

THE BICENTENARY OF BURKE.

History records a long and bitter antagonism between the Irish and English peoples. It dates from the time when a certain king of Leinster—repeating the amorous enterprise of Paris against the marital rights of Menelaus—carried off the wife of the Chieftain of Breffni and sought the aid of the first Angevin king of England in countering the wrath of the injured husband. Since then many things have happened to intensify the antagonism, not the least of them lying in the fact that some of the English immigrants took on Irish ways and Irish thought. It was said of the great Norman family of the Geraldines that they became *Hibernicis ipsis Hibernior*. Lord Thomas Fitzgerald, ('Silken Thomas') in his desperate revolt against Henry VIII immensely augmented the grudge between the two peoples that only great constitutional changes in our time are expected to expunge. And yet England was served in a more splendid way by two men born on Irish soil (to wit, in Dublin) than by her own sons in a great epoch of her modern history. In the eighteenth century Edmund Burke contended so valorously, with tongue and pen, for the maintenance of the institutions of his adopted country when threatened by the undermining influences of the French Revolution that an atmosphere of ineluctable hostility to the French Republic was created in England, which eventuated in a war that Burke's fellow-countryman, the Duke of Wellington, was able to bring to a triumphant conclusion in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. No wiser words than Burke's on the relations between his native and his adopted country were ever uttered: "England and Ireland may flourish together. The world is large enough for us both. Let it be our care not to make ourselves too little for it."

Some obscurity has surrounded the date of birth of Edmund Burke, but it is now generally accepted as the twelfth of January, 1729. He was the son of Richard Burke, a Dublin attorney. Although his father was an adherent of the Church of Ireland as by law established, his mother was a Roman Catholic. Edmund was reared in the faith professed by his father, but he ever regarded his mother's co-religionists with sympathy and esteem. His work for their emancipation from the restraints of the law was as sincere

and as steadfast as the efforts that marked his whole public career to defend the integrity of the English constitution as it stood in his time.

Although Burke's course at Trinity College, Dublin, was notable rather for its disregard of the subjects on the curriculum than for that proficiency in them which made for high academical honours, the desultoriness of his studies did not mean that his mind was not being suitably trained for the great place in public life that he was subsequently to attain. While he gave no sign of scholarship in Greek literature, his speeches and writings show that at college he must have acquired an intimate knowledge of the Latin poets Vergil, Horace and Ovid; and Sir Philip Francis, speaking of Burke after he had entered public life, declared that "Cicero was the model on which he laboured to form his own character in eloquence, in ethics and philosophy." He confessed to four enthusiasms during his college days, a *furor mathematicus* (meaning thereby natural philosophy), a *furor logicus*, a *furor historicus* and a *furor poeticus*. The first three of these prepossessions yielded him profit in later life but the fourth bewrayed his youth into a long and fruitless dalliance with the thankless muse. He loved the poets—more particularly Milton—but he never knew himself to sing, and build the lofty rhyme.

After he had taken his degree as a bachelor of arts at Trinity, he went to London in conformity with the wishes of his father to prepare for admission to the English Bar. In 1750 he was entered of the Middle Temple, but as he showed little inclination to proceed to his call his father summarily cut off his allowance and he was forced to turn to literary work as a means of subsistence. While his law reading seems to have been as desultory as his studies at Trinity there is no doubt that constitutional law had seriously engaged his attention. Montesquieu's *De l'Esprit des Loïs* had been published two years before Burke began his terms at the Middle Temple, and he repeatedly discloses his debt to that great treatise which initiated the comparative study of political institutions. Montesquieu is made the subject of one of Burke's most stately panegyrics in the *Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs*.

Although Burke never became a member of the Bar his reverence for the law was a conspicuous thing. