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On Empire, Liberty, and Reform: Speeches and Letters. Edmund Burke

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Any would-be anthologist of Edmund Burke, even if he or she is content to rely solely on published items, has a huge body of material from which to choose for inclusion in a single volume. A fair amount was published in Burke's own lifetime. Additions to the canon were made by his literary executors in the first edition of his *Works*, originally published in eight large volumes between 1792 and 1827. A great deal more has been added in the Oxford University Press edition of the *Writings and Speeches*, which began to appear in 1981 and of which eight out of the planned nine volumes are now in print. Ten volumes of published letters were published between 1958 and 1970 in the Cambridge/Chicago edition under the general editorship of the late Thomas Copeland, a fine scholar to whom David Bromwich pays proper tribute.

The bulk of Burke's published material is matched by the extraordinary range of topics with which it is concerned. Burke was of course a politician of great energy and with a remarkable capacity to master not only what was his very extensive routine duty but also causes that he made particularly his own. He was as well an intellectual of very varied tastes and interests, which he presumably had some leisure to cultivate in the prepolitical part of his life, that is almost until his forties, and then evidently sustained by ravenous reading and a most enviable power of memory.

In selecting from this superabundance David Bromwich sets certain parameters for himself. As his title indicates, his concern is with politics and public life. His chosen audience is the interested reader, not the specialist scholar. There is a substantial general introduction, but the introductory material for each item and the explanatory notes are limited. Textual problems are not discussed. Wherever possible, which means in

all but one case, complete texts are given rather than extracts. To fit in a wide a selection of complete texts within a single volume, Bromwich is willing to be selective among what would conventionally be regarded as the longer classics of the Burke canon. The *Speech on Conciliation with America*, the *Speech on Fox's India Bill* and *A Letter to a Noble Lord* are in. *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents*, *An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs* and, most challengingly, *Reflections on the Revolution with France* are out. In addition to those classics that earn their passage, the reader is given a number of less frequently reproduced items. Taken together, these provide a balanced and effective coverage. Every Burke enthusiast will have variations to suggest; but hard choices have to be made and these are entirely defensible ones. It is a well-judged selection informed by a persuasive interpretation of Burke.

British politics and constitutional issues are covered by speeches and published letters while Burke was MP for Bristol, together with a speech opposing reform of the House of Commons. The speech on Conciliation and the *Letter to the Sheriffs of Bristol* deal with the American crisis. Trade with Ireland was a major concern of Burke in his Bristol years. Otherwise, the Irish coverage here is confined to a letter to his son Richard in 1792, who was then acting as agent for the Catholic Committee. In place of the *Reflections*, the reader gets two pieces on France: a letter to Charles-Jean-Francois Depont, *Picky Pokey* to the Burke family, giving Burke's early reactions to French events, and the rather dense *Preface to Brissot's Address to His Constituents*, conveying his horror at what was happening by 1794. India is better represented than is conventional in anthologies. As well as the speech on Fox's Bill, there are two small bits of the four-day opening of the Hastings's trial in 1788 and three personal letters.

For Bromwich there is an underlying consistency in the way in which Burke approached these very diverse issues. He sets this out in his Introduction, where he states that Burke can never be pigeon-holed as either a radical or a conservative. He was neither of the left nor of the right, although Bromwich inclines him emphatically more to the very moderate left than to the right. To describe him as 'the founder of modern conservatism' is simply to commit an 'error'. Nor is Bromwich much interested in placing him in a Christian natural law tradition. Burke steered a course between extremes: he rejected 'despotism' on the one hand and 'innovation' on the other, both of which were enemies to liberty. Liberty depended on balance that was to be preserved by checks and restraints. When the balance tilted to one side or the other it must be adjusted by appropriate reform. Reform was not at all the same thing as innovation, still less revolution. It must operate within the complex fabrics of actual social and political life.

