and Government are closely connected.”¹⁷ While other political thinkers had discussed the connection between church and state, few thinkers attributed both institutions with similar characteristics.

Burke began his vindication as many political thinkers have begun major works; he posited and defined the state of nature. In the Burkean state of nature man lived by instinct. The state of nature was not perfect; “[w]ant of Union, Want of mutual Assistance, Want of a common Arbitrator to resort to in their Differences... were Evils which they [men] could not but have felt pretty severely on many occasions.”¹⁸ In an Aristotelian hierarchy of society, man united as a family, then families joined to form a body politic held together by law. Burke called the body politic “political society.” Conventions such as law (government) and religion are subject to the same criticisms. Burke wrote, “The Professors of Artificial Law have always walked hand in hand with the Professors of Artificial Theology. As their End, in confounding the Reason of Man, and abridging his

¹⁶ Burke, *A Vindication of Natural Society*, as printed in *Pre-Revolutionary Writings*, Ian Harris, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 50.

¹⁷ Burke, as quoted by Harris, *Pre-Revolutionary Writings*, 16.

¹⁸ Burke, *A Vindication*, 13-14.

natural Freedom, is exactly the same, they have adjusted the Means to that End in a Way entirely similar.”¹⁹ In other words, both can be used to oppress the people.

Although he recognized the inevitability of political society, Burke in no way accepted its superiority to natural society. *A Vindication* defended natural society against the claims and consequences of political society. In Burke’s view, political society is to blame for the conflict and destruction throughout history. Specifically, artificial divisions such as ethnicity, and artificial conventions such as government have been sources of dissension and hatred. Burke cited some of the worst massacres in history as evidence of his charge against political society. He wrote, “If pretended Revelations have caused Wars where they were opposed, and Slavery where they were received, the pretended wise Inventions of Politicians have done the same. But the Slavery has been much heavier, the Wars far more bloody, and both more universal by many Degrees.”²⁰ Burke’s ultimate argument against political society echoes Aristotle’s question of Plato: ‘who guards the guardians?’ Out of necessity, government must be above its own laws. This reasoning creates quite a paradox; political society is bound by law while government is not. Burke called this “the Reason of State.”²¹ “But no wonder, that what is set up in Opposition to the State of Nature, should preserve itself by trampling upon the Law of Nature.”²²

Burke’s view of human nature was mixed. He divided society into “establishments.”²³ One such establishment was the public. Burke greatly feared the public because he knew that the same constituents who had elected him to office could easily be converted into a riotous mob. Burke saw in the people an irresponsible passion,

¹⁹ Burke, *A Vindication*, 47.

²⁰ Burke, *A Vindication*, 56.

²¹ Burke, *A Vindication*, 29.

²² Burke, *A Vindication*, 29.

“all the ill dispositions of the world, and... malice.”²⁴ Burke perceived that the mob could wreak havoc on the government and, in turn, the constitution he so revered. That is why he so vehemently opposed the French revolutionaries. In their zeal to reform their government they destroyed it.

Another establishment was the nobility. Burke was an ardent champion and “humble servant” of those born and bred into office. Burke believed that however dull those who inherited seats in Parliament might be, their vested interests would spur them to govern wisely. He wrote quite often, though, of the need for “flappers” such as himself to move the aristocrats to action.²⁵ While the public was, in Burke’s mind, corrupted, the nobility was inherently virtuous.

Burke’s view of government reflected his view of people. The primary role of government would be to preserve and protect the constitution. Under the constitution Parliament retained supremacy. The nobility would serve as a calm, guiding influence over the Commons, which was subject to the passions of the people unless the members of Commons acted as trustees. Though he asserted the right of citizens to elect representatives, he believed that trusteeship rather than delegation is the essence of representation. To his constituents in Bristol Burke wrote, “Next to my honor and conscience, I have nothing so near and dear to me as their [his constituents’] approbation. However, I had much rather run the risk of displeasing than of injuring them; --if I am driven to make such an option.”²⁶

²³ Mansfield, *Selected Letters*, 16-17.

²⁴ Burke, as quoted by Mansfield, *Selected Letters*, 50.

²⁵ Mansfield, *Selected Letters*, 161.

²⁶ Burke, as quoted by Mansfield, *Selected Letters*, 407.

Though Burke steadfastly opposed oppression, he was not an egalitarian. Burke believed that the aristocrats had been born to the service of the state. To the Duke of Richmond he wrote, “Your Birth will not suffer you to be private. It requires as much Struggle and violence to put yourself into private Life as to put me into publick. Pardon a slight comparison but it is as hard to sink a Cork as to buoy up a Lump of Lead.”²⁷

To Burke, neither society nor religion was egalitarian. Bolingbroke had implied that divine revelation was unjust; Burke replied that such a claim is ridiculous. “What,” he asked, “would become of the World if the Practice of all moral Duties, and the Foundations of Society, rested upon having their Reasons made clear and demonstrative to every Individual?”²⁸ *A Vindication* is Burke’s response to Bolingbroke’s assertion of egalitarian deism.

Because Burke’s *A Vindication* is a diatribe against Bolingbroke’s *Works*, most of it is written in a negative tone. Burke’s goal was to discredit Bolingbroke’s claims, not to establish his own. Burke spent little time espousing the benefits of natural society because the political society he presented was repulsive.

Burke offered positive alternatives to each gloomy scenario he described. He likened superstitious belief to a prison through which “such Glimmerings of Light, and... such refreshing Airs of Liberty... daily raise our Ardor for more.”²⁹ “Happiness,” “Virtue,” “Knowledge,” and “Truth” were mentioned often; usually Burke used these words to show contrast with “Misery,” “Debauchery,” “Superstition,” and “Tyranny.” He wrote, “[t]he Practice of Virtue... depends upon the Knowledge of Truth; that is... the

²⁷ Burke, as quoted by Mansfield, *Selected Letters*, 80.

