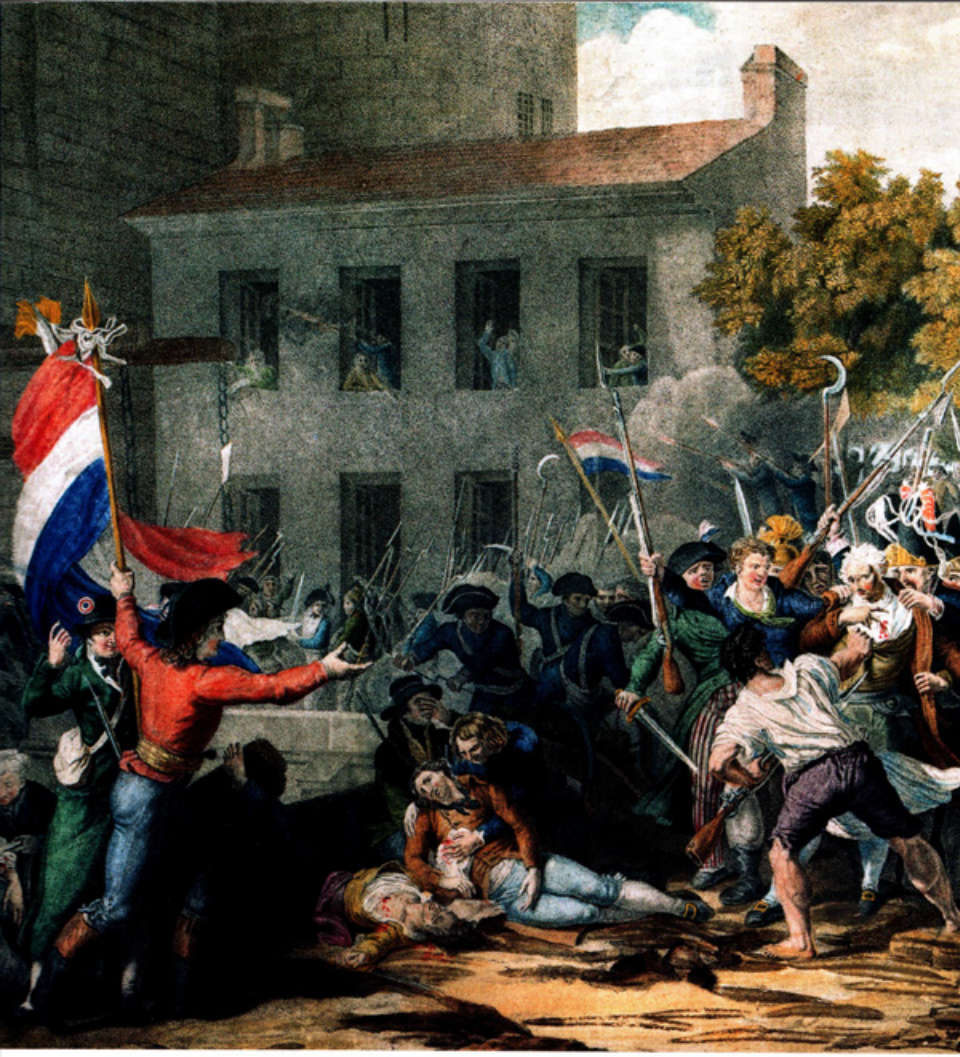

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EDMUND BURKE

Reflections on the Revolution in France

PENGUIN CLASSICS

REFLECTIONS ON THE REVOLUTION IN FRANCE

EDMUND BURKE (1729–97) was born in Dublin and educated at Trinity College, Dublin. In 1750 he entered the Middle Temple in London but soon left the law for literature. His first publication, *A Vindication of Natural Society* (1756), was followed in 1757 by *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and the Beautiful*, a text that was to influence the writers of the Romantic period. He became private secretary to 'Single Speech' Hamilton, then Secretary for Ireland, until in 1765 he filled the same post for the Marquis of Rockingham, then Prime Minister. He was elected MP for Wendover and his oratory gained him influence in the Whig party, although he was not to hold office until the downfall of the Tory party, under Lord North, in 1783. His championship of the then unpopular causes of Catholic emancipation and the relaxation of the Irish Trade Laws cost him his seat at Bristol and he was subsequently elected MP for Malton in 1781. Burke became paymaster of the forces in 1782, resigned with Fox, and returned to the same office under the coalition government in 1783. A great part of his political career became dedicated to the problem of India and he took part in the investigation of the East India Company affair. The French Revolution, too, prompted one of his best-known works, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). He retired in 1794 and received a pension from the ministry.

CONOR CRUISE O'BRIEN is Emeritus Professor of the University of Dublin. Born in 1917, he gained his BA and Ph.D. degrees from Trinity College, Dublin, and entered the Department of External Affairs of Ireland in 1944. In 1955 he was Counsellor in Paris, and from 1956 until 1960 he was head of the United Nations section and a member of the Irish Delegation to the UN. In 1961 he represented the Secretary-General of the UN in Katanga, and at the end of that year he resigned from his appointments. He was Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ghana from 1962 to 1965, Albert Schweitzer Professor of Humanities at New York University from

1965 to 1969, a Fellow of St Catherine's College, Oxford, from 1978 to 1981 and Visiting Professor at Dartmouth College, USA, from 1984 to 1985. He was a member of the Dail for Dublin North-East from 1969 until 1977 and of the Senate of the Republic of Ireland for the following two years. He joined the *Observer* in 1978, where he was Editor-in-Chief until 1981. His books include *Parnell and His Party* (1957), *To Katanga and Back* (1962), *Writers and Politics* (1965), *The United Nations Sacred Drama* (with drawings by Feliks Topolski; 1968), *States of Ireland* (1972), *Herod* (1978), *Neighbours: The Ewart–Biggs Memorial Lectures 1978–9* (1980), *The Siege: The Story of Israel and Zionism* (1986), *The Great Melody: A Thematic Biography of Edmund Burke* (1992), *Ancestral Voices: Religion and Nationalism in Ireland* (1994), *On the Eve of the Millennium* (1996) and *The Long Affair: Thomas Jefferson and the French Revolution* (1996).

EDMUND
BURKE

Reflections on the Revolution in France

AND ON THE PROCEEDINGS IN CERTAIN SOCIETIES IN LONDON RELATIVE TO THAT EVENT

Edited with an Introduction and Notes by
CONOR CRUISE O'BRIEN

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C.C.O'B.

The footnotes to this text are indicated by asterisks, daggers, etc.

The superior numbers (thus: [46]) refer to the notes by the editor of this Pelican edition. They are to be found on p. 378ff.

INTRODUCTION

'THE MANIFESTO OF A COUNTER-REVOLUTION'

I

THE spectre haunting Europe in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), and haunting the world today [1968], walks for the first time in the pages of Burke:

> ... out of the tomb of the murdered monarchy in France has arisen a vast, tremendous, unformed spectre, in a far more terrifick guise than any which ever yet have overpowered the imagination, and subdued the fortitude of man. Going straight forward to its end, unappalled by peril, unchecked by remorse, despising all common maxims and all common means, that hideous phantom overpowered those who could not believe it was possible she could at all exist, except on the principles, which habit rather than nature had persuaded them were necessary to their own particular welfare, and to their own ordinary modes of action.*

The revolution which Burke feared is not of course identical with Marx's Communist revolution, but has much essential in common with it, and in some ways more in common with it than with the actual French

* First of the *Letters on a Regicide Peace* (1796); *Works* V, p. 155; Marx may have known the passage; he did know some of Burke's writings. There is a bitter footnote about Burke in *Capital*: 'The sycophant – who in the pay of the English oligarchy played the romantic *laudator temporis acti* against the French Revolution just as, in the pay of the North American colonies at the beginning of the American troubles, he had played the liberal against the English oligarchy, was an out-and-out vulgar bourgeois.' (*Capital* I, Moscow, 1954, p. 760, n2.) Earlier he had described Burke as the man whom both Parties in England regard as the model of a British Statesman (*N.Y. Daily Tribune*, December 1855). From a Marxian point of view there is of course no contradiction between the two descriptions.

Revolution of Burke's day. Burke would have been likely to see in the principles of the Communist revolution the emergence in even purer form of all that he most detested in the contemporary revolution whose progress he watched with horror and fascination in France, and sought with eloquence and skill to check in England. The spirit of total, radical innovation; the overthrow of all prescriptive rights; the confiscation of property; destruction of the Church, the nobility, the family, tradition, veneration, the ancestors, the nation – this is the catalogue of all that Burke dreaded in his darkest moments, and every item in it he would have discovered in Marxism. In the personality of Marx himself he would have seen incarnated that energy which he regarded as most dangerous to ordered society: the energy of ability without property.* In Engels he would have seen a prime representative of a category whose activities he found both noxious and incomprehensible: the category of the men of property who encouraged the spread of principles inimical to the rights of property.† Like Burke, Marx and Engels long and anxiously scrutinized the French Revolution, seeking in its course the secret of the future development of European and world politics.‡ Like his, their imagination was deeply penetrated by the energies which the Revolution let loose, deeply impressed by the

*'But as ability is a vigorous and active principle, and as property is sluggish, inert, and timid, it never can be safe from the invasions of ability, unless it be, out of all proportion, predominant in the representation.' (*Reflections*, p. 140.)

† See *Letter to a Noble Lord* (1796); *Works* V, pp. 110–51. See also p. 384, n.42.

‡Marx in his earlier years applied the lessons of the French Revolution too schematically as in his writing for the *Rheinische Zeitung* and *The Civil War in France*. But in *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, in chastened and deliberate language he gives an extraordinary sense of how, and in what ambiguous shapes, the great Revolution weighs on his own time.

contrast between the scale of these events and the routine of politics in a world that hoped the Revolution could be ignored, or treated as a purely local and exceptional event, isolated in space or time. Like him they looked through the political surface of the Revolution towards its economic and social substance: Burke provides, in the *Reflections** and elsewhere, some of the best examples of that aristocratic critique of the bourgeoisie, to which the *Communist Manifesto* allows a provisional and sardonic welcome. Burke and Marx both sought to understand the revolutionary principles at work in France – Burke in order to stop them from spreading, and to destroy the nucleus of infection; Marx in order to hasten the victory of a new revolution, bringing with it the triumph of all that for Burke had been most hateful – though not of that which had been most contemptible – in the old one.

The great revolutions of our own time, those of Russia and China, came, under Marxist leadership, in lands which had never known an equivalent of the French Revolution. France, itself, and those other Western countries most exposed to the Enlightenment, and – like Britain and the United States – least resistant to those principles of political democracy which Burke abhorred, are not among the most revolutionary in the world today. The country which was the fulcrum of counter-revolution in his day – the country whose Empress he praised†

* See for example the passage (*Reflections*, pp. 311–313) about the ascendancy of financial speculators, with its peroration: 'Here end all the deceitful dreams and visions of the equality and rights of men. In the "Serbonian Bog" of this base oligarchy they are all absorbed, sunk, and lost for ever.' See also (p. 130) the discussion of the membership of the Tiers État and its implications: 'From the moment I read the list I saw distinctly, and very nearly as it has happened, all that was to follow.'

† *Letter to the Empress of Russia* (1791), *Corr.* VI, pp. 441–5, 448. Privately he had his reservations.

was to become for our time that nucleus of revolutionary infection which France was for his. We have lived to see Russia itself, through its revolutionary gains, cease to be a revolutionary force, superseded by a power which had clung even longer than Russia to the ancestral ways, which had furnished the supreme example in the world of long adherence to the social contract in the form that Burke conceived it – 'a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born.'* If, as Burke desired and passionately urged, the European monarchies had wholeheartedly and successfully combined to crush the Revolution early and utterly in France, while ruthlessly suppressing every incipient manifestation of potential revolutionary character in their own countries, one wonders what results such success would have produced in a longer term. Might not the revolutionary forces, not so much suppressed as compressed, have burst out at a later date, with far greater violence, under more disciplined, consistent and determined leadership; and with even more radical effects on the structure of society? Merely to pose the question is I think to raise doubts about the degree of enlightenment in the self-interest of international counter-revolutionary com-

**Reflections*, pp. 194–5. The long passage which contains these words still has a profound appeal to lovers of all forms of traditional society. A brilliant young East African writer, Ali al 'Amin Mazrui, has said that, in this passage, Burke is at his most 'African' – closest, that is, not to the University-trained African, but to 'the African who is steeped still in traditional ways'. (*Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 1, no. 2, Jan. 1963.) Mazrui's contention about the compatibility of Burke's doctrine in this passage with African traditional thought is surely sound; his attempt to apply Burkian principles to the Congo was, however, vitiated by the inadequacy of the information then available to him. The Tananarive agreement of 1960 was not, as he assumed, an inter-tribal settlement but an internationally sponsored attempt at a compromise between international forces.

bination. I shall return to this topic, in considering the relevance of Burke to the militant anti-communism of our own day. First, however – since Burke's own attitude to the Revolution was not all at once a crusading one – it is necessary to discuss the actual development of his opinions, emotions and apprehensions about the Revolution, to the extent to which these are revealed in his surviving writings.

2

From the very beginning, just after the fall of the Bastille, events which seemed to so many a new dawn of liberty aroused Burke's forebodings, without however yet drawing down a general condemnation.

'As to us here', he wrote to Lord Charlemont on 9 August 1789,*

our thoughts of everything at home are suspended, by our astonishment at the wonderful Spectacle which is exhibited in a Neighbouring and rival Country – what Spectators and what actors. England gazing with astonishment at a French struggle for Liberty and not knowing whether to blame or to applaud! The thing indeed, though I thought I saw something like it in progress for several years,† has still something in it paradoxical and Mysterious. The spirit it is impossible not to admire; but the old Parisian ferocity has broken out in a shocking manner. It is true this may be no more than a sudden explosion.... But if it should be character rather than accident, then that people are not fit for Liberty, and must have a **Strong** hand like that of

* *Correspondence* VI pp. 9–12. This is Burke's earliest known comment on the Revolution.

† The editors of *Corr.* VI comment: 'As early as 1769 Burke after describing the financial difficulties of France wrote "No man, I believe, who has considered their affairs with any degree of attention or information, but must hourly look for some extraordinary convulsion in that whole system; the effect of which on France, and even on all Europe, it is difficult to conjecture." ' (*Corr.* VI, eds. Cobban and Smith, p. 10, n.2.)

their former masters to coerce them. Men must have a certain fund of moderation to qualify them for Freedom else it becomes noxious to themselves and a perfect nuisance to every body else.

The same attitude, that of a concerned and generally disapproving spectator, is reflected in Burke's other comments during 1789. The disapproval deepens, however. On 10 October 1789, after the revolutionary removal of the king from Versailles to Paris, he writes to his son about

> ... the portentous state of France – where the Elements which compose Human Society seem all to be dissolved, and a world of Monsters to be produc'd in the place of it – where Mirabeau presides as the Grand Anarch; and the late Grand Monarch makes a figure as ridiculous as pitiable. I expect to hear of his dismissing the Regiment he has called to his aid, for drinking his health ... and that he has chosen a corps of Paris Amazons for his Body Guard. (*Corr.* VI, pp. 29–30.)

On 4 November Chames-Jean-François de Pont, the 'very young gentleman at Paris' of the prefatory page of the *Reflections*, wrote to Burke that letter to which the *Reflections* are, in form, a reply. 'Son Coeur', he said,

> a battu pour la première fois au nom de Liberté en vous en entendant parler.... Si vous Daignez l'assurer que les françois sont Dignes d'être libres, qu'ils sauront Distinguer la liberté de la licence et un Gouvernement légitime d'un pouvoir Despotique; si vous daignez enfin l'assurer que la Révolution Commencée Réussira, fier de votre témoignage il ne sera jamais abattu par le Découragement qui Suit Souvent l'Espérance. (*Corr.* VI, pp. 31–2.)

At no time from the beginning of the Revolution to his death could Burke have given the reassurance sought by his young correspondent, but his original reply* is far removed in tone and character from the fierce polemic of

*This is the letter of 'October 1789' referred to in Burke's prefatory page. Cobban and Smith, however, establish that it was written in November, and probably not forwarded before the end of that year. (*Corr.* VI, pp. 39–50.)

the *Reflections*. He emphasizes his ignorance of the actual situation and his distrust of his own judgement. 'If I should seem . . .' he says, 'to express myself in the language of disapprobation, be so good as to consider it as no more than the expression of doubt.' He defines that freedom which he loves: 'The Liberty I mean is *social* freedom. It is that state of things in which Liberty is secured by the equality of Restraint; a Constitution of things in which the liberty of no one Man and no body of Men and no Number of men can find Means to trespass on the liberty of any Person or any description of Persons in the Society.' Failing this, failing the establishment of

> real *practical* Liberty with a Government powerful to Protect, impotent to invade it. . . . You may have subverted Monarchy, but not recover'd freedom. . . . You are now to live in a new order of things; under a plan of Government of which no Man can speak from experience. . . . The French may be yet to go through more transmigrations.

Burke offers advice not in the taste of this enlighten'd age and indeed . . . no better than the late ripe fruit of mere experience – Never wholly separate in your mind the merits of any Political Question from the Men who are concerned in it. . . . The power of bad men is no indifferent thing . . .' The letter concludes with praise of prudence and moderation:

> Prudence (in all things a Virtue, in Politicks the first of Virtues). . . . Believe me, Sir, in all changes in the State, Moderation is a Virtue, not only amiable but powerful. It is a disposing, arranging, conciliating, cementing Virtue . . . to dare to be fearful when all about you are full of presumption and confidence. . . .

These sagacious and memorable admonitions are in no way inconsistent with the *Reflections* – which contain several passages in the same strain – but the fire of that great tract has not yet been kindled. Nor is there as yet any note of alarm. 'As to France,' he writes to Earl

Fitzwilliam about the time when he must have been composing the reply to de Pont,

> if I were to give way to the speculations which arise in my Mind from the present State of things and from the causes which have given rise to it and which now begin to be unfolded, I should think it a country undone . . . I should certainly wish to see France circumscribed within moderate bounds. The interest of this Country requires, perhaps the Interests of mankind require, that she should not be in a position despotically to give the Law to Europe: But I think I see many inconveniences only not to Europe at large, but to this Country in particular from the total political extinction of a great civilized Nation situated in the heart of this our Western system.*

It was not very long before Burke, and after him many others, were struck by 'inconveniences' of a quite different character. Up to the end of 1789, however, he remains detached, and little moved. 'The affairs both of France and England', he writes to his friend Philip Francis in December,

> are rendered little more to us than a matter of Curiosity; with the one our Duty gives us no concern; with the other we are not sufferd to intermeddle with any Effect or any Credit: and after all perhaps the follies of France, by which we are not yet affected may employ ones curiosity more pleasantly, and as usefully, as the depravity of England which is more calculated to give us pain.†

It is in January 1790 that the mood of contemplation begins to give place to one of action. A letter written to an unknown, probably in the latter half of that month‡

* *Corr.* VI, 12 November 1789.

† *Corr.* VI, pp. 55–8, 17 December 1789.

‡ The editors of *Corr.* VI date (p. 78) this 'at some time around the middle or the latter half of January 1790'. They also show that Burke did not read Dr Price's sermon and the correspondence of the Revolution Society until his arrival in London 'for the meeting of Parliament on the 21st' *Corr.* VI, p. 81. The conclusion of the letter seems to show the influence of this reading.

seems to register within itself the transition. In that letter he is more philosophical, or teleological, about the situation in France than he is ever to be again: 'Man is a gregarious animal. He will by degrees provide some convenience suitable to this his natural disposition; and this strange thing may some time or other, assume a more habitable form. The fish will at length make a shell which will fit him.' Then, after some scathing remarks about Voltaire and Rousseau, he strikes a new note of concern: 'I see some people here are willing that we should become their scholars and reform our state on the French model. They have begun; and it is high time for those who wish to preserve *morem majorum* to look about them.'

The first phase of Burke's counter-revolutionary activity – the phase of the *Reflections* – was that of fighting the influence of these people in England. In this phase he did not see the danger mainly in France itself, but in the kind of thinking which had in his view produced the events in France, and in the men who favoured the introduction of this kind of thinking into England. The danger came home to him on his reading of Dr Price's sermon and the Revolution Society's correspondence with the National Assembly.* Shortly afterwards, in Parliament, Charles James Fox praised the French Revolution highly, saying that he 'exulted in it from feelings and from principle'. Pitt also looked forward to a reconstructed and free France 'as one of the most brilliant powers in Europe'. It was then that Burke on 9 February 1790 for the first time took a public stand against the principles of the Revolution. The published account of his speech makes clear that his principal declared concern is the danger of infection spreading from France to England:

That the house must perceive, from his coming forward to

* *Reflections* pp. 91–6 and notes 2–5, pp. 379–80.

However plausible it may have seemed to contemporary and other opponents – and the debate round the *Reflections* has remained so live that opponents have always had a tendency to become contemporary – the charge that Burke turned against the Revolution for gain cannot be sustained. Long ago, at the outset of his career – as a condition indeed of having a career at all – Burke had cast in his lot with an important section of the men of rank and property. He was himself one of the most notable examples of the conjuncture which he thought most redoubtable to ordered society: ability without property. Had he been born in similar social circumstances in Arras in the 1750s, or in Dublin or Belfast in the 1760s, he might conceivably have been a revolutionary, and dangerous in proportion to his mighty powers. Mary Wollstonecraft thought so: 'Reading your *Reflections* warily over, it has continually struck me, that had you been a Frenchman, you would have been, in spite of your respect for rank and antiquity, a violent revolutionist.... Your imagination would have taken fire ...'* As it was, born in Dublin in 1729, he placed his ability from

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subsequent impeachment of Hastings with the fact that Will Burke [a kinsman and close friend of Edmund's] in the meantime had changed from a London speculator to "a Government servant in India".' Commenting on Mr Wecter's investigation of the Burke finances, Professor Copeland says: '... it is now quite clear that both Richard [Edmund's brother] and Will were on occasion dishonourable in their financial dealings. Edmund, though he has never been proved to have been consciously dishonourable, was so closely associated with the other two that he was inevitably and quite properly given part of the blame for their acts.' (*Edmund Burke; Six Essays*, London, 1960.)