In contemporary terms Bromwich insists that Burke was always a Whig, even if in the turmoil of his last years he became 'the last of the old Whigs'. Bromwich has, however, compiled his anthology in the belief that Burke does not belong exclusively to the eighteenth century. Nineteenth-century liberals trying to maintain their concepts of liberty in the face of an emerging mass democracy found much to interest them in Burke. Bromwich suggests that those of us who are concerned at the political effects of mass consumerism manipulated by unaccountable economic power should also read Burke attentively.

Of the three concepts chosen for the title of this collection, Bromwich's understanding of what Burke meant by 'liberty' and 'reform' are clearly expounded in his introduction. The texts that follow give the reader much material against which to test Bromwich's interpretations. 'Empire', put first no doubt for good reasons, proves more elusive. What Burke may have meant by it is not self-evident and Bromwich does not have much to say on that, although there are interesting indications in the texts.

For those that he had most admired during his political life, Burke wrote in the 'Letter to a Noble Lord', liberty had been 'a liberty inseparable from order, from virtue, from morals, and from religion' (p. 476). It flourished in a particular context and in the conditions appropriate to that context. It is not, he told Charles Depont, 'solitary, unconnected, individual selfish liberty, as if every man was to regulate the whole of his conduct by his own will. The liberty I mean is **social** freedom' (p. 405). Liberty certainly cannot be enjoyed at the expense of others. Irish Protestants might think that the penal laws were the safeguard of their liberty, but liberty based on 'penalties', 'incapacities', 'exclusion and proscription' imposed on four-fifths of the Irish population was indistinguishable from 'the most shocking kind of servitude' (p. 421).

Liberty and claims to rights stated in absolute terms and applied indiscriminately were of course totally incompatible, as Burke argued at length in the 'Reflections'. The French Revolution was 'not less fatal to liberty than to government' (p. 443). Yet liberty was still a matter of right. 'It is not the reward of our merit, or the acquisition of our industry. It is our inheritance. It is the birthright of our species. We cannot forfeit our right to it, but by what forfeits our title to the privileges of our kind' (p. 405). 'Liberty is a good to be improved' and, using due caution, 'it ought to be the constant aim of every wise pubic counsel' to devise means to limit restraints on liberty. These words were written with the people of the American colonies in mind, a people who were totally imbued with 'the high spirit of free dependencies' (pp. 170-1). Attempts to cramp their liberty were both unjustified and wholly impractical.

Making adjustments to enlarge liberty in response to the sense of the public was the duty of those entrusted with political power. They should therefore be reformers. To reform was not, however, to yield to public pressure or to introduce indiscriminate change. In the *Letter to a Noble Lord* Burke used his Economical Reform programme as an exemplary case of what reform should be. 'I had a people to gratify, but not to inflame, or to mislead' (p. 481). 'It was my aim to give the people the substance of what I knew they desired, and what I thought was right whether they desired it or not, before it had been modified for them into senseless petitions' (p. 479). The reforming statesman in the British context was thus likely to be a member of an elected legislature, accountable to a wider public but not under its direct mandate, as Burke famously told the electors of Bristol in 1774 (p. 55).

Reform and indeed all statecraft must be guided by a wisdom that is both practical and sees beyond the immediate. Government, as Burke wrote in the *Reflections*, is 'a contrivance of human wisdom to provide for human **wants**'. While not engaging with *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*, Bromwich rejects any idea that Burke saw society primarily in economic terms. 'Nothing would have repelled Burke more than the idea that the market runs society.' That is surely right. Even so, well constituted and properly functioning systems of government throughout the world, certainly including India, were marked by the prosperity of their populations. Britain's eminence rested on her 'constitution and commerce' (p. 46). Burke applied himself unremittingly in his early parliamentary career to the promotion of commerce. But government was about much more than that. If liberty was inseparable from order, from virtue, from morals, and from religion' (p. 476), governments must sustain an order that enable men to cultivate virtue, morals and religion. To do this required a profound understanding of the nature of the political order within which one attempted to exercise power. The British constitution, like any other constitution, had been 'made by the peculiar circumstances, occasions, tempers, dispositions and moral, civil, and social habitudes of the people, which disclose themselves only in a long space of time' (p. 274). The prudent statesman must be fully acquainted with these things, and even then he should 'dare to be fearful' (p. 414). Reform might be necessary, but it was never to be undertaken lightly.