²⁸ Burke, *A Vindication*, 11.

²⁹ Burke, *A Vindication*, 15.

Foundation of Virtue, and consequently, the only Measures of Happiness.”³⁰ These words are juxtaposed against “[t]he Fabrick of Superstition... [t]he Miseries derived to Mankind from Superstition... and... Tyranny under the name of Church Government.”³¹

Burke could not completely accept the pessimism of Machiavelli and Hobbes, who emphasized war.³² He did not believe that the state of nature is a state of war; rather, the state of war is the result of artificial divisions in society. However, Burke employed graphic descriptions of “butcheries,” “blood,” and “destruction.” Burke estimated that more than thirty-six million people died in these conquests and massacres, and he charged all of those deaths to political society. He wrote:

There is more Havock made in one Year by Men, of Men, than has been made by all the Lions, Tygers, Panthers, Ounces, Leopards, Hyenas, Rhinoceroses, Elephants, Bears, and Wolves, upon their several Species, since the Beginning of the World; though these agree ill enough with each other, and have a much greater Proportion of Rage and Fury in their Composition than we have... But with respect to you... be it spoken, your Regulations have done more Mischief in cold Blood, than all the Rage of the fiercest Animals in their greatest Terrors, or Furies, has ever done or ever could do!”³³

Oppression and harm done by legislators are prevailing themes in Burke’s rhetoric. Besides the slavery metaphor, Burke also makes use of medical jargon. In explaining his reasons for avoiding mixed government, Burke wrote of a surgeon’s instrument cutting to the quick, and a “disease” beyond cure.³⁴ He warned that “labour[s] under a mortal Consumption, whilst we are so anxious about the Cure of a fore Finger.”³⁵

³⁰ Burke, *A Vindication*, 15.

³¹ Burke, *A Vindication*, 15.

³² Burke, *Correspondence*, 5: 20. In a letter to Lord Loughborough (July 17, 1782) Burke wrote, “Indeed I do not see any thing in a pleasant point of View. I bear up however better than my present style would seem to indicate.”

³³ Burke, *A Vindication*, 27-28.

³⁴ Burke, *A Vindication*, 54.

³⁵ Burke, *A Vindication*, 55.

In keeping with the satire of Bolingbroke's criticism of religion, Burke also used a religious metaphor. When explaining how government had trampled natural law, Burke admitted, "There was a Time, when I looked with a reverential Awe on these Mysteries of Policy; but Age, Experience, and Philosophy have rent the Veil; and I view this *Sanctum Sanctorum*, at least, without any enthusiastick admiration."³⁶ He described law as mysterious, dark, and uncertain; barristers he called "these Priests of the sacred Temple of Justice"³⁷ He compared wars to sacrifices "in the porch of the political Temple."³⁸ Ironically, Burke considered himself a sort of high priest, charged with the mission of interceding for the oppressed and protecting British virtue.

Thoughts on the Present Discontents

More than a decade after *A Vindication*, Burke again raised his voice and his pen in opposition. *Thoughts on the cause of the present discontents* was Burke's attempt to discover and discuss the source of public disaffection with government. No such source was readily apparent. Great Britain was actually enjoying relative peace and prosperity at that time. "no great external calamity... no pestilence or famine... [no] scheme of taxation new or oppressive nor... unsuccessful war" offered reason for complaint.³⁹ Neither could dissension between parties be blamed, as the distinction between the Whigs and Tories had become blurred. At last Burke resorted to the age-old corruption polemic as a plausible

³⁶ Burke, *A Vindication*, 30.

³⁷ Burke, *A Vindication*, 48. Burke was not alluding to his mother's Catholic faith; rather, this is a reference to the leaders of the Jewish synagogue. Only the high priest could enter the Holy of Holies; other priests attended the temple. The people were restricted to the outer areas of the temple. Burke used this imagery to evoke a sense of false religion, one that intentionally confuses the people.

³⁸ Burke, *A Vindication*, 55.

³⁹ Burke, *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents*, as quoted by Harris, *Pre-Revolutionary Writings*, 118.

explanation for the public's grumblings. He named as the source of this corruption the 'third party' in England—the Court faction.

Burke asserted that the corruption with which Parliament and the Administration alike had been tainted originated with the *King's men* (also known as *King's friends*). These "friends" of the monarch had deluded George III, his ministers, and even Parliament into decisions which, in Burke's opinion, undermined the British constitution.

The Present Discontents is a product of the classical conservatism for which Burke is known. In this work he defended "the spirit of the whole constitution."⁴⁰ He advocated cautious reforms to remove power from the Court faction and return control to Parliament, namely Commons. Under Britain's constitution, even the monarch is subject to the laws but is also given necessary discretion to act on behalf of the people. The ministry is responsible for legislation and administration. Parliament serves as a check upon both. The Ministry, therefore, is accountable to the House of Commons which, in turn, is accountable to the constituents. The Court faction, however, greatly impaired such a system.

The Court faction, led by Lord Bute, had established, in effect, a double Cabinet. This allowed one administration (the Court) the power to implement the wishes of the king while the other (the Ministry) was held responsible. A Court party was also formed to oppose the Ministry. This party subdued Parliament into acquiescence, clearing the government of most of the opposition to the Court faction.

Burke charged that this "system of favouritism" not only caused public disorder, but also contradicted constitutional principles.⁴¹ The plan of the Court faction affected

⁴⁰ Burke, *Discontents*, 143.

⁴¹ Burke, *Discontents*, 143.

foreign and domestic policy, Parliament, and even the King himself. The double Cabinet had rendered the Ministry ineffectual in diplomacy. Confusion ensued both abroad and at home as the people began to lose confidence in the administrations.

The position of Parliament was usurped by the Cabinets as well. “The House of Commons was supposed originally to be *no part of the standing government of this country*. It was considered as a *controul*, issuing *immediately* from the people, and speedily to be resolved into the mass from whence it arose.”⁴² However, as a result of rule by the Court party, Parliament had abandoned “the *corrective and controul* of the acting powers of the State.”⁴³

Burke also charged the *King’s men* with undermining the monarchy. Their “pretence was, to prevent the King from being enslaved by a faction, and made a prisoner in his closet.”⁴⁴ Burke rebutted their claim by examining the results of their service to the king; he concluded that “[I]t will be very hard... to state in what respect the King has profited by that faction which presumptuously choose to call themselves *his friends*.”⁴⁵

The *King’s men* had hoped to eliminate the “connexions” which had entrenched certain members of Parliament and rendered them indispensable to government. One means toward this end was filling ministry positions in such a way as to destroy party loyalty. Burke was incensed by this tactic, and even accused the men who accepted the posts as “impostors.”⁴⁶ He inverted Lord Bute’s argument that all posts should be filled based upon “mere personal ability” by stating “[t]hat Connexion and Faction are

⁴² Burke, *Discontents*, 159.

⁴³ Burke, *Discontents*, 162.

⁴⁴ Burke, *Discontents*, 154.

⁴⁵ Burke, *Discontents*, 158.

⁴⁶ Burke, *Discontents*, 188.

equivalent terms.”⁴⁷ In other words, Bute’s Court faction was simply “connexion” of another kind.

Burke saw party as an effective tool for political action. Though his entire career in Commons was spent in opposition, it was, he argued, “formed” opposition. He believed that organized party led to greater consistency because party encouraged members to act as a principled unit rather than ambitious individuals. As for Burke’s role in the opposition, he “believe[d] in any body of men in England I should have been in the Minority; I have always been in the Minority.”⁴⁸

Even in opposition Burke was able to make quite an impression upon Parliament. Because accusations of corruption in politics is not a new phenomenon, Burke offered some historical examples before addressing corruption in the contemporary government. He bolstered the usual virtue/corruption rhetoric with recurring commentary on private and public life.

Burke was especially concerned with corruption in the House of Commons due to the influence of the Court faction. He urged his fellow-statesmen to unite in opposition: “When bad men combine, the good must associate; else they will fall, one by one, an unpitied sacrifice in a contemptible struggle.”⁴⁹ Such a sacrifice was Wilkes, whose election to Commons was repeatedly nullified by a Parliament that refused to seat him. Burke claimed that the once-virtuous Commons had been deceived by Bute and his ministers. Members of Parliament had been convinced to abandon their own parties in hopes of a Cabinet position. These “evils” led Burke “to conclude the principle of Parliament to be totally corrupted, and therefore its ends entirely defeated... indiscriminate

⁴⁷ Burke, *Discontents*, 184.

⁴⁸ Mansfield, *Selected Letters*, 162n.

support to all Ministers... destroys their very end as a controul, and is a general previous sanction to misgovernment... the setting up any claims adverse to the right of free election... tends to subvert the legal authority by which the Parliament sits.”⁵⁰

Burke asserted that the corruption went deeper than the Parliament; it had tainted the members themselves. The breaking of political connections in Parliament would “prevent the people from ever reposing a confidence in any appearance of private friendship, or public principle.”⁵¹ He urged the House of Lords to acquire influence “by their public and private virtues.”⁵² Burke also emphasized the necessity of private virtue in public life. Arguing to preserve political connections, he wrote,

I remember an old scholastic aphorism, which says, ‘that the man who lives wholly detached from others, must either be an angel or a devil’. When I see in any of these detached gentlemen of our times the angelic purity, power, and beneficence, I shall admit them to be angels. In the mean time we are born only to be men. We shall do enough if we form ourselves to be good ones. It is therefore our business... to bring the dispositions that are lovely in private life into the service and conduct of the commonwealth; so to be patriots, as not to forget we are gentleman. To cultivate friendships, and to incur enmities. To have both strong, but both selected: in the one, to be placable; in the other, immoveable. To model our principles to our duties and our situation. To be fully persuaded, that all virtue which is impracticable is spurious; and rather to run the risque of falling into faults in a course which leads us to act with effect and energy, than to loiter out our days without blame, and without use. Public life is a situation of power and energy; he trespasses against his duty who sleeps upon his watch, as well as he that goes over to the enemy.⁵³

Conciliation with America

Great Britain’s policy toward the American colonies was one of ‘sleeping upon [her] watch.’ Aside from trade, Britain had devoted little attention to the colonial holding. Burke’s maiden speech in the House of Commons concerned a petition on trade with the

⁴⁹ Burke, *Discontents*, 184.

⁵⁰ Burke, *Discontents*, 161.

⁵¹ Burke, *Discontents*, 139.

⁵² Burke, *Discontents*, 134.

North American colonies. Burke wrote of it, “All I hoped was to plunge in, and get off the first horrors; I had no hopes of making a figure. I find my Voice not strong enough to fill the house; but I shall endeavor to raise it as high as it will bear.”⁵⁴ And raise his voice he did. Burke’s letters contain the same rhetoric he would roar on the floor of Commons. Burke wrote, “I will always speak what I think;” judging from the length of his speeches and many of his letters this was a true statement.⁵⁵

Unlike the French revolutionaries, whom Burke saw as the worst kind of agitators, the American revolutionaries received sympathy from Burke. Such a comparison would seem a glaring inconsistency, but for Burke’s explanation. The French were, in effect, destroying all governing authority in France. The Americans, on the other hand, had begun their revolution as an effort to claim their rights under the authority of the British constitution; when that failed, the Americans established their own constitutional system. In Burke’s view, revolution was the final resort for the Americans, the first for the French. Burke explained that forming “a solid constitution requires wisdom as well as spirit, and whether the French have wise heads among them, or if they possess such whether they have authority equal to their wisdom, is to be seen; In the mean time the progress of this whole affair is one of the most curious matters of Speculation that ever was exhibited.”⁵⁶ In response to a young Frenchman’s question on whether he thought the French deserved liberty, Burke replied, “I certainly think that all Men who desire it, deserve it.”⁵⁷ Burke served as a colonial agent for the New York Province just a few years previous to his

⁵³ Burke, *Discontents*, 190-191.

⁵⁴ Burke, *Correspondence*, 233.

⁵⁵ Burke as quoted by Mansfield, *Selected Letters*, 74.

⁵⁶ Burke, *Correspondence*, 6: 10. And speculate Burke did. Countless letters concerning the French Revolution were written by Burke. It is quite clear from his correspondence that Burke devoted a great deal of thought to the French Revolution and its global effects.

speech for conciliation with the American colonies. His time spent in the colonies had exposed him to the colonists' "fierce spirit of Liberty."⁵⁸ These were men who desired and deserved freedom, and possessed the wisdom to manage such freedom. Burke's experience with the American colonies, combined with the nation's experience with other colonial holdings, prompted Burke to urge Parliament toward peace rather than punishment.

The colonists were outraged by the Townshend Duties and English restrictions on trade and fishing. The English were outraged by colonial resistance to English rule. As the parliamentary debate over proper recourse raged, Burke addressed the House of Commons. In his usual manner of confident self-deprecation Burke argued for concession to the colonies' demands. Burke was an advocate for conciliation because he had seen how unsuccessful force had proven. His strongest argument, however, was based upon constitutional principles. He supported the colonists' claims that the manner in which they had been taxed was unjust, but he added that the manner in which Parliament dealt with the colonies was "indeed, wholly alien from all the ancient methods and forms of Parliament."⁵⁹ Parliament seemed inclined to force the colonies into submission. Burke's opposition was both pragmatic and idealistic. He argued that "the use of force alone is but temporary," uncertain, wasteful, and not proven to succeed.⁶⁰ He added that such force would destroy not only a major part of the empire's population and commerce, but also the very spirit of the colonists.

⁵⁷ Burke, as quoted in Mansfield, *Selected Letters*, 256. A later letter to this same young man would become Burke's most famous work, a 400 page "letter" entitled *Reflections on the Revolution in France*.

⁵⁸ Burke, *Speech of Edmund Burke, Esq., On Moving his Resolutions for Conciliation with the Colonies* (March 22, 1775), as quoted by Harris, *Pre-Revolutionary Writings*, 221.

⁵⁹ Burke, *Conciliation*, 211.

⁶⁰ Burke, *Conciliation*, 220.

Using Parliament's own words, as well as classical conservative ideas such as reverence for the constitution and tradition, and advancement of thoughtful reform and policies, Burke presented a reasonable defense for his plan for peace. He explained the value of the colonies to the British empire, then explained that this value stemmed from the "Temper and Character" of the Americans.⁶¹

Burke argued that the colonists were inherently British. They, therefore, held British ideas, endorsed the British system of popular government, and had the same attitude toward taxation and representation.⁶² This British temperament was enhanced by prevailing Protestantism, widespread education (especially in the law), slaveholding aristocracy in the southern colonies, and the great distance that lay between Great Britain and her colonies. England's "wise and salutary neglect" nurtured the independent nature of the colonists.⁶³ Burke recognized this, and relented; he "pardon[ed] something to the spirit of Liberty."⁶⁴

Burke offered three alternatives to the use of force. England could attempt to change the character of the colonies alter that which is "unalterable by any human art."⁶⁵ Burke's discourse on this topic is rather droll. He pointed out the hypocrisy of the English denying freedom to their colonial brethren. "An Englishman is the unfittest person on earth, to argue another Englishman into slavery."⁶⁶ Burke also ridiculed the idea of changing the religion and local governments, emancipating the slaves in the southern

⁶¹ Burke, *Conciliation*, 221.

⁶² Burke, *Conciliation*, 222-223.

⁶³ Burke, *Conciliation*, 220.

⁶⁴ Burke, *Conciliation*, 220.

⁶⁵ Burke, *Conciliation*, 231.

⁶⁶ Burke, *Conciliation*, 232.

colonies, and drying up the ocean. He concluded that these things would, of course, be impossible.

The second solution that Burke proposed was “to prosecute that spirit in its overt acts, as criminal.”⁶⁷ He quickly defeated this idea as well. “I do not know,” he said, “the method of drawing up an indictment against an whole people.”⁶⁸

After dismissing those possible solutions, Burke finally offered one that he believed to be practical.

If then the removal of the causes of the spirit of American Liberty be, for the greater part, or rather entirely impracticable; if the ideas of Criminal Process be inapplicable, or, if applicable, are in the highest degree inexpedient, what way yet remains? No way is open, but the third and last--- to comply with the American Spirit as necessary Evil.⁶⁹

Burke supported his solution by first appealing to the constitution, then to experience. He “set out... with a profound reverence for the wisdom of our ancestors, who have left us the inheritance of so happy a constitution.”⁷⁰ He then “consult[ed] the genius of the English constitution,” which he likened to an oracle.⁷¹ There he found examples from which a lesson could be drawn. With Ireland, Wales, Chester, and Durham, England tried to rule by force; this proved disastrous. When “the rights and privileges of English subjects” were bestowed upon them, however, “[f]rom that moment, as by a charm, the tumults subsided; obedience was restored; peace, order, and civilization, followed in the train of liberty—When the day-star of the English constitution had arisen in their hearts, all was harmony within and without.”⁷²

⁶⁷ Burke, *Conciliation*, 233.

⁶⁸ Burke, *Conciliation*, 233.

⁶⁹ Burke, *Conciliation*, 236.

⁷⁰ Burke, *Conciliation*, 240.

⁷¹ Burke, *Conciliation*, 241.

⁷² Burke, *Conciliation*, 244.

Burke believed that a plan for peace must contain six propositions; he called these the “six massive pillars... to support the temple of British concord.”⁷³ The first two “pillars” are taken “nearly *verbatim* from acts of Parliament.”⁷⁴ First, the colonies had been allowed the privilege of sending representatives to parliament. Secondly, the colonies had been taxed in spite of this, and have been “*touched and grieved*” by this taxation.⁷⁵

Burke reminded his colleagues that these were their own admissions, “the language of your own ancient acts of Parliament... the genuine produce of the ancient rustic, manly, home-bred sense of this country” which he “did not dare to rub off a particle of the venerable rust that rather adorns and preserves, than destroys the metal. It would be a profanation to touch with a tool the stones which construct the sacred altar of peace. [Burke] would not violate with modern polish the ingenuous and noble roughness of these truly constitutional materials.”⁷⁶

Burke then moved from matters of parliamentary record to matters of fact. No plan had been made for American representation in Parliament. However, each colony had an assembly with the power to tax. These same assemblies had repeatedly granted subsidies to the Crown. Parliament had recognized these pillars and also the last in part. The final pillar is the resolution that the former system of colonial grants to England was much more beneficial to both England and the colonies.

Burke’s proposal, then, was to comply with colonial demands. He asked Parliament to repeal the act closing Boston Harbor and an act requiring American murder trials to be held in England. He also asked that Parliament restore the charter of

⁷³ Burke, *Conciliation*, 248.

⁷⁴ Burke, *Conciliation*, 248.

⁷⁵ Burke, *Conciliation*, 248.

⁷⁶ Burke, *Conciliation*, 249.

Massachusetts, and refrain from revoking those of Rhode Island and Connecticut. Burke's plan also called for the institution of a colonial judicature and regulation of the Courts of Admiralty.

In a style reminiscent of *A Vindication of Natural Society*, Burke used his opponents' arguments against his opponents. He employed the same tactic of echoing the enemy's words. And true to his form, Burke continued his speech past his planned conclusion (because he "plainly perceive[d] some objections" remaining in the body.⁷⁷ He carefully compared his plan to the other. "This I offer to give you is plain and simple. The other full of perplexed and intricate mazes. This is mild; that harsh... may you decide with wisdom!" In closing Burke again implored the members to act wisely. "Magnanimity in politicks is not seldom the truest wisdom; and a great empire and little minds go ill together... Let us get an American revenue as we have got an American empire. English privileges have made it all that it is; English privileges alone will make it all it can be."⁷⁸

Reflections on the Revolution in France

Considering his speeches in support of the American colonists, Burke's diatribe in opposition to the French revolutionaries may seem surprising. If, however, the circumstances surrounding both wars (the American and French Revolutions) and both works (*Conciliation with America* and *Reflections*) are examined, Burke's views are clearly reconciled. A much younger Burke had seen the American colonists as Englishmen fighting for English principles. The French revolutionaries, on the other hand, fought for

⁷⁷ Burke, *Conciliation*, 256.

⁷⁸ Burke, *Conciliation*, 266.

ideals that not only threatened England but also gave “all Europe... but too close and connected a concern in what is done in France.”⁷⁹

Burke feared that France’s “panacea or... plague” would either be an “unnecessary physic” or require “the most severe quarantine.”⁸⁰ In order to make his point, Burke even quoted Bolingbroke (whom he regarded as “a presumptuous and a superficial writer”). Bolingbroke, said Burke, made “one observation which... is not without depth and solidity. He says that he prefers a monarchy to other governments because you can better ingraft any description of republic on a monarchy than anything of monarchy upon the republican forms.”⁸¹

By “cashiering” (dethroning) the king, the French revolutionaries claimed to have set up a true democracy, one completely egalitarian. Burke charged that the only equality produced by the revolution was an equality of corruption. He reminded the reader that “Aristotle observes that a democracy has many striking points of resemblance with a tyranny.”⁸² Burke also judged “a perfect democracy... the most shameless thing in the world. As it is the most shameless, it is also the most fearless.”⁸³

Tyranny was, in Burke’s estimation, the only possible outcome of a radical new system. The French Revolution had destroyed the institutions of government, as well as the character of society. “They have forgot that, when they framed democratic governments, they had virtually dismembered their country.”⁸⁴ In their fight for complete liberty the French had destroyed the means of maintaining it. Using words similar to those

⁷⁹ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1987), J.G.A. Pocock, ed., 70

⁸⁰ Burke, *Reflections*, 78.

⁸¹ Burke, *Reflections*, 110.

⁸² Burke, *Reflections*, 109.

⁸³ Burke, *Reflections*, 82.

⁸⁴ Burke, *Reflections*, 46.

of the contract theorists, Burke explained that the French had forgotten that in order to “secure some liberty, [one] makes a surrender in trust of the whole of it.”⁸⁵

The French Revolution was a contradiction of everything Burke held sacred—the constitution, experience, prejudice, and moderation. The French perception of the English people, even of Burke himself, led to the assumption that the English were supportive of their cause. Burke assured the gentleman in Paris that his was not so.

Because... half a dozen grasshoppers under a fern make the field ring with their importunate chink, whilst thousands of great cattle, reposed beneath the shadow of the British oak, chew the cud and are silent, pray do not imagine that those who make the noise are the only inhabitants of the field; that, of course, they are many in number, or that, after all, they are other than the little, shrivelled, meager, hopping, though loud and troublesome, insects of the hour. I almost venture to affirm that not one in a hundred amongst us participates in the ‘triumph’ of the Revolution Society.⁸⁶

Burke asserted that a much more moderate approach would prove more successful than a revolution. He traced, in detail, the history of the British constitution and the experience and events that had made it great. The French “might... have profited of our [England’s] example and have given... recovered freedom a correspondent dignity.”⁸⁷ Burke compared the French constitution to a crumbling but “noble and venerable castle” upon the foundation of which a strong government could have been built.⁸⁸ Instead, “civil and military anarchy made the constitution of the kingdom.”⁸⁹

Burke was appalled by such a system of government. He was horrified that a society could treat monarchs as disgracefully as the French had handled Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette. Burke saw the French Revolution as the end of French virtue and

⁸⁵ Burke, *Reflections*, 52.

⁸⁶ Burke, *Reflections*, 75.

⁸⁷ Burke, *Reflections*, 31.

⁸⁸ Burke, *Reflections*, 31.

⁸⁹ Burke, *Reflections*, 34.

chivalry. He was especially incensed by the rough treatment which the French Queen had undergone. Burke concluded that the revolution had changed everything. "All the decent drapery of life is to be rudely torn off. All the super-added ideas, furnished from the wardrobe of a moral imagination, which the heart owns and the understanding ratifies as necessary to cover the defects of our naked, shivering nature, and to raise it to dignity in our own estimation, are to be exploded as a ridiculous, absurd, and antiquated fashion."⁹⁰

Burke was also frightened by the new National Assembly, which consisted not of distinguished statesmen, but of petty lawyers, clergy, doctors, and "a handful of country clowns."⁹¹ Burke argued that such inexperienced men were not fit to govern a state because "no name, no power, no function, no artificial institution whatsoever can make the men of whom any system of authority is composed any other than God, and nature, and education, and their habits of life have made them."⁹² Burke was not suggesting that only the aristocracy should govern; he believed that "[t]here is no qualification for government but virtue and wisdom, actual or presumptive."⁹³ Burke held that such wisdom could only be gained through experience, and virtue through prejudice.⁹⁴ "Prejudice," wrote Burke, "is of ready application in the emergency; it previously engages the mind in a steady course of wisdom and virtue and does not leave the man hesitating in the moment of decision... Prejudice renders a man's virtue his habit."⁹⁵

Burke's commitment to the conservation of the constitution and its customs and tradition is unequivocal. He credited the constitution with allowing him to be "free...

⁹⁰ Burke, *Reflections*, 67.

⁹¹ Burke, *Reflections*, 38.

⁹² Burke, *Reflections*, 38.

⁹³ Burke, *Reflections*, 44.

⁹⁴ Literally, *pre-judging*. Burke used this term in a manner similar to "tradition."

⁹⁵ Burke, *Reflections*, 76.

but not free dangerously to others.”⁹⁶ Burke saw it as “an order that keeps things fast in their place: it is made to use, and we are made to it.”⁹⁷

This conservative commitment, however, would lead to inner struggles for Burke. It made him acknowledge his God- and constitution-given place in the social and political order, but he wanted to rise above these to a position of rank and renown. Burke the conservative revered and defended the traditional aristocracy, but Burke the marginal upstart recognized aristocratic shortcomings. That is why Burke championed the cause of the American Revolutionaries—he admired their energy and spirit. That is why he prosecuted Warren Hastings with such zeal—he saw Hastings as the debaucher of the British system. And that is why he so fiercely opposed the Jacobins and dissenters—in Burke’s mind they were a real threat to everything held dear under the constitution.

In a fashion reminiscent of his earlier works, Burke patterned the French state and revolutionaries upon a parent and children. While early works (*examples*) played upon the likeness of a good parent, in this instance Burke portrayed a destructive relationship. He proclaimed that the faults of the state should be approached as “the wounds of a father, with pious awe and trembling solicitude. By this wise prejudice we are taught to look with horror on those children of their country who are prompt rashly to hack that aged parent in pieces and put him into the kettle of magicians, in hopes that by their poisonous weeds and wild incantations they may regenerate the paternal constitution and renovate their father’s life.”⁹⁸

Burke was quite sure that such a violent, traumatic event as the French Revolution could produce nothing but corruption and chaos. He greatly feared the spread of this evil

⁹⁶ Burke, as quoted in Kramnick, *Rage*, 125.

⁹⁷ Burke, as quoted in Kramnick, *Rage*, 125.

anarchy and the threat it posed to “rational liberty.”⁹⁹ “The wild *gas*, the fixed air, is plainly broke loose; but we ought to suspend our judgment until the first effervescence is a little subsided, till the liquor is cleared, and until we see something deeper than the agitation of a troubled and frothy surface.”¹⁰⁰

Thoughts and Details on Scarcity

Burke concluded that the public’s agitation was due to economics. With the exception of “scarcity... there is nothing on which the passions of men are so violent, and their judgment so weak, and on which there exists such a multitude of ill-founded popular prejudices.”¹⁰¹ Burke was well-versed in economics. He had been quite taken by the ideas presented by Adam Smith in *Wealth of Nations*. Though influenced by Smith, Burke’s *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* champion not only capitalistic but also conservative tenets.

The rising price of bread and the decline of wages had produced not only hunger but also the possibility of civil unrest in England. Such an event would have been frightful to Burke. He therefore set down his solution to the problem. Burke argued “that labour is... a commodity, and as such, an article of trade.”¹⁰² Burke, therefore, reasoned that the law of supply and demand should determine wages. Burke opposed “indiscreet tampering with the trade of provisions”; he did not believe that one of the powers of government is “[t]o provide for us in our necessities.”¹⁰³ He explained that government efforts at

⁹⁸ Burke, *Reflections*, 84.

⁹⁹ Burke, *Reflections*, 4.

¹⁰⁰ Burke, *Reflections*, 8.

¹⁰¹ Burke, *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*, as quoted in Butler, *Controversy*, 61.

¹⁰² Burke, *On Scarcity*, 64.

¹⁰³ Burke, *On Scarcity*, 62.

compulsory equalization could only produce “equal want, equal wretchedness, equal beggary, and... depress high and low together beneath the level of what was originally the lowest.”¹⁰⁴ Burke reminded his readers that “a monopoly of capital” should not be assumed upon “a monopoly of authority.”¹⁰⁵ Without government intervention, the economy could benefit everyone. It would be in the best interest of the nobility to encourage the farmers, and in the best interest of the farmers to protect the workers. It is also in the best interest of the workers to be productive. In such a system, healthy workers and steady production preserve the economy.

Burke feared that rather than acting as a restraint, the government would enact positive measures in order to deal with the crisis. He foresaw the chaos and calamity which would result from following the French example of interventionism. Attempts to distribute food, capital, and authority equally would simply subvert the natural order of the state and economy. Burke admonished, “When the poor rise to destroy the rich, they act as wisely for their own purposes as when they burn mills, and throw corn into the river, to make bread cheap.”¹⁰⁶

In rhetoric reminiscent of Hobbes and Locke, Burke stated that the natural relationship between labourer and producer is “an implied contract.”¹⁰⁷ The state has no interest in the contract; it must be “a matter of discretion and of interest between the parties... the parties are the masters. If they are not completely so, they are not free, and therefore their contracts are void.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ Burke, *On Scarcity*, 66.

¹⁰⁵ Burke, *On Scarcity*, 67.

¹⁰⁶ Burke, *On Scarcity*, 62.

¹⁰⁷ Burke, *On Scarcity*, 63.

¹⁰⁸ Burke, *On Scarcity*, 63.

As usual, Burke holds France as an example of what not to do. He wrote, “[T]he leading vice of the French monarchy... was in good intention ill-directed, and a restless desire of governing too much.”¹⁰⁹ He urged his countrymen to avoid a similar mistake.

A Letter to a Noble Lord

After a long career in Commons, Burke retired from Parliament in 1794. A reward of three pensions would follow his retirement. (A title would have been bestowed upon Burke had his son and successor, Richard, not died.) The Duke of Bedford and Earl of Lauderdale, both fellow Whigs, had openly criticized Burke for accepting the pensions, Burke penned a stinging reply.

Burke had always maintained a careful concern for his reputation. He had been deliberately consistent in his conduct. Therefore, when Bedford attacked him for supposed hypocrisy, Burke fought back.

Although *A Letter to a Noble Lord* seems to have been the work of “an ingenious madman,”¹¹⁰ it is one of Burke’s most logical, tightly-knit pieces. As he had done to Bolingbroke years earlier, Burke challenged Bedford with Bedford’s own argument. Burke contrasts his own merit for a small pension to Bedford’s claim to an even grander reward (a title). In turn of phrase Burke wrote:

The Duke of Bedford is the Leviathan among all the creatures of the Crown. He tumbles about his unwieldy bulk; he plays and frolics in the ocean of the royal bounty. Huge as he is, and whilst “he lies floating many a rood,” he is till a creature. His ribs, his fins, his whalebone, his blubber, the very spiracles through which he spouts a torrent of brine against his origin, and cover me all over with the spray,— every thing of him and about him is from the Throne. Is it for *him* to question the dispensation of the Royal favour?¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ Burke, *On Scarcity*, 70.

¹¹⁰ William Windham once remarked that Burke was popularly regarded as “an ingenious madman.”

¹¹¹ Burke, *To a Noble Lord*, 53.

In an exceptionally sarcastic tone Burke thanked Bedford and Lauderdale “for having so faithfully and so fully acquitted towards me whatever arrear of debt was left undischarged by” other critics.¹¹² In his long career Burke had been criticized by many, and on many different grounds; this criticism, however, elicited his final defense.

Bedford had criticized Burke’s reform plan, which was the product of Burke’s “hatred to innovation.”¹¹³ In response, Burke repeated one of his conservative maxims which “cannot at this time be too often repeated; line upon line; precept upon precept; until it comes into the currency of a proverb, *To innovate is not to reform.*”¹¹⁴ Burke explained that he “had a State to preserve, as well as a State to reform... a People to gratify, but not to inflame, or to mislead.”¹¹⁵ He also reminded his critics that he had carefully explained his reasoning in every part of the reform plan.

Burke boasted of what he had prevented from being done. He considered this a merit. He also considered his “very great zeal” for “those old prejudices which buoy up the mass of his [Bedford’s] nobility, wealth, and title” a merit.¹¹⁶ Burke thought it absurd that Bedford could, at the same time, attack a fellow Englishman who sought to uphold the aristocracy, and court the French revolutionaries who sought to tear it down. Burke felt that his own “merits, whatever they are, are original and personal; [Bedford’s] are derivative.”¹¹⁷ Burke believed that the Duke of Bedford held no personal claim to his compensation. Bedford was entitled because one of his ancestors had benefited from the plunder and confiscation of the property of both the nobility and the church. This

¹¹² Burke, *To a Noble Lord*, 50.

¹¹³ Burke, *To a Noble Lord*, 51.

¹¹⁴ Burke, *To a Noble Lord*, 51.

¹¹⁵ Burke, *To a Noble Lord*, 51.

¹¹⁶ Burke, *To a Noble Lord*, 52.

¹¹⁷ Burke, *To a Noble Lord*, 53.

forefather had also negotiated peace with France. Although Bedford himself had done nothing to deserve neither a pension nor a title, “The Crown has paid the Duke of Bedford by advance.”¹¹⁸

Burke, on the other hand, was considered by the Crown “after long service.”¹¹⁹ Bedford was “a young man with very old pensions,” while Burke was “an old man with very young pensions—that’s all.”¹²⁰ Though attempting to be modest, Burke listed the accomplishments of which he was most proud. He had defended “the whole of the national church of [his] own time and [his] own country, and the whole of the national churches of all countries from the principles and examples which lead to ecclesiastical pillage, then to contempt of *all* prescriptive titles, then to the pillage of *all* property, and thence to universal desolation.”¹²¹ Burke had resisted “the power and pride of France, under any form of its rule... opposing it with the greatest zeal and earnestness... in order to save my country.”¹²²

Burke warned that Bedford had been deceived by the philosophical slant of the French Revolution. Though Bedford’s ancestor had acted as a lion preying on confiscated lands, Burke suggested that “the sect of the cannibal philosophers of France” were “Bedford’s natural hunters; and he is their natural game.”¹²³ The French revolutionaries sought to eliminate aristocracy and the landed interest; this, in turn, would eliminate Bedford. Burke cautioned, “Ingratitude to benefactors is the first of revolutionary virtues.”¹²⁴

¹¹⁸ Burke, *To a Noble Lord*, 56.

¹¹⁹ Burke, *To a Noble Lord*, 56.

¹²⁰ Burke, *To a Noble Lord*, 53-54.

¹²¹ Burke, *To a Noble Lord*, 54.

¹²² Burke, *To a Noble Lord*, 55.

¹²³ Burke, *To a Noble Lord*, 56-57.

¹²⁴ Burke, *To a Noble Lord*, 56.

Burke portrayed the French revolutionaries as “a den of bravoos and banditti” in “the garb and tone of an academy of philosophers.”¹²⁵ He also depicted them as “legislative butchers” who had divided Bedford “into rumps, and sirloins, and briskets, and into all sorts of pieces for roasting, boiling, and stewing... [A]ll the while they are measuring *him*, his Grace is measuring *me*.”¹²⁶

Conclusion

William Pitt once said of Burke’s rhetoric that there was “much to admire, and nothing to agree with.”¹²⁷ Burke often had disagreements with acquaintances and friends; he was, however, willing to admit when he was wrong. In a letter to Pitt written just a few years before his death, Burke did just that. To the Prime Minister Burke wrote, “In some instances of my publick conduct I might have erred. Few have been so long (and in times and matters so arduous and critical) engaged in affairs, who can be certain that they have never made a mistake: But I am certain that my intentions have been always pure, with regard to the Crown and to the Country.”¹²⁸

Part of the power of Burke’s masterful rhetoric was the manner in which he delivered the words. The speeches and pamphlets Burke wrote comprise what Mansfield calls “the public Burke... the real Burke.”¹²⁹ Yet the personal letters of the private Burke provide us with greater insight to Burke and his public ideas than do his official statements. In correspondence Burke admits to shortcomings, fears, and vulnerabilities that he could not mention on the Commons floor. If Burke was, as he claimed, a man who

¹²⁵ Burke, *To a Noble Lord*, 57. Obviously, Burke held a very low opinion of the new French academy.

¹²⁶ Burke, *To a Noble Lord*, 58-59.

¹²⁷ Mansfield, *Selected Letters*, 2.

¹²⁸ Burke, *Correspondence*, 7: 577.

“came into Parliament not at all as a place of preferment, but of refuge” and was simply “pushed into it,” then the real Burke would be the private Burke we encounter in his letters.¹³⁰

Perhaps both views are true. Many of Burke’s public colleagues were among the friends to whom he wrote letters. Burke wrote that “[h]ypocrisy is not cheap vice; nor can our natural Temper be masked for many years together.”¹³¹ These were the men who would have known him best. Yet sometimes Burke was forced to split with friends because of his political convictions. This is especially striking in Burke’s response to an attempt by Charles James Fox to reconcile with Burke. In her dying husband’s stead Jane Burke express his

“most heartfelt pain to obey the stern voice of his duty in rending asunder a long friendship, but that he deemed this sacrifice necessary; that his principles remained the same; and that in whatever of life yet remained to him, he conceives that he must live for others and not for himself. Mr. Burke is convinced that the principled which he has endeavored to maintain are necessary to the welfare and dignity of his country, and that these principles can be enforced only by the general persuasion of his sincerity.”¹³²

Upon Burke’s death his executor wrote to a close friend of Burke, Earl Fitzwilliam, “The private vanishes before the public calamity.”¹³³

Burke’s influence in political thought has endured because of the coherence of his convictions. Burke was willing to compromise, but not to convert. As events transformed the political and social landscape, Burke adapted. Even now, more than two hundred years after his death, the seeming contradictions in Burke’s works and his life are disputed. But the writings and speeches of Burke reveal a remarkably consistent man.

¹²⁹ Mansfield, *Selected Letters*, 3.

¹³⁰ Burke, *Correspondence*, 1: 340.

¹³¹ Burke, as quoted by Mansfield, *Selected Letters*, 62.

¹³² Burke, *Correspondence*, 9: 373.

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