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## Influences that Went to the Making of Edmund Burke in His Career as an Orator

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INFLUENCES THAT WENT TO THE MAKING OF EDMUND BURKE IN HIS CAREER  
AS AN ORATOR

By

JAMES CROWLEY

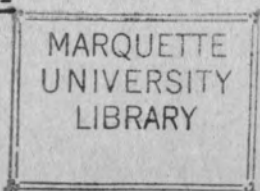
A Thesis submitted partially to fullfill the requirements for  
The Degree of Bachelor of Philosophy.

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COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS

MARQUETTE UNIVERSITY

JUNE 1927



THE INFLUENCES THAT WENT TO THE MAKING

OF

EDMUND BURKE

IN HIS

CAREER AS AN ORATOR

Edmund Burke looms before us through the mist of years as a prodigy of eloquence and knowledge; devoted to the good of his country; an unselfish and disinterested patriot; a sage whose moral wisdom shines far beyond his own generation and century. He was the most remarkable man who has taken part in public affairs, from the thrilling days of our Revolution down to the present time. The life and principles of so great a man are a fascinating study to all admirers of the work he accomplished. If history has any interest or value, it is to show the influences that combined to produce the great Celt, Edmund Burke, whose impress on his own age and on the ages that have succeeded, is still a marvel and a cause of universal admiration.

Burke was born in Ireland, of Irish parents, in 1730. All the enthusiasm and eloquence of that distinguished race pulsed in his ardent nature, waiting only for the opportunity to burst forth in a mighty wave of power. This factor of race may not be lightly passed over in any estimate of the forces at work in shaping the career of Burke. The Almighty Who destined him for a public life of great power and renown, sent him into the world with the singularly fortunate gift of native wit, talent, and honor. This, then, was the first and greatest influence in his life - the heritage of Celtic blood, of Celtic faith, of Celtic traditions, of Celtic ideals.

Trinity College, Dublin, has produced many remarkable men. Hither came young Burke. It has been said that he did not exhibit during his College Career those wonderful powers that were latent within him. However, it was evident to all that he was of a highly intellectual turn of mind. Remote as such an influence may have been, there can be no doubt that it had a bearing on his future career. His whole family were omnivorous readers, and thus when he entered College, he had a regular store

house of knowledge due to his constant reading. This qualified him to enter into any discussion that came up before the students and fitted him, too, to take a prominent place in the many debating societies which he was wont to frequent. His early efforts as a speaker were made in a small society founded by him on the 21st of April, 1747, while in his third year at Trinity. It was here that Burke, responding to that innate love of oratory, first learned the difficult art of persuasion. Here, too, he acquired that difficult but highly valuable habit of searching into the very depths of any question that was to be discussed. He devoted hours of deep study to every subject before outlining his argument, but so well did he know his subject when finally formulating his propositions, that his entire brief was drafted from personal knowledge of the question. Practice in delivery brought him an ease and grace of expression that made him a marked man among his colleagues and paved the way for the perfect poise and unrivalled eloquence which later made him the envy of every speaker in Parliament.

The study of law interested Burke. He was a man who had an interest in every thing human. Law, and its many applications, had a fascination for him. Here, again, one sees how step by step the man was being prepared for his future work as an orator. The concentration of mind, the keenness of perception, the precision and accuracy of speech and of thought, which characterize the efficient lawyer, all tended to equip him for the political career so soon to open before him.

As with the study of law, so too, with the study of literature. He entered it with enthusiasm, an enthusiasm which might easily have become the dominant note of his whole life had not the public weal called him from it. His early literary life is fully shown in that masterful essay on "The Sublime and the Beautiful" which attracted so much attention at its publication that it rapidly became a text book in the universities. In it his

ardent and beautiful nature found full expression. This devotion to literature afforded valuable training, a training which one who would excel in oratory can ill afford to neglect. It gave a discipline in the regard for fact, a discipline in the regard for words, their import and value, a discipline in the ever-present remembrance of a wider whole, in which each field of thought and knowledge has its place, but not more than its place.

Dear as was the pursuit of a literary career, Burke was obliged to give it up that he might serve his country in the political arena where his services seemed very necessary. At first he acted as private secretary to Gerard Hamilton who was famous for having made only one speech and was chief secretary to the Earl of Halifax. Lord Rockingham soon recognized the unusual ability of the young man and in consequence, Burke found himself private secretary to England's Prime Minister. Logically, entrance into Parliament should be the next step, and this, Lord Rockingham straightway secured for him.

Burke entered the House of Commons in 1765 at the age of thirty-five. He was now ready for his life work. The great factors that had combined to develop his genius had functioned well. Now came the additional force, opportunity, to cement the work that had gone before. He stood out now as a giant figure outlined clearly against the sky of the leading opinions of his day in reference to the coercion of the American colonies.

When Burke began his public life, the nation was ruled by the great Whig families whose ancestors had fought the battles of reform in the times of Charles and James. This party had held power for seventy years, had forgotten the principles of the Revolution, and had become selfish and venal, dividing among its chiefs the spoils of office. It had become as absolute and unscrupulous as the old kings whom it had once dethroned. It was an oligarchy of a few powerful Whig noblemen whose rule was supreme in

England. Burke joined this party, but afterwards deserted it, or rather broke it up, when he perceived its arbitrary character and its disregard of the fundamental principles of the Constitution. This he was able to do after its unsuccessful attempt to force the American colonies.

American difficulties were the great issue of that day. The majority of Parliament, both Lords and Commons, was sustained by King George III who believed in an absolute jurisdiction over the colonies as an integral part of the empire, and was bent not only in enforcing this jurisdiction, but also resorted to the most offensive and impolitic measures to accomplish it. This Parliament, fancying it had a right to tax America without her consent, without a representation even, was resolved to carry out the abstract rights of a supreme governing power, both in order to assert its prerogative and to please certain classes in England who wished relief from the burden of taxation. And because the Parliament had this power, it would use it against the dictates of expediency and against the great elemental truth in government that even thrones rest on the affections of the people. Blinded and infatuated with what it considered the nation's prerogative, it would not even learn lessons from that conquered country which for five hundred years it had vainly attempted to force and which it could finally govern only by a recognition of its rights.

Pitt maintained that taxation went with representation and that, therefore, Parliament had no right to tax the unrepresented colonies. The ministry held that Parliament was sovereign, but they agreed with Pitt in pronouncing the exercise of the right of taxation in the case of the colonists, to be thoroughly impolitic and inexpedient. Pitt's high regard for himself, agitated by certain counsels of men, of counsels of men, of the caliber of Lord Shelburne, prevented the union of the only two sections of

the Whig party that were at once able and disinterested enough to carry on the government efficiently. Such an opportunity as this did not return.

The ministerial policy toward the colonies was defended by Burke with splendid enthusiasm and unanswerable eloquence. Burke had been returned to the House of Commons for the pocket borough of Wendover, and his first speech on January twenty-seventh, seventeen hundred sixty six, was said to be felt as the rising of a new light. From this time on during the next twenty-five years, Burke was one of the chief guides and inspirers of a revised Whig party. The age of small portions was now succeeded by an age of great principles, and selfish ties of mere families and persons were changed into a union resting on a common conviction and patriotic aims. It was Burke who did more than any one else to give to the Opposition, under the first half of the reign of George III, this stamp of elevation and grandeur. Before leaving office, the Rockingham Government repealed the Stamp Act; confirmed the personal liberty of the subject by forcing on the House of Commons, one resolution against general warrants, and another against the seizure of papers; and relieved private houses from the intrusion of officers of excise by repealing the cider tax. Nothing so good was done in an English Parliament for nearly twenty years to come. George Grenville, whom the Rockingham administration had displaced and who was very bitter because of the Rockingham's very formal reversal of his policy, printed a pamphlet to show his statesmanship and ability. Burke replied in his "Observations on a Late Publication on the Present State of the Nation". Here he showed for the first time that he had not only as much knowledge of commerce and finance, and as strong a hand in dealing with men as Grenville, but also a way of conceiving and treating politics in which neither then nor since has he had a rival.



In handling the troublesome question of American difficulties Burke discarded all theories and abstract rights. He would not even discuss the subject whether Parliament had a right to tax the colonies. He took the side of expediency and common sense. He foresaw and predicted the consequences of trying to force such a people as the Americans with the forces which England could command. He pointed out the infatuation of the ministers of the Crown, then led by Lord North. His speech against the Boston Port Bill was one of the most brilliant specimens of oratory every displayed in the House of Commons. He did not encourage the colonies in rebellion, but pointed out the course they would certainly follow if the irritating measures of the government were not removed. He advocated conciliation, the withdrawal of theoretic rights, the repeal of obnoxious taxes, the removal of restriction on American industry, the withdrawal of monopolies and of ungenerous distinctions. For ten years he labored with successive administrations to procure reconciliations. It is said that he spoke nearly every day for ten years. Always he appealed to reason, to justice, and to common sense.

It was perhaps during these long and trying years that Burke's great powers were fully evidenced. Every speech he made was a battle against ignorance, and prejudice, things that were in themselves a clarion cry to his warrior spirit. One cannot but see and admire the principles underlying so vast an expenditure of energy. In all these speeches against oppression and greed the guiding force, the motive power, is the spirit of his own unconquerable land, lifting up its voice in denunciation of the despoiler, crying out with its native love of justice and truth against centuries of oppression, against multitudes of wrongs endured at England's hands.

The political career of Burke culminated at the close of the war

with America. Not so his political power, which continued to live on long after Charles James Fox had finally supplanted him as leader of his party. The reasons for that lasting power are found, oddly enough, in the very reasons that operated in his removal from power. Politicians hated the dominion of a man who would not flatter, who could not be bribed, and who exposed wrong fearlessly. Parties of that day rewarded mediocre men whom they could use or bend. Burke championed what his soul considered just and right. He could not be bought or sold.

Much of Burke's success in moving men lay in his literary or rhetorical methods. Newman has said that style is the expression of personality. In Burke's case the definition really found application. Even in the coolest of his works there is the stamp of greatness, of grasp, of comprehension. In all its varieties his style is noble, earnest, deep-flowing as would befit a man whose sentiment was lofty and sincere, whose nature was noble and refined, and whose judgment had passed through the travail of long discipline. He had the style of his subjects, the sense and the grandeur proper to a man dealing with imperial themes, sacredness of law, and the freedom of the nation.

The trial of Warren Hastings is famous in history and in literature. Burke's name is always thought of in conjunction with it. His first decisive step against Hastings was a motion for papers in the spring of 1786. The thanks of the House of Commons to the managers of the impeachment were voted in the summer of 1794. But in those eight years some of the most astonishing events in history had changed the political face of Europe. Burke was more than sixty years old when the states general met at Versailles in the spring of 1789. He had taken a prominent part on the side of freedom in the revolution which stripped England of her empire in

the West. He had taken a prominent part on the side of justice, humanity and order in dealing with the revolution which had brought to England new empire in the East. The same strong passion for freedom, justice, humanity and order was roused in him at a very early stage of the third great revolution in his history - the revolution that overthrew the old monarchy in France. From the first, Burke looked on the events of 1789 with doubt and misgivings. He had been in France in 1773 where he had not only the famous vision of Marie Antoinette at Versailles full of life and joy, but he had also supped and discussed with some of the destroyers, the encyclopaedists, the sophistes, economists, and calculators. His first speech on his return to England was a warning (March 17, 1773) that the props of good government were beginning to fail under the systematic attacks of unbelievers, and that principles were being propagated that would not leave to civil society any stability. The apprehension never died out in his mind; and when he knew that the principles and abstractions, the un-English dialect and destructive dialect of his former acquaintances were predominant in the National Assembly, his suspicion that the movement would end in disastrous miscarriage waxed into certainty.

The scene grew still more sinister in his eyes after the march of the mob from Paris to Versailles in October, and the violent transport of the king and queen from Versailles to Paris. The same hatred of lawlessness and violence which fired him with a rage against the Indian malefactors was aroused by the violence and lawlessness of the Parisian insurgents.

The same disgust for abstractions and naked doctrines of right that had stirred him against the pretensions of the British Parliament in 1774 and 1776 was revived in as lively a degree by political conception which he judged to be identical in the French Assembly of 1789, and this

anger and disgust were exasperated by the dread with which certain proceedings in England had inspired him, that the aims, principles, methods, and language which he so misdoubted or abhorred in France, were likely to infect the people of Great Britain.

Burke's conservatism was the result partly of strong imaginative associations clustering around the more imposing symbols of social continuity, partly of a sort of corresponding conviction in his reason that there are certain permanent elements of human nature out of which the European order had risen and which that order satisfied, and of whose merits, as of its mighty strength, the revolutionary party in France were most fatally ignorant.

To discuss Burke's writings on the Revolution would be to write first a volume upon the abstract theory of society, and then a second volume on the history of France. One of the most common charges against Burke's view of the revolution was that he allowed his imagination and pity to be touched only by the sorrows of the kings and queens and forgot the thousands of oppressed and famine stricken toilers of the land.