Statesmen must therefore be guided by a strong sense of the practical and by a highly developed insight into the needs and conditions of particular societies. But government also involved the application of moral principles. Bromwich points out the potential for conflict within Burke's thought between a 'contextualist view of morals' and a morality derived from universal principles of natural law. He recognises too that the strongest statements about natural law come in the speeches against Hastings, particularly in a part of the opening address of 1788 that is not included in these selections. It is thus with 'empire' that Burke's moral beliefs come most clearly into focus.

How did Burke conceive of an empire that included Ireland, the North American and West Indian colonies, and the provinces that had recently passed into the control of the East India Company? He was unusually quick to see these very different territories as constituting a single British empire, but he insisted that 'we should conform our government to the character and circumstances of the several people who composed this mighty and strangely diversified mass' (p. 168). Uniformity could not be imposed upon them. There was, however, one inescapable common bond of empire and that was the supremacy of the British legislature. He thought that the American colonies had been provoked into rejecting British sovereignty by the crass incompetence of British ministers, but he viewed the prospect of American independence with a sad

resignation. The best that he could say was that he preferred 'independency without war to independency with it' (p. 176). He was thoroughly uneasy about Irish legislative independence after 1782. The East India Company must be accountable to parliament because it derived its 'trust' from parliament, and parliament 'alone is capable of comprehending the magnitude' of governing India' (p. 291).

For Burke the maintenance of British sovereignty over the empire was not, as it was to be for later generations of imperial rulers, the essential guarantee for the security of metropolitan economic and strategic interests. He did accept that Britain could legitimately derive wealth and power from a properly conducted empire, but he invested empire with much higher purposes. His model of empire was Cicero's ideal for Rome, a protectorate over subordinate provinces, each largely autonomous and governed in the way that was appropriate to it, but subordinate to Britain so that Britain could ensure that justice prevailed throughout the whole. In America this meant protecting the established liberties of the colonies and reconciling conflicts of interest between them and with Britain. In Ireland it meant safeguarding the legitimate rights of the Irish parliament and established church, while ameliorating the condition of the Catholics and bringing them into political life. In India it meant ensuring that India was governed by the laws and usages of its own peoples and that British abuses were curbed and punished.

For Burke empire was a God-given trust to Britain. Even in the *Letter to the Sheriffs of Bristol* with its strong statement of government as shaped by human wants, he wrote of 'the comprehensive dominion which the Divine Providence had put into our hands' (p. 168). References to the providential origins of empire become much more insistent in the Hastings's prosecution. He wrote, for instance, of that 'astonishing dispensation of providence by which we acquired Dominion where nature had almost forbid intercourse'. It followed therefore that the justice that Britain was required to administer throughout the world emanated from God. Justice would in most circumstances take the form of local law adapted to local circumstances, but where the local legal authority had manifestly acted against justice, as the Irish parliament had done with the penal laws, or where Burke believed that local law was being grossly misinterpreted to justify injustice, as in British India, Burke resoundingly proclaimed the authority of a divine law binding on all humanity. 'We are all born in subjection, all born equally high and low, governors and governed, in subjection to one great, immutable, pre-existent law, ... out of which we cannot stir.' He therefore impeached Hastings 'in the name, and by virtue, of those eternal laws of justice, which he has violated' and 'in the name of human nature itself' (p. 400).

Thus the prominence that Bromwich gives to 'empire' in the title of his anthology seems to be fully justified. When dealing with Europe, even with France convulsed by revolution, Burke could advocate cautious, meliorative, Whig policies of reform to preserve or marginally enhance the enjoyment of liberties deeply embedded in existing societies. Confronted by the phenomenon, which Europeans had not experienced since the Spanish irruptions into America, of huge alien populations suddenly brought under European rule, Burke rose to the occasion by expounding a theory of universal justice based on a common humanity. Whatever else that may have been, it was hardly old Whiggery any more than it was conservatism.

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