**A Vindication of the Rights of Man* (1790). Burke's son Richard – though he warmly and even indiscreetly supported his father's politics – thought he would have stood to gain by a revolution: 'I see to myself personally great positive and Evident Interest from such changes as have happened in France ... or anything like them.' (*Sheffield Papers*; R. Burke Jr. to Fitzwilliam, 20 July 1790.)

the beginning at the service of men of rank and property. He remained faithful, without servility, to the party he had chosen. His writings on American affairs were not revolutionary; they were, rather, an attempt to prevent the development and exacerbation of a revolutionary situation. It is true that he never condemned the American Revolution, as he did the French, but then the secession of a group of colonies is not an event similar to the overthrow of the settled order of a major state, even though the word 'Revolution' is used about both. Burke's letters of the second half of 1789 – quoted above – show that his attitude towards the French Revolution was disapproving from the very beginning, even before there was any question of his taking a public stand. Even allowing for Burke's unusual gifts of political foresight, an attack on the French Revolution cannot have looked, in the first half of 1790, like a promising pathway to a pension. In 1790 the French Revolution did not seem dangerous, to most Englishmen. France seemed even to be 'settling down'. Burke himself had been informed, towards the end of 1789, 'that heats are beginning to abate'.* The period from the transfer of the king to Paris (October 1789) to his attempted escape (June 1791) is one of the quietest in the Revolution: the 'initial tumults' are over; constitution-making is in progress, with much talk of the English example; the principal events that were to be thought of as the 'horrors of the Revolution', the September massacres, execution of the King and Queen, the Reign of Terror – all are in the future. In this context the vehemence of Burke's attack, while certain to alienate many of Burke's political friends, was not certain to attract new support and in

* *Corr.* VI, pp. 39–50; reply to de Pont, November 1789; see above, pp. 14–15. Burke had originally hesitated to send the letter because 'in Seasons of Jealousy suspicion is vigilant', but released it on learning of the abatement of heats.

fact its immediate effect seems to have been even to increase his unpopularity. A recent writer has summed up the situation just after the publication of the *Reflections*:

> Thus Burke had no immediate success either with Government or with Opposition. The general feeling in political circles was that Burke, though eloquent and ingenious, went too far in this opinions; too far in his total and systematic opposition to the French revolution; too far in his attack on the dissenters and reformers; too far in his apprehensions of danger to the English constitution; too far in making public scenes, and breaking friendships, on an issue that need never have been publicly debated at all.*

What saved his reputation was the progress of the Revolution in the direction he had foretold. In the debate in which Burke committed himself – in February 1790 – Pitt himself spoke about the Revolution in a conciliatory spirit. Even in later years when events, seeming to confirm many of Burke's dire predictions, had drawn Burke and the Government closer together, it is never a case of his following a Government line, but rather of his reproaching the Government for its pragmatic attitude and lack of counter-revolutionary zeal.

4

'What I most envy Burke for', said Dr Johnson, 'is, his being constantly the same.'† Johnson seems to have had

* R. R. Fennessy, O.F.M.: *Burke, Paine and the Rights of Man*, The Hague, 1963, (pp. 193–4).

† Boswell's *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, 15 August 1773. Coleridge thought the same: 'No man was ever more like himself' than Edmund Burke (*Essay on the Grounds of Government*, 1809). Tom Moore on the other hand found in him 'a want of moral identity observable through his life and writings'. (*Memoirs of Sheridan*, 1825.) Moore, unlike the more politically minded Mackintosh, saw Burke's attitude towards the French Revolution as a complete break with his earlier position.

in his mind primarily the equable temperament which was Burke's in his middle years, but a reader of Burke is likely to find the comment applicable in a more general sense to his work, including the *Reflections*. The more one reads Burke the more one is impressed, I think, by a deep inner consistency, not always of language or opinion, but of feeling: a consistency of which the root principles are a strong capacity for affection, and a strong distrust of all reasoning not inspired by affection for what is near and dear. 'I have no great opinion of that sublime abstract, metaphysic reversionary, contingent humanity, which in *cold blood* can subject the *present time* and those whom we *daily see and converse with* to immediate calamities in favour of the *future and uncertain* benefit of persons who *only exist in idea*.'* The amount of added emphasis, unusual in Burke, is, I think, proportionate to the strength of his feelings on this theme. (See *Reflections* p. 315, the passage ending 'so many little images of the great country in which the heart found something which it could fill'). This consistency by no means excludes complexity and contradictions; rather, it is the consistency of a complex and powerful personality, successfully withstanding unusual stress.

Burke's family affections were – in the eyes of some English contemporaries – excessive, in that they went out not merely to his immediate family – his wife Jane, his idolized son, Richard, his brother Richard – but also to what a modern anthropologist would call his 'extended family'. 'He always marched', as Professor Copeland has said, 'at the head of a clan.'† Cousins from Ireland, relatives of all kinds down on their luck, were welcome at Beaconsfield. In society, Burke's 'train' was so full of brogue as to shock

* *Corr.* VI, pp. 104–9; to A. J. F. Dupont, post 29 March 1790.
† *Edmund Burke: Six Essays.*

even his admirers.* Had Burke been the purely self-seeking adventurer whom some of his opponents depicted, he would have acted differently towards his compromising relatives. These affections of his extended beyond – but not indefinitely beyond – his family. They took in the country of his birth, and his mother's co-religionists; he never ceased to struggle for concessions in Ireland, and relief for Catholics. Compromising connexions again: an ambitious Irish adventurer in eighteenth-century England would, if guided by pure calculation, have avoided these topics: it did not help Burke to be caricatured in the garb of a Jesuit, or to have it said – by Wilkes – that his oratory 'stank of whiskey and potatoes'. Burke's affection also held, life-long, to his old Quaker school-master Shackleton, and his son, to his patron, the Marquess of Rockingham, and in general, in the more attenuated form of 'loyalty' to that section of English society – the Whig oligarchy – whose interests he had served, and through whose patronage he and his clan had established themselves. And in proportion as he loved or respected these groups of people, and the settings in which they lived, he hated all that seemed, to his powerful and sensitive intelligence, to menace them.†

Yet the span is great: between the ruined Irish Catholics and the owners of the wealth of England there

* 'Burke has now got such a train after him as would sink anybody but himself: his son, who is quite *nauseated* by all mankind; his brother, who is liked rather better than his son, but is rather oppressive with animal spirits and brogue; and his cousin Will Burke ... a fresh charge on any prospects of power Burke may ever have. Mrs Burke, has in her charge Miss French, the most perfect *she Paddy* that ever was caught.' (Sir G. Elliot, 2 May 1793 – *Life and Letters of Sir G. Elliot*, ed. Countess of Minto, London 1874: II, 136.)

† 'The moral sentiments, so nearly connected with early prejudice as to be almost one and the same thing, will assuredly not live long under a discipline which has for its basis the destruction of all prejudices.' *Works* III, p. 108.

is a chasm for Burke's affections to bridge. I believe, on grounds which will now be set out, that there is a connexion between the tensions of this spanning and the emotional charge, the pathos and fury, of the *Reflections*.

It is entirely natural that it should have been the words of the dissenting divine, Dr Price,* that set in motion the avalanche of Burke's eloquence against the Revolution. Burke's feelings towards the Dissenters were strong and mixed, and for some time past his hostile feelings towards them had been predominant. In the late spring of 1789, well before French affairs were occupying the minds of Englishmen, Richard Bright wrote asking for his support for a measure of relief for the Dissenters. Burke's reply is revealing:

> There are no Men on Earth to whom I have been more attached, and with a more sincere Esteem and Affection, than to some amongst the Dissenters. From my earliest years my Connexions have been very much with them. I flatter myself that I have still friends of that denomination. They were once indulgent enough to Me to think that (according to my scanty Power of obliging) they had some sort of obligation to me. In the Year 1784, a great Change took place,† and all of them who seem'd to act in Corps, have held me out to publick Odium, as one of a gang of Rebels and Regicides, which had conspired at one blow to subvert the Monarchy, to annihilate, without cause, all the Corporate privileges in the Kingdom and totally to destroy this Constitution. It is not their fault that I am in a situation to be asked by them or by anybody else, for my poor Vote . . .‡

It was not to be long before Burke had a chance of turning against Dissenters of the school of Dr Price every one

* See n.5, pp. 379–80.

† The reference is to Pitt's electoral victory of that year, in which the dissenting influence contributed to the overwhelming defeat of the Whigs – and thereby to Burke's isolation in his last years.

‡ *Corr.* V, pp. 470–74; 8–9 May 1789.

of the charges which he regarded the Dissenting body as having used against the Whigs – partiality to rebellion, regicide, subversion and innovation, and enmity to the Constitution. On 13 February 1790 Bright again wrote to Burke looking for support for his measure.* By this time Burke had read Price and others, and had made his speech on the Army Estimates: the *Reflections* were brewing. Burke replies with a new grimness:

> Since the last years applications many things have either happend, or come to my knowledge, which add not a little to my disposition to persevere in my former State of inactivity [i.e. on dissenting petitions]. Extraordinary things have happened in France; extraordinary things have been said and done here, and published with great ostentation, in order to draw us into a connexion and concurrence with that nation upon the principles of its proceedings, and to lead us to an imitation of them. I think such designs, as far as they go, highly dangerous to the constitution and the prosperity of this Country. I have had lately put into my hands, and but very lately, two extraordinary works,† so sanctiond as to leave no Doubt upon my Mind that a considerable party is formed, and is proceeding systematically, to the destruction of this Constitution in some of its essential parts. I was much surprised to find religious assemblies turned into a sort of places of exercise and discipline for politicks, and for the nourishment of a party which seems to have contention and power much more than Piety for its Object . . .‡

It is clear, I think, that had the Dissenting influence been used in favour of the Whigs, instead of against them, in 1784, his reaction to the language of Price, Palmer, Robinson and the others would have been likely to be more temperate.§ Burke was a passionate man, strong in

* *Sheffield Papers.*

† Palmer's *Protestant Dissenter's Catechism* and Robinson's *Principles of Nonconformity.*

‡ *Corr.* VI, pp. 82–5; to R. Bright, 18 February 1790.

§ The fierceness of his personal resentment breaks out at the end of the second letter to Bright. For Burke to support the Dissenters'

his resentments as in his affections, and it is not to be supposed that he did not enjoy giving the Dissenters back something of what he considered them to have given him six years before. But Burke's specific political resentments against the Dissenters, joined to the frustration of his later years in Parliament, had the effect of setting free the deeper forces of his being. Had Rockingham lived, had he and his friends been in power, had they enjoyed Dissenting support, it is hardly possible that Burke could have written with untrammelled eloquence about the Revolution in France. Frustrated, he was free.*

The significance of Burke's quarrel with Dissenters in his writings on the Revolution† goes much deeper than the specific quarrel over party politics. It was natural that Dissenters – and ordinary English Protestants generally – should welcome the early stages of the French Revolution because they saw in them the overthrow of Popery. The

petition would be, he says, 'a very bad example, and of a most immoral tendency, to the world; in teaching Men, that they may persecute and calumniate their true friend ... and yet that they may ... make use of his abilities for the service of their *party*. This My dear Sir, is a terrible example.'

*A hostile contemporary saw this frustration and wounded vanity as the actual *causes* of the *Reflections*: 'You were the Cicero of one side of the house for years,' wrote Mary Wollstonecraft 'and then to sink into oblivion, to see your *weary* honours fade before you, was enough to arouse all that was human in you and make you produce your impassioned *Reflections* ...' (*A Vindication of the Rights of Man*). Disraeli, in *Sybil*, adopted a similar interpretation. 'Burke poured forth the vials of his hoarded vengeance into the agitated heart of Christendom,' etc. Vengeance against Fox for taking the Whig leadership from Burke, Disraeli thought.

