How Burke Became Conservative

William Anthony Hay

Edmund Burke and the Invention of Modern Conservatism, 1830–1914
By Emily Jones
(Oxford University Press, 2017)

Noting the way reputations change over time provides a starting point for considering how the search for a usable past can lay a foundation for a political movement. Edmund Burke's eventual transformation into the founder of conservatism in the English-speaking world offers an intriguing example of that dynamic. In *Edmund Burke and the Invention of Modern Conservatism, 1830–1914,* Columbia University historian Emily Jones explores how the idea of "Burkean" conservatism—a philosophy upholding the authority of tradition; an organic, historical conception of society; and the need to defend order, religion, and property—emerged as developments in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries recast Burke's views in a particular form. Whereas Yale University's David Bromwich frames his recent intellectual biography around the question of what it meant to think like Burke in his own time, Jones asks what made it possible for later generations to claim him as the founder of conservatism.

Recognized first for his contributions to philosophy and aesthetics, Burke entered politics in 1756 as secretary to the Marquess of Rockingham. Although twice briefly prime minister, Rockingham spent most of his career in opposition, leading the successors to the Court Whigs who, after controlling the government for decades, had been marginalized by George III's accession to the throne. Burke's *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents* in 1770 justified principled cooperation as a party, distinct from self-interested faction, and scathingly attacked the king's use of patronage to build parliamentary support. He became the Rockingham Whigs' main spokesman in the House of Commons, and his role as opposition strategist continued after Rockingham died in 1782.

Far from defending established order, Burke routinely criticized what he considered the abuse of authority, from British policies toward the American colonies to the governing of Ireland and India. But for his spectacular break with Whig leader Charles James Fox over the French Revolution, he would stand among the forerunners to the nineteenth-century Liberal Party. Burke's attacks on royal patronage as "Old Corruption" and calls for economical government anticipated later radical demands. No contemporaries, including his great friend Samuel Johnson, considered Burke anything but a Whig.

Yet Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* in 1790 won plaudits from George III even as it opened a pamphlet war and separated him from longtime Whig allies. While the legacies of Fox and his bête noire, Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger, became rallying points for their respective adherents, Burke left no significant political followers to uphold his memory after his death in 1797. Neither party claimed him for its own. Tories found his views on Ireland, India, and America—indeed empire more broadly—problematic. His indictment of George III in *Present Discontents* raised another stumbling block. For their part, Whigs blamed Burke for splitting the party with a response to the French Revolution that they believed went too far and tainted them by association. Burke's rejection of parliamentary reform as a threat to the constitution also set him on the wrong side of what became a defining issue in the nineteenth century. After the 1832 Reform Act, Liberals and their supporters among the intelligentsia cast the eighteenth century as a bygone world lacking relevance to current problems. Their largely successful project made Burke and others who defended its constitutional and social order politically irrelevant.

To be sure, both Whigs and Tories recognized Burke's merits, but they respected him for different reasons and always with qualifications. Jones rightly points out that nobody in the early nineteenth century attempted to form a Burkean tradition from the disparate elements his legacy provided. Thomas Babington Macaulay proclaimed Burke the greatest man since John Milton, but that praise reflected a literary judgment that downplayed Burke's political opinions. Much later, Benjamin Disraeli also lauded Burke. Appreciating his turns of phrase and rhetorical force, however, did not mean accepting the arguments they reinforced. Burke offered several generations of British politicians what Jones calls "an inspiring example of a life in literature and politics" rather than a coherent theoretical guide.

Assessments of Burke for much of the nineteenth century stressed contradictory themes, especially when critics focused on the Irish background that set him apart from his English contemporaries. Peculiarities in his eloquence were thought to display an Irish flair. The liberal editor George Cornewall Lewis attributed to Burke both the "high degree of intellectual power we call *genius*" and wisdom, which he called "the power of judging when the intellectual and moral faculties are both in a sound state." John Morley, another influential liberal, echoed the point by insisting that Burke had the poet's heart along with the statesman's brain. Both enabled Burke to see what others missed or misperceived. Thus commentators cited *Reflections*—written before the revolution spiraled into regicide and the Reign of Terror—as evidence of Burke's capacity for foresight.

Burke's vehemence was sometimes counted as an Irish failing at odds with the phlegmatic temper Englishmen valued, but Matthew Arnold in 1864 saw it as enabling Burke to live by ideas, being "irresistibly carried, if so be it, by the current of thought to the opposite side of the question" from everyone else. His argument helped make Burke appreciated as a thinker and not merely a literary stylist. Passion, Morley insisted, "gave him a zeal for the welfare of others and a hatred of oppression." His defense of Indians, Americans, and Irish Catholics—along with the famous passage in the *Reflections* about Marie Antoinette—sprang not from abstract principle but from generous sympathy.

Vehemence could be equated to madness, a judgment drawing on Burke's reputation during his own day, but that framing resonated less and less over the latter half of the nineteenth century. Over time, Irish stereotypes no longer defined Burke in popular culture. Jones argues that a significant

reinterpretation located him instead within an established British political, literary, and intellectual canon. Between 1860 and 1880, a group of liberal writers grappling with mid-Victorian challenges rebutted old charges against Burke while asserting a consistency in his outlook that laid the basis for a broader reassessment later.

Jones notes the irony of liberals helping to frame Burke's reputation as a conservative. Liberal ideas from the 1820s and '30s had little to say about the emergence of mass politics or mass culture. With the 1867 Reform Act portending wider changes, readers increasingly concerned with the course of history associated Burke with a line of organic, developmental thought that made him both more consistent than previously allowed and more relevant to current debates.

Both sides in the debate over Irish home rule invoked Burke. Along with his Irish background, parallels from his arguments for conciliation with America in the 1770s made him a logical touchstone. Liberal prime minister William Gladstone spoke of Burke's writings as "a mine of gold for the political wisdom with which they are charged." He drew on them to emphasize the necessity of voluntary political ties to maintain the Union and the hard choice between home rule and coercion. Yet Liberals opposed to Gladstone's policy—the so-called Liberal Unionists—cited Burke to resist what they called a constitutional revolution. The legal theorist A. V. Dicey later drew on *Reflections* to cast home rule as a reckless gamble with unforeseeable results.

The split among Liberals over home rule in 1886, reinforced by a failed second attempt to pass the measure in 1893, seemed to parallel Burke's rupture with Fox over the French Revolution. Liberal Unionists successfully claimed Burke rhetorically and followed his example in breaking with their own party on a matter of principle. Just as the Duke of Portland and other Whigs backed Pitt in the 1790s, Liberal Unionists joined Conservatives led by Lord Salisbury. As Jones argues, they divorced Burke from Liberal positions and carried him across the political aisle.

Interestingly Conservatives themselves—rather than the Liberal Unionists who joined their opposition to Gladstone's measure—did not much cite Burke during the home rule debates. Salisbury, a formidable man of letters whose writings reward attention, seems not to have taken Burke for a guide. Arthur James Balfour, Salisbury's nephew and successor as prime minister, who published serious work on philosophy, did not claim him either. Making Burke the founder of modern conservatism took other changes that gained force after 1900.

In the twentieth century, British Conservatives began constructing their own tradition of cautious reform and organic national development to consolidate the cross-class base they had acquired in recent decades. Successive challenges, including disestablishment of the Anglican Church in Wales and efforts to curb the House of Lords' powers, framed questions to which Burke offered answers. Having already been recast as a consistent thinker, he became increasingly useful as a source of arguments and a totem for a Conservative Party striving to go beyond mere reaction. Keeping things as they were would not be enough.

The Conservatives' landslide defeat in 1906 increased the pace of reassessment. In 1912, Salisbury's younger son, Lord Hugh Cecil, published the well-received volume *Conservatism,* which set opposition to revolutionary principles first encountered during the 1790s as the basis of the party's tenets. Downplaying Pitt, Cecil argued that Burke gave Conservatives their "first and perhaps greatest teacher," who combined support for preservative reforms to institutions with attacks on the folly of sweeping change. An emerging consensus took the French Revolu-

tion as the starting point for the Conservative Party's ideas and framed current differences as a continuation of the struggle between Burkeans and Jacobins. Other works, notably Geoffrey Butler's *The Tory Tradition*, claimed Burke for a Conservative lineage extending from the early nineteenth century through Disraeli and Salisbury. Never a Tory in his own day, Burke became a Conservative.

Claiming Burke as a Conservative worked partly because he had long been a recognized, if not iconic, figure in British letters. Jones charts Burke's place in school curricula and examination syllabuses, as well as the publishing history of his writings, to show how familiar he would have been to the general public. If changes in his reputation made him easier to claim by 1900, Burke's standing among the educated classes and autodidacts made him worth claiming. References to a figure whom readers knew well—including female readers whose schooling emphasized literature over politics—provided a shorthand for larger arguments.

Jones focuses on Burke's role in British politics up to 1914. Her dating of Burke's appropriation by British Conservatives to a period before the Russian Revolution makes an important point. The Burkean turn in British politics involved far more than seeing Bolshevism as a replay of events in France from 1789. It spoke to conditions at home more than dangers abroad. Social and cultural changes in the later nineteenth century made Burke relevant to Liberals and Conservatives in a way that he had not been closer to his own time. If many Liberals ultimately broke with Burke's constitutional traditionalism and demurred from his view of the French Revolution, other Liberals and the Conservatives they ultimately joined found those facets of his thought useful in addressing their own present discontents.

Burke, then, did not create modern conservatism. But his ideas gave others valuable material for constructing foundations to uphold a faltering Conservative Party in Britain and to frame a more comprehensive conservatism that went beyond the irritable mental gestures of aging reactionaries. Jones's fine volume sets that process into the context of politics and ideas over the "long 19th century" that ended in 1914. Along with Drew Maciag's *Edmund Burke in America*, her book demonstrates how their subject's reputation changed over time. Other scholars in recent decades have done much to reveal the complexity of Burke's thought within the context of its eighteenth-century time and place. Jones and Maciag show that Burke has much to offer readers grappling with their own situations. Earlier generations certainly found that to be the case.

William Anthony Hay *is an associate professor of history at Mississippi State University and author of* Lord Liverpool: A Political Life.