

*Edmund Burke: Defending Our Inheritance*



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Defining Conservatism Series

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*"There's all them Frenchy devils over the Channel yonder a-murderin' their king and nobility, and Mr. Pitt and Mr. Fox and Mr. Burke a-fightin' and a-wranglin' between them, if we Englishmen should 'low them to go on in their ungodly way. 'Let 'em murder!' says Mr. Pitt. 'Stop 'em!' says Mr. Burke." <sup>1</sup>*

At the time Baroness Orczy's fictional protagonist, the Scarlet Pimpernel was gallantly rescuing members of the French nobility from the guillotine, Edmund Burke was inveighing in the British Parliament against the principles of the French Revolution, even urging war to prevent their spread.

The French Revolutionaries were engaged in wholesale slaughter of their political enemies in the name of abstract principles like equality. They stood for the belief that society could be remade from the ground up if all vestiges of the past were removed and all political power could be wielded by the state, ostensibly for the common good. The guiding mind of these revolutionaries was Jean-Jacques Rousseau who believed that in a fictional state of nature all men would have lived amicably with perfect freedom and that it was only social constraints that were keeping them from achieving this potential now. Rousseau and the later revolutionists, "asserted the 'right' to be free from any authority that did not emanate from the State."<sup>2</sup> This meant, in practice, that some would be "forced to be free"<sup>3</sup> as the French Revolutionary terror made clear.

As Bruce Frohnen noted, "According to Burke, the British must defeat the maxims of the French revolutionaries" because "[t]hese maxims are evil and they will spread if allowed to exist. 'To root out these maxims, and the examples that support them, is a wise object of years of war. This is that war. This is that moral war.'"<sup>4</sup> Russell Kirk, perhaps the greatest modern exponent of Burke's thought, pointed out:

Of all men of his time, Burke was the most vehemently opposed to any compromise with Jacobinism. He would have chosen the guillotine rather than submission-or, as he put it, death with the sword in hand. He broke with friends and party, sacrificing reputation and risking bankruptcy, rather than countenance the least concession to the "peace" faction in England.<sup>5</sup>

In fact, Kirk notes: "That Jacobinism never seized upon Britain was the accomplishment, in considerable part, of Burke's eloquence."<sup>6</sup>

Burke accomplished much more than galvanizing opposition to the French Revolution, however. Indeed, he is widely considered the "founder of conservatism."<sup>7</sup> Rod Preece wrote, "Burke is for anglophone conservatives, the philosopher who best expresses their disposition and simultaneously applauds the tradition which they conserve."<sup>8</sup> This is in part because "[w]hen Burke's pen touched paper, no matter how mundane his subject, something magical happened."<sup>9</sup> More than style, though, the content of Burke's thought makes him endlessly relevant to modern conservatism.

Edmund Burke was born in Dublin in 1792. He was educated at Trinity College, Dublin and published an important work on aesthetics in 1756. For three decades, he worked on the Annual Register. He became a Member of Parliament a decade later and distinguished himself with attacks on the government's policy in America and Ireland. Indeed, his principled stance on Irish policy resulted in a subsequent electoral loss. His remarkable Letter to the Electors of Bristol was written at this point in his career. It powerfully makes the case for a political representative's duty to do right even when his course might be at odds with the immediate wishes of constituents.<sup>10</sup>

His parliamentary service (he subsequently represented another borough) was also distinguished by his tireless effort to secure the impeachment of Warren Hastings, the royal governor of India, whom Burke believed had abused his office.<sup>11</sup> In 1790, he published his most famous, Reflections on the Revolution in France. His opposition to the principles of the French Revolution led to a break with his own party. He retired from Parliament in 1794, to be replaced by his son who died tragically only a few months later. Burke himself passed away July 9, 1797.<sup>12</sup>

It is not easy to write about Edmund Burke because of the heroic scope of his life and accomplishments. More space than this essay provides would be needed to explain all the reasons that more than 200 years after his death, Burke continues to exercise a powerful influence on political thought. Even so, two major themes in Burke's thought stand out: his vociferous opposition to political ideologies and his championship of inherited rights and institutions.

### **"Armed Doctrines" of Ideology**

As to the first, Francis Canavan notes: "For Burke, the constitution and government of society could never be . . . a deduction from a few abstract principles of 'natural right,' i.e., the rights that the individual enjoyed in an original state of nature."<sup>13</sup> An ideologue seeks to impose on society and government an unvarying formula that is presented as the answer to every problem no matter how complicated. Ideology is hostile to reliance on experience and political compromise. It is concerned with purity of principle.

The French revolutionary ideology (and later manifestations such as Bolshevism) called for an end to all distinctions and to the units of society that perpetuated distinction such as religion and family. This was to be done in the name of putting every individual on the same level, again for the sake of equality.

Burke's philosophy was the negation of ideology, which he called "armed doctrines." He decried the French Revolutionaries who, rather than approaching solutions to problems of the state with "due caution," destroyed the state only to replace it with a fierce system based on application of abstract theories like absolute equality. Summarizing Burke, Professor Frohnen notes: "The French revolutionaries were vicious because they destroyed their nation in pursuit of a corrupt, utopian vision."<sup>14</sup> They were, in Burke's words, like "children of their country who are prompt rashly to hack [their] aged parent in pieces, and put him into the kettle of magicians, in hopes that by their poisonous weeds, and wild incantations, they may regenerate the parental constitution, and renovate their father's life."<sup>15</sup>

### **The "Little Platoons" are Worth Preserving**

Standing in contrast to the ideologies of revolutionary France was what Burke described as "entailed inheritance derived to us from our forefathers, and to be transmitted to our posterity."<sup>16</sup> His opposition to

French ideology was meant to prevent the forced disinheritance that would surely result from an ideological restructuring of society. Burke was concerned the living "unmindful of what they have received from their ancestors, or of what is due to their posterity, should act as if they were the entire masters"; that they should ever think they possess the 'right' to destroy 'at their pleasure the whole original fabric of society.'"17

The inheritance Burke worked to preserve was a society whose liberty and order had developed organically, rather than from a top-down action of an all-powerful state committed to abstract principles. It arose from historical experience. To Burke, society is "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."<sup>18</sup>

The most important factors in securing a free inheritance were autonomous social institutions, like the family, in which individuals could meaningfully participate in their own government. "To be attached to the subdivision, to love the little platoon we belong to in society is the first principle (the germ as it were) of public affections. It is the first link in the series by which we proceed toward a love of our country and to mankind."<sup>19</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the philosopher of the Revolution Burke opposed, reversed this order. Says Professor Frohnen: "Rousseau was a bad man, according to Burke, because he claimed to love the human race but could not love his own offspring; he sent them to a foundling home, showing himself to be less human than the bear that instinctively licks and cares for her young."<sup>20</sup>

These "little platoons" developed the characteristics necessary to a free social order. In their absence, a controlling state would necessarily step in to impose order. "Men qualify for freedom in exact proportion to their disposition to put moral chains upon their own appetites. Society cannot exist unless a controlling power is put somewhere on will and appetite, and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without."<sup>21</sup>

In an early scene in *Ivanhoe*, Sir Walter Scott (himself an admirer of Burke) introduced the "disinherited knight" whose emblem, emblazoned on a shield, is an uprooted tree.<sup>22</sup> Through the action of the novel, the knight is able to reclaim his patrimony through efforts of valor.

In many ways, the challenge for conservatives today is similarly to reclaim an inheritance that is in danger of being lost in the face of sustained ideological assaults. These assaults come from, among others, those who cannot abide the fact that not all family forms are created equal and who are willing to do away with the natural family in order to put the weight of government behind the idea that any adult relationship is as good as any other. As Russell Kirk points out: "'Parisian philosophers' of two centuries gone live on as today's self-proclaimed 'intellectuals,' with their incessant talk of 'compassion' and their advocacy, among other things, of the inalienable right to expand the empire of unnatural vices."<sup>23</sup>

In this face of our current revolutionary attacks, the conservative's task is one of preservation and restoration. In fulfilling these responsibilities, Burke remains preeminent. His writings and speeches help identify not only the ideological threat but also help us appreciate the "little platoons" and other inherited institutions that are worth preserving. His example of grim determination in holding back the ideological onslaught of his time is also an encouragement to those who feel their "time is out of joint."<sup>24</sup>

This is why we will return to Edmund Burke, again and again.

## **Selected Resources and Bibliography:**

THE WORKS OF EDMUND BURKE (9 volumes, 1839)

EDMUND BURKE, REFLECTIONS ON THE REVOLUTION IN FRANCE (1790)

THE BEST OF BURKE: SELECTED WRITINGS AND SPEECHES (comp. Peter J. Stanlis 1999)

SELECT WORKS OF EDMUND BURKE: THE LETTERS ON A REGICIDE PEACE (1999)

RUSSELL KIRK, EDMUND BURKE: A GENIUS RECONSIDERED (1967)

Russell Kirk, Edmund Burke and the Constitution THE INTERCOLLEGIATE REVIEW 3 (Winter 1985-1986)

RUSSELL KIRK, THE CONSERVATIVE MIND: FROM BURKE TO ELIOT (1997)

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## **Endnotes:**

<sup>1</sup> EMMUSKA ORCZY, THE SCARLET PIMPERNEL 20 (2004).

<sup>2</sup> Richard W. Garnett, *Taking Pierce Seriously: The Family, Religious Education, and Harm to Children* 76 NOTRE DAME L. REV. 109, 144 (2000).

<sup>3</sup> Robert Nisbet, *The Pursuit of Equality* PUBLIC INTEREST 103 (Spring 1974).

<sup>4</sup> Bruce P. Frohnen, *Burkean Virtue and the Conservative Good Life* 23 PERSPECTIVES ON POLITICAL SCIENCE 4 (Winter 1994).

<sup>5</sup> Russell Kirk, *Three Pillars of Order: Edmund Burke, Samuel Johnson, Adam Smith* MODERN AGE 226, 228 (Summer 1981).

<sup>6</sup> Russell Kirk, *Why Edmund Burke is Studied* MODERN AGE 237, 238 (Summer/Fall 1986).

<sup>7</sup> Francis Canavan, *The Founder of Conservatism* MODERN AGE 330 (Summer/Fall 1982); George W. Carey, *The Conservative Mission and Progressive Ideology* MODERN AGE 14 (Winter 2000).

<sup>8</sup> Rod Preece, *On the Concept of Conservatism* MODERN AGE 189, 193 (Spring 1982).

<sup>9</sup> Peter J. Stanlis, *Edmund Burke, the Perennial Political Philosopher* MODERN AGE 325, 328 (Summer/Fall 1982).

<sup>10</sup> *Biographical Note* in EDMUND BURKE, REFLECTIONS ON THE REVOLUTION IN FRANCE 194 (Penguin Classics edition 1986, originally published 1790).

<sup>11</sup> John T. Noonan, Jr., *The Bribery of Warren Hastings* 10 HOFSTRA LAW REVIEW 1073 (1982).

<sup>12</sup> *Biographical Note* in EDMUND BURKE, REFLECTIONS ON THE REVOLUTION IN FRANCE 194 (Penguin Classics edition 1986, originally published 1790).

<sup>13</sup> Francis Canavan, *The Founder of Conservatism* MODERN AGE 330 (Summer/Fall 1982). Professor Canavan notes further: "The current version of this ideology is the American Civil Liberties Union's conception of 'constitutional rights.'"

<sup>14</sup> Bruce P. Frohnen, *Burkean Virtue and the Conservative Good Life* 23 PERSPECTIVES ON POLITICAL SCIENCE 4, 10 (Winter 1994).

<sup>15</sup>EDMUND BURKE, REFLECTIONS ON THE REVOLUTION IN FRANCE 194 (Penguin Classics edition 1986, originally published 1790).

<sup>16</sup>EDMUND BURKE, REFLECTIONS ON THE REVOLUTION IN FRANCE 119 (Penguin Classics edition 1986, originally published 1790).

<sup>17</sup>George W. Carey, *The Conservative Mission and Progressive Ideology* MODERN AGE 14, 17 (Winter 2000).

<sup>18</sup>EDMUND BURKE, REFLECTIONS ON THE REVOLUTION IN FRANCE 194-195 (Penguin Classics edition 1986, originally published 1790).

<sup>19</sup>EDMUND BURKE, REFLECTIONS ON THE REVOLUTION IN FRANCE 135 (Penguin Classics edition 1986, originally published 1790).

<sup>20</sup>Bruce P. Frohnen, *Burkean Virtue and the Conservative Good Life* 23 PERSPECTIVES ON POLITICAL SCIENCE 4, 10 (Winter 1994).

<sup>21</sup>Quoted in John O'Sullivan, *The Moral Consequences of Impatience* in THE BETRAYAL OF LIBERALISM 211 (Hilton Kramer & Roger Kimball 1999).

<sup>22</sup>SIR WALTER SCOTT, IVANHOE (1962).

<sup>23</sup>Russell Kirk, *Why Edmund Burke is Studied* MODERN AGE 237, 243 (Summer/Fall 1986).

<sup>24</sup>HAMLET, act I, scene v, line 188.