Burke's answer was simple; and to the effect that the Revolution though it had made an end of the Bastille, did not bring the only real practical liberty, that is to say, the liberty which comes with settled courts of justice, administering settled laws, undisturbed by popular fury, independent of everything but law, and with a clear law for their direction. The people, he contended, were no worse off under the old monarchy than they will be in the long run under assemblies that are bound by the necessity of feeding one part of the community at the grievous charge of other parts, as necessitous as those who are so fed; that are obliged to flatter those who have their lines at their disposal by tolerating acts of doubtful influence on commerce and agriculture, and

for the sake of precarious relief to sow the seeds of lasting want; that will be driven to be the instruments of the violence of other from a sense of their own weakness, and by want of authority to assess equal and proportioned charges upon all, will be compelled to lay a strong hand upon the possessions of a part as against the moderate section of the Constituent Assembly, this was just.

One secret of Burke's views of the Revolution was the contempt which he had conceived for the popular leaders in the earlier stages of the movement. In spite of much excellence of intention, heroism, and energy, it is hardly to be denied that the leaders whom that movement brought to the surface were almost without exception, men of the poorest political capacity. Burke's vital error was his inability to see that a root and branch revolution was, under the conditions, inevitable. His cardinal position from which he deduced so many important conclusions, namely, that the parts and organs of the old constitution of France were sound and only needed moderate invigoration, is absolutely mistaken and untenable. There was not a single chamber in the old fabric that was not crumbling and tottering. The court was frivolous, vacillating, stone-deaf and stone-blind; the gentry were amiable, but distinctly bent to the very last on holding to their privileges, and they were wholly devoid both of the political experience that only comes of practical responsibility for public affairs, and of the political sagacity that only comes of political experience.

When Burke dealt with the affairs of India, he passed over the circumstances of our acquisition of power in that continent. "There is a sacred veil to be drawn over the beginning of all government", he said, "The first step to an empire is revolution, by which power is con-

ferred; the next, is good laws, good order, good institutions, to give that power stability". Exactly on this broad principle of political force, revolution was the first step to the assumption by the people of France of their own government. Granted that the revolution was inevitable and indispensable, how was the nation to make the best of it? And how were surrounding nations to make the best of it? This was the true point of view. But Burke never placed himself at such a point. He never conceded the postulate, because though he knew France better than any body in England, except Arthur Young, he did not know her conditions well enough. He said, "They little know how many a weary step is to be taken before they can form themselves into a mass which has a true political personality". And how true this was, it will perhaps take more than a century fully to show.

Burke's view of French affairs, however, consisted with all his former political conceptions, put an end to more than one of his old political friendships. He had never been popular in the House of Commons, and the vehemence sometimes amounting to fury, which he had shown in the debates on the India Bill, on the regency, on the impeachment of Hastings, had made him unpopular even among men on his own side. In May 1789, the month in which the States General marched in impressive array to hear a sermon at the church of Notre-Dame at Versailles - a vote of censure had actually been passed on him in the House of Commons for a too severe expression used against Hastings.

When the debates on the regency were at their height, we have Burke's word that he was not admitted to the private counsels of the party. The younger Whigs had begun to press for shorter Parliaments, for the ballot, for redistribution of political power. Burke had never looked

with any favor on these projects. His experience of the sentiment of the populace in the two greatest concerns of his life, - American affairs and Indian affairs - had not been likely to prepossess him in favor of the popular voice, as the voice of superior political wisdom.

He did not absolutely object to some remedy in the state of representation, still he vigorously resisted such proposals as the Duke of Richmond's in 1780 for manhood suffrage. The general ground was this: "The machine itself, is well enough to answer any good purpose, provided the materials were sound. But what signifies the arrangements of rottenness?"

In May 1791, a heated debate took place in the House of Commons, which resulted in the severing of friendship between Burke and Fox. The minister had introduced a measure for the division of the province of Canada and for the establishment of a local legislature in each division. Fox in the course of the debate, went out of his way to praise the revolution, and to sneer at some of the most effective passages in the Reflections. A few months afterwards, Burke published the Appeal from the new to the old Whigs, a grave, calm, and most cogent vindication of the perfect consistency of his criticism upon the English Revolution of 1688 and upon the French Revolution of 1789 with the doctrines of the great Whigs who conducted and afterwards defended in Anne's reign the transfer of the Crown from James to William and Mary.

The appeal was justly accepted as a satisfactory performance for the purpose with which it was written. Events, however, were doing more than words could do, to confirm the public opinion of Burke's foresight. He had always divined by the instinct of hatred that the French moderations must gradually be swept away by the Jacobins, and now it was all coming true. The humiliation of the King and Queen

after their capture at Varennes; the compulsory acceptance of the Constitution; the plain incompetence of the new Legislative Assembly; the growing violence of the Parisian mob and the ascendancy of the Jacobins at the common hall.

When we realize what impression this made upon the sober mind of the English, we may easily understand how the people came to listen to the voice of Edmund Burke, as they would to a prophet.

