

### A GREAT POLITICAL PHILOSOPHER.\*

Edmund Burke was the first of the great men who contributed to England's greatness in the eighteenth century to become known to me through literary channels. As a boy at school I caught the spell of his eloquence through study in class of his speech on the impeachment of Warren Hastings and his panegyrics on Sheridan and Marie Antoinette. Contemporaneously while browsing about my father's library I came upon Burke's *Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, as published in Charles Knight's *Half-Hours with the Best Authors*. So far as this essay investigates the disparate elements which serve to divorce the emotion of the sublime from that of the beautiful—an undertaking in psychology wherein Burke anticipates to some extent Croce's theory of Beauty—it was naturally over my head, but it dated the beginning of an appreciation of his literary quality that led me to realize from a larger knowledge later on in life that De Quincey was not far astray when he said that Burke was "the supreme writer of his century."

There is a strain of irony in the fact that while Burke in his youth declined to enter the profession of the law and in maturer years held a poor opinion of the usefulness of lawyers in general in State affairs, the activities of his capacious mind were almost wholly exercised within the orbit of public law. Then again—exhibiting the inconsistency that sometimes caused his mental footsteps to slide—he could speak of the law as "one of the first and noblest of sciences" and yet could pour contempt on the methods of procedure in the courts of his day. But in contemplating loss or gain to the Bar by his failure to join it, we should not forget that he was the first to distinguish between the legal right of the British Parliament to tax the colonies and the constitutional right of the colonies to resist such taxation. He seems to have envisaged the difference, now fully recognized, between Sovereignty in a unicellular State, such as Great Britain, and that in a multicellular State, such as the British Empire.

Revealed as a political philosopher both in his public speeches and written word Burke has been accorded by men of his own time and later the praise of super-excellence. His rare gifts were acclaimed by friend and foe alike during his life. Chatham, Fox and

\*Edmund Burke: A Biography. By Rev. Robert H. Murray, Litt.D. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1931. Price \$5.00.

Canning amongst the parliamentarians, Johnson, Goldsmith, Gibbon and Horace Walpole amongst the literary men of his day, saw to it that Fame should not grudge him one of her fairest wreaths; while in our own day Lord Morley—who surely possessed what Burke himself called “the cold neutrality of an impartial judge”—appraises his pronouncements in favour of the American colonists in these words: “It is no exaggeration to say that they compose the most perfect manual in our literature, or in any literature, for one who approaches the study of public affairs, whether for knowledge or for practice.”<sup>1</sup> To balance this high tribute, and to prove Morley’s habit of judging with discretion, reference may be directed to his comments on Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France*.<sup>2</sup> We quote a passage: “The simple truth is that Burke did not know enough of the subject about which he was writing. When he said, for instance, that the French before 1789 possessed all the elements of a constitution that might be made nearly as good as could be wished, he said what many of his contemporaries knew, and what all subsequent investigation and meditation have proved, to be recklessly ill-considered and untrue.”

Burke has been read by the learned in all countries, and his works have found many critics and commentators in England and abroad. In Germany his essay on *The Sublime and The Beautiful* gave food for thought to Kant and Lessing in the field of aesthetics; while Savigny was obviously influenced by Burke in applying the historical method to Jurisprudence. In France Montalembert declared him to be on a footing with Shakespeare as an example of a great Englishman, while Étienne Dumont thinks that his *Reflections* may have saved Europe when France was seething in the cauldron of misrule.

Burke was not a politician as we have come to know the meaning of the word; his nobility of mind unfitted him for success in the dubious practices of partisanship. Hence it is not surprising that he never obtained cabinet rank in an age when dissimulation was accounted a virtue in public life. Possibly, too, he was not a statesman in that he failed to understand that one must be content to work in company with inferior minds in carrying on government. It was difficult for him to see that when the other fellow differed from his views the other fellow might be right. And yet he found it possible to correct his opinions, but always independently of his critics. He practically espoused Locke’s theory of government in his *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents* (1770), but we find them

<sup>1</sup> English Men of Letters Series: Burke. By John Morley, 1879, p. 81.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162.

disavowed in his *Reflections on the French Revolution* (1790) where he expounds a new theory of government and a new method of dealing with social problems. In all Burke's later writings we discover Democracy to be anathema to him, because with the multitude "the lust of selfish will" displaces moral standards as the touchstone of sound government. A patriotic aristocracy, he thinks, will best achieve the good of the people at large. The multitude must be ruled because they cannot rule themselves. In society political rights were artificial in their origin; 'natural rights' were a fond thing, vainly invented by sentimentalists. In politics metaphysical theories were useless; what practice has demonstrated as workable is the only thing worthy to be built into the structure of government. Thus he reveals himself as a pragmatist.

All this and more will be discovered by a sedulous reading of Burke's speeches and writings; and one who performs his duty in that behalf will reach the conclusion that Burke's true and proper fame is that of a political philosopher rather than that of a politician or statesman in action. This view finds countenance in Hazlitt's estimate of his quality, and Hazlitt was moved to speak thus of him:

The truth is that he was out of his place in the House of Commons; he was eminently qualified to shine as a man of genius, as the instructor of mankind, as the brightest luminary of his age; but he had nothing in common with that motley crew of knights, citizens and burgesses. He could not be said to be "native and endued unto that element." He was above it.

In England excellent biographies of the great man have been written by Sir James Prior and Thomas Macknight as well as by Lord Morley, but neither taken singly nor in the mass do they make Dr. Murray's book a superfluous thing. Its four hundred pages present not only an adequate aperçu of the life history and qualities of the man himself, but also a critical analysis of his political ideas as related to twentieth century statecraft. In considering the value of these ideas Dr. Murray says:

He, more than any man, taught the world what is, in some respects, the greatest political discovery made since the fall of the Ancient World—the discovery of the truth that there are no abstract rules nor general laws in politics; that everything is growth, everything gradual, everything dependent, not on laws and constitutions suddenly imposed upon a people, but upon the nature of man as modified by character, circumstance and custom which the particular people have inherited. As Einstein is the discoverer of physical relativity, so Burke is the discoverer of the truth of political relativity . . . Democracy likes to ignore history and to suppose that men are all alike. But they are not; and the democratic catastrophies which are written all over the map of Europe and Asia to-day are there to teach it—if it will yet learn and save itself—the great lesson of Edmund Burke.

We leave the study of Dr. Murray's thoughtful work with the impression that Burke's latest biographer would not be offended if the political ideas expounded by the philosopher were more active than they are in modern constitutions. But Democracy is with us now, and apparently its doctrines will prevail unless and until they are more largely discredited by the march of events. Still we must not forget that order functions as the sheet-anchor of the constitution in democratic as well as in aristocratic or autocratic communities; and Burke's counsel that so far as existing forms of order are workable they ought not to be scrapped at the bidding of the idealist avid of change no matter where it leads, can never be safely disregarded.

Ottawa.

CHARLES MORSE.