† The quarrel did not cease with the publication of the *Reflections*. Late in 1791, for example, he writes that 'What I look to with seriousness is the Phalanx of Party which exists in the body of the dissenters', and estimates that nine-tenths of these are devoted 'to the principles of the French Revolution'. (*Corr.* VI, pp. 418–22; to Dundas, 30 September 1791.)

very first achievement for which Dr Price was *thankful* was 'a *diffusion* of knowledge which has undermined superstition and error'.* To most Englishmen of the day, whether Dissenters or not, these words must have sounded quite proper, used as they were in a context which necessarily implied that the 'superstition and error' were of the Romish kind. But Burke was not English, although he often wrote and spoke in the character of an Englishman. He was Irish and of old native, not recent settler stock; in the words of a modern biographer, 'Edmund Burke was pure Irish'.† This distinction was, in some ways, more basic than that of formal religious profession. The recent settlers were, in general, militant in their Protestantism, which they associated with their title to their lands and their dominant position in society. Those of the older stock who had become Protestant were always suspect of having done so to escape the operation of the Penal Laws – to keep their land, if they had any, and to have access to careers. Burke himself was exposed to such suspicion, as we have seen; early in his career he was denounced to Rockingham as a crypto-Catholic.‡ There is no need to doubt his denial; the whole tenor of his writing makes it clear that he was not a man likely to cherish one set of dogmas – or other abstractions – beneath a feigned belief

* *Reflections*, p. 157.

† The name Burke is of Norman origin but Norman and Gaelic blood had long been intermingled. Burke's father, says Sir Philip Magnus, 'came of a family which had long been merged with the Celtic population of the country.' (*Edmund Burke: A Life*, London, 1939; pp. 1, 5.)

‡ In 1765 enemies of Burke informed the Duke of Newcastle, who informed Rockingham, that Burke was a papist educated by the Jesuits. Burke, denying the story, offered to resign but Rockingham refused his resignation. (Carl B. Cone, *Burke and the Nature of Politics: The Age of the American Revolution*, Kentucky University Press, pp. 71–2.)

in another set. His feelings are another matter. To an unknown correspondent who – at the height of the Revolution controversy – inquired about his religious beliefs, he replied that having been baptized and educated in the Church of England he had 'seen no cause to abandon that communion. When I do, I shall act upon my conviction or my mistake. I think that Church harmonizes with our civil constitution ... I am attached to Christianity at large; much from conviction: more from affection.'*

It will be seen that the references to the Church of England are cool and politic, provisional and contingent. It is not to the Church of England – still less to Protestantism – that he is attached, 'much from conviction; more from affection'; it is to 'Christianity at large'. This is odd. Nothing could be more foreign to Burke's habitual way of thinking, writing and feeling than to be more attracted to something 'at large' than to his own subdivision of it. If for once he shows no enthusiasm for his 'little platoon'† and is all for the Army 'at large', we are justified I think in inferring that he does not feel himself to be quite in the right platoon. This would not be surprising. Burke's mother was a Catholic; so was his father-in-law and friend, Dr Nugent; his father, Richard Burke 'seems' according to Professor Thomas Copeland 'to have conformed to the Established Church 13 March 1722 about the time he began to practise law in Dublin.'‡ In order to practise law at this time and place one was obliged to conform to the Established Church. Edmund's wife Jane was, like him, the child of a 'mixed marriage'. It is not known where Edmund and she were married, and there is a tradition that it was a Catholic

* *Corr.* VI, pp. 214–16; to an unknown 26 January 1791.

† *Reflections*, p. 135 'to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle (the germ as it were) of public affections'.

‡ *Corr.* I, p. 274 n. See, however, p. 76.

marriage solemnized in Paris.* The 'clan' at whose head Edmund Burke marched was shot through with Catholicism; and this at a place and time in which Protestantism might be feigned, but Catholicism, being socially and economically disadvantageous to the verge of ruin, must be presumed to be based on firm conviction. Burke might 'see no cause to abandon' the communion of the Church of England but his family background was such – and his family feeling so strong – that he could not possibly contemplate attacks on the Church of Rome with any of the feelings of a proper Englishman – with detachment, complacency or downright approbation.† This emotional disposition in religious matters has surely much to do both with the nature and with the promptness of his response to the events in France.

5

Burke's Irish origin and connexions affect his response to the Revolution in other ways besides the religious. Englishmen of rank and wealth in the late eighteenth century – before 1793 – could not easily imagine social revolution as a reality. 'The Burkes', close to the rawness and deep social and political resentments of Ireland, were much more aware of the underside of society, and conscious of danger. Richard Burke, Jr – who often expressed his father's thought with indiscreet vehemence – wrote, at the time when the *Reflections* were being composed, a vivid warning to Lord Fitzwilliam, whose agent he

* Basil O'Connell, 'The Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke ... a Basis for a Pedigree', *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society*, Vol. LXI, pp. 257–74, January–June 1956.

† W. B. Yeats in his later years liked to think of Burke – with Swift, Berkeley, Goldsmith, Grattan and Parnell – as among the glories of a specific Anglo-Irish Protestant tradition. (See *The Senate Speeches of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Donald R. Pierce, London 1961.) The real Burke resists confinement in this category.

was: 'Think when you walk the streets of Peterborough that they lie under the stones and that they will come out of the rotten tenements you have purchased of Mr Parker to lord it over the lord of those tenements. What will then become of the persuasive eloquence, the moderating concessions and the temporizing expedients of Mr Fox?'* The placid tone of Lord Fitzwilliam's reply† does not suggest that young Burke succeeded in communicating his vision. Here, as usual at this time, the Burke mind, haunted by the phantom of revolution,‡ was baffled by 'those who could not believe it was possible she could at all exist . . .' An Irishman could not be so sceptical, or so placid; revolt

* *Sheffield Papers*; 29 July 1790.

† Richard was trying to get the great Whig lord to reprimand and disavow Fox and Sheridan, the Whig leaders in the Commons who had praised the Revolution. He said he wrote without his father's knowledge, but that 'I know I speak his sentiments as well as my own.' Fitzwilliam indicated that the timing and character of any '*caveat*' were matters for him to determine (July and August 1790).

‡ The expression is not entirely rhetorical. It is surprising how often Burke's references to the Revolution use supernatural or fantastic terms. The revolutionary leaders are 'suddenly, and, as it were, by enchantment, snatched from the humblest rank' (*Reflections*, p. 130); they are men who hack their father in pieces and put him into the 'kettle of magicians' (ibid. p. 194). In private letters he calls the Revolution 'this strange, nameless, wild, enthusiastic thing' (January 1791) and 'this vile chimera, and sick mans dream of Government' (26 September 1791); the friends of the Revolution in England are 'the infernal faction' (September 1792); their Press 'the Newspapers of Hell' (October 1792). In his last years as might be expected, this imagery became more obsessive – see the passage beginning 'The Revolution harpies of France, sprung from night and hell', in *A Letter to a Noble Lord* (1796); the 'spectre' passage in the first *Letter on a Regicide Peace* (1796); the 'questionable shape' (second *Letter*, 1796). And in the last unfinished *Letter*, he writes: 'In the time I have lived to, I always seem to walk on enchanted ground. Everything is new and, according to the fashionable phrase, revolutionary.' Burke also uses ghostly imagery about Ireland (see p. 36).

was in fact imminent in Ireland, and broke out in 1798, the year after Burke's death. No man in England had been more painfully conscious of its imminence than Burke. 'We regarded as the great Evil of the time,' he wrote to Dr Hussey in December 1796, 'the growth of Jacobinism, and we were very well assured that from a variety of causes no part of these Countries were more favourable to the growth of that Evil than our unfortunate country.'* He abhorred the movement of the United Irishmen, which sought to bring together dissenters and Catholics in one national, democratic, revolutionary movement under French inspiration and with French aid – 'those who, without any regard to religion, clubb all kinds of discontents together, in order to produce all kinds of disorders'.† Yet, where the Irish Catholics were concerned, he makes a unique allowance, if not for a legitimate kind of Jacobinism, at least for a kind rooted in human nature; the two categories are, in Burke's mind, very close together. 'That Jacobinism,' he wrote to Hussey,

> which is Speculative in its Origin and which arises from Wantonness and fullness of bread may possibly be kept under by firmness and prudence.... But the Jacobinism which arises from Penury and irritation, from scorned loyalty and rejected Allegiance, has much deeper roots. They take their nourishment from the bottom of human Nature ... and not from humour or caprice or the opinions of the Day about privileges or Liberties.‡

Burke's references to the danger of revolution in Ireland are naturally most frequent in the last years of his life, the period closest to the impending revolt. But Ireland was never far from his thoughts. As a modern Burke

* *Sheffield Papers*; *c.* 6 December 1796.

† *Sheffield Papers*; to Hussey, 18 May 1795.

‡ To Hussey, *c.* 6 December 1796. There is no doubt that Burke had the Irish Catholics in mind in this passage: the Irish Dissenters he regarded as quite a privileged body.

scholar has written: '... like every other responsible and intelligent Irishman with sufficient heart from that day to this, Burke carried Ireland round with him as his personal "old man of the sea".'* Burke had written in 1780 that when he first came into Parliament, fourteen years before, what had been 'first and uppermost in my Thoughts, was the hope without injury to this Country to be somewhat useful to the place of my Birth and education....'† We know from the draft tract against the Popery Laws, written shortly before his election to Parliament, how this hope then worked, and this tract is perfectly consistent with all that he afterwards wrote on the condition of Ireland.‡

It is reasonable therefore to assume that his vision of Ireland – an oppressed and dangerous Ireland – was a permanent part of Burke's imaginative landscape. His relation to Ireland made impossible for him two of the stock responses of Englishmen to the opening stages of the Revolution: that of approval for what seemed an anti-Papist reformation and that of 'It can't happen here'. 'Here', for Burke, was not only England but also Ireland, so that revolution for him was from the beginning a thing imaginable. This goes some way to explain the alertness and promptitude of Burke's response, the fact that he was

* T. H. D. Mahoney, *Edmund Burke and Ireland*, London, 1960, p. ix.

† *Sheffield Papers*; to Thomas Burgh, New Year's Day, 1780. He added that when he felt this hope to be dashed 'all the lustre of my imaginary rank was tarnished; and I felt degraded even by my elevation.'

‡ *Letter to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Perry* (1778); *Letter to Thomas Burgh* (1780); *Letter to John Merlott* (1780); *Letter to a Peer of Ireland* (1782); *Letter to Sir Hercules Langrishe* (1792); *Letter to William Smith* (January 1795); *Second Letter to Sir Hercules Langrishe* (1795); *Letter to Richard Burke* (1792). *Works* V, pp. 486, 491, 510, 282; III, p. 298; VI, pp. 49, 56, 61.

'To make a revolution is to subvert the antient state of our country; and no common reasons are called for to justify so violent a proceeding'

Edmund Burke's seminal work was written during the early months of the French Revolution, and predicted with uncanny accuracy many of its worst excesses, including the Reign of Terror. A scathing attack on the Revolution's attitudes to existing institutions, property and religion, it makes a cogent case for upholding inherited rights and established customs, argues for piecemeal reform rather than revolutionary change – and deplores the influence Burke feared the Revolution might have in Britain. *Reflections on the Revolution in France* is now widely regarded as a classic statement of conservative political thought, and is one of the eighteenth century's great works of political rhetoric.

Conor Cruise O'Brien's introduction examines the contemporary political situation in England and Ireland and its influence on Burke's point of view. He highlights Burke's brilliant grasp of social and political forces and discusses why the book has remained so significant for more than two centuries.

Edited with an introduction by CONOR CRUISE O'BRIEN

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