Now whatever were the defects in the character or philosophy of Burke, it cannot be denied that he attempted to obey and observe the worth-while rule of doing right, and teaching the principle to his generation. In this light, his life and labors command our admiration because he did uphold the right and condemn the wrong and was sufficiently clear-headed to see the sophistries which concealed the right and upheld the wrong. That was his peculiar excellence.

How loftily his majestic name towers above the other statesmen of his troubled age! Certainly no equal to him in England has since appeared in those things which give a permanent fame.

The man who has most nearly approached him is Gladstone. If the character of our own Webster had been as reproachless as his intellect was luminous and comprehensive, he might be named in the same category of illustrious men.

Like the odor of sanctity which was once supposed to emanate from a Catholic Saint, the halo of Burke's imperishable glory is shed around every consecrated retreat of that land which thus far has been the bulwark of European liberty. The English nation will not let him die; he cannot die in the hearts and memories of man any more than can Socrates or Washington.



No nation will be long ungrateful for eminent public service even if he who rendered them was stained by grave defects; for it is services which make men immortal. Much more will posterity reverence those benefactors whose private lives were in harmony with their principles, - the Hales, the L'Hopitals, the Hampdens of the world. To this class Edmund Burke undeniably belonged. All writers agree as to his purity of morals, his generous charities, his high social qualities, his genial nature, his love of simple pleasures, his deep affections, his reverence, his Christian life.

He was a man of sorrows, it is true, like most profound and contemplative natures, whose labors are not fully appreciated, - like Cicero, Dante, and Michael Angelo. He was doomed too, like Galileo, to severe domestic misfortunes. As an illustration, he was greatly afflicted by the death of his only son, in whom his pride and hopes were bound up.

It is for Edmund Burke's writings and published speeches that he leaves the most enduring fame; and what is most valuable in his writings is his elucidation of fundamental principles in morals and philosophy. And here was his power, - not his originality, for which he was distinguished in an eminent degree; not learning which amazed his auditors; not sarcasm, of which he was a master; not wit, with which he brought down the house; not passion, which overwhemed even such a man as Hastings; not fluency, with every word in the language at his command; not criticisms, so searching that no sophistry could escape him; not philosophy, musical as Apollo's lyre, - but insight into great principles, the moral force of truth clearly stated and fearlessly defended.

This elevated him to a sphere which words and gestures, and the rich music and magnetism of voice and action can never reach, since

it touched the heart and the reason and the conscience alike, and produced convictions that nothing can stifle.

There were more famous and able men than he, in some respects, in Parliament at the time. Fox surpassed him in debate, Pitt in ready replies and adaptation to the genius of the House, Sheridan in wit, Townsend in Parliamentary skill, Mansfield in legal acumen; but no one of these great men was so forcible as Burke in the statement of truths which future statesmen will value.

And as he unfolded and applied the imperishable principles of right and wrong, he seemed like an ancient sage bringing down to earth the fire of the divinities he invoked and in which he believed, not to chastise and humiliate, but to guide and inspire.

These, then were the influences at work in forming and developing the oratory of Edmund Burke.

How great in turn was the stream of influence emanating from that oratory may be seen by studying its results. Recapitulating the services by which he will ultimately be judged: He had a hand in almost every movement for which his generation is applauded. He gave an impulse to almost every political discussion which afterwards resulted in beneficent reform.

Some call him a croaker without sympathy for the ideas on which modern progress is based; but he was really one of the great reformers of his day. He lifted up his voice against the slave-trade; he encouraged and lauded the labors of Howard; he supported the just claim of Catholics; he attempted, though a churchman, to remove the restrictions to which dissenters were subjected; he opposed the cruel laws against insolvent debtors; he sought to soften the asperities of the Penal Code; he labored to abolish the custom of enlisting soldiers for life; he

attempted to subvert the dangerous powers exercised by judges in criminal prosecutions for libel; he sought financial reform in various departments of the state; he would have abolished many useless offices in the Government; he fearlessly exposed the wrongs of the East-India Company; he tried to bring to justice the greatest political criminal of the day; he took the right side of American difficulties, and advocated a policy which would have secured for half a century longer, the allegiance of the American Colonies, and prevented the division of the British empire; he advocated measures which saved England, possibly, from French subjugation; he threw the rays of his genius over all political discussions; and he left treatises which from his day to ours, have proved a mine of political and moral wisdom, for all whose aim or business it has been to study the principles of law or government. These truly, were services for which any country should be grateful, and which should justly place Edmund Burke on the list of great benefactors. These constitute a legacy of which all nations should be proud.

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