

Richard Bourke, *Empire and Revolution: the political life of Edmund Burke* (Princeton University Press 2015). xxiii + 1001pp., 9 figs., 2 maps. Cardcovers, £24.00 [ISBN: 9780691175652]. **Reviewed 06.2018**

Reviewing Jesse Norman MP's 2013 biography of *Edmund Burke* (*Transactions* 132), William Evans described it as "a readable introduction", which it would be unfair to dismiss as "Burke Lite for Beginners". Such a tag could not even be contemplated with reference to the work presently under review, which is light neither in volume (weighing in at a thousand pages) nor in content. And Professor Bourke is certainly not writing for the beginner; Richard Bourke is a Professor of the History of Political Thought and from this fact may stem both the many strengths, and some significant weaknesses, of *Empire and Revolution*.

Political history frequently takes a back seat to political thought. The historical events are all there, but are frequently skimmed over, particularly in the earlier part of the book. Blink, and you are liable to miss for example a change of Ministry or a crucial campaign in the American War. The Eighteenth is never the easiest of Centuries and Professor Bourke does not make it any more accessible. A detailed chronology at the start of the volume makes only partial compensation.

As the sub-title makes clear, the author has aimed to produce not a pure biography but a *political* life. We learn nothing of Burke's marriage beyond the fact thereof, and his son Richard only assumes prominence when he embarks on a political career in his own right. Samuel Johnson and The Club, of which Burke was such an ornament, receive only passing mention. Much can be said both for and against biography of this sort; suffice it here to remark that the private and the public cannot always be neatly compartmentalised and that much more could usefully have been said of, for example, Burke's chronic indebtedness in youth and early middle-age, and consequent need for a seat in Parliament to avoid arrest whilst the Commons was in session.

Burke's connection with Bristol is adequately sketched, but for a fuller recent account, the reader should go to the relevant chapter of Poole's and Rogers' *Bristol from Below* (2017). Professor Bourke is at his best in his treatment of his hero's (I do not think the term is too strong) thought. We have here a veritable compendium of Burke's writings and speeches throughout his career, enriched by the commentary of a philosophical historian at the top of his game and at home not only with Burke's near contemporaries but with the Ancients and Medieval thinkers also.

A strong case is made for the consistency of the subject's approach throughout many political changes. The author does not shrink from the problem of squaring Burke's eulogy of the Glorious Revolution of 1688/89 and support for the American colonists, on the one hand, and his detestation of the French Revolution on the other. Burke, we are told, always upheld the right of subjects to resist tyrants. James II he saw as a tyrant, and he viewed George III and his ministers as tyrannically using the Americans. The government of Louis XVI, however, he saw as flawed but not tyrannous, and susceptible to organic change. It is possible to take issue with any or all of these positions, but if we accept Burke's views as honestly held, his character for consistency is established. Similarly, the condemnation of Warren Hastings' uprooting of traditional Indian institutions is seen as of a piece with that of the *Jacobins'* conduct in France.

The case is powerful, and well argued, but may not be the last word on the subject. Here again, too little weight is given to political exigencies. Might not the Whigs' taking up of the

crusade against Hastings in the 1780s be seen as grabbing the nearest stick to hand with which to beat Pitt's government (an attack deftly turned when Pitt himself agreed to the impeachment proceeding)? Might not even the anti-French revolutionary crusade derive from Burke's wish to put clear water between himself and Charles James Fox following George III's recovery in March 1789 and the consequent stalling of the Regency campaign? The debate will no doubt continue.

Burke has long been seen as *a-* if not *the-* English conservative thinker. It was not always thus. During the Nineteenth Century, he struck as many chords with party Liberals as with Conservatives, and Lord Salisbury (viewed by Maurice Cowling as "the giant of conservative doctrine") was distinctly cool. Burke's statue in Bristol was the gift of a scion of a noted Liberal (and dissenting) family.

Opinion shifted in the Twentieth Century, with Lord Coleraine in 1970 calling Burke "the first, as he remains the greatest, of conservatives". More recently, Jesse Norman appears to have seen Burke's "little platoons" as providing a valedictory background to the "Big Society" theme which was briefly peddled by the Cameronian Conservative Party.

It is Professor Bourke's crowning achievement to demonstrate the eclecticism of Burke's thinking, and of the influences thereon, who include John Locke and Adam Smith to name but two. Locke was certainly not a conservative; nor, *pace* Lady Thatcher's enthusiasm, was Smith.

But at the end of the day, conservative or no, Edmund Burke is undoubtedly a seminal figure, about whom Mr Norman has much to say and Professor Bourke much else. Keen Burkeans should read both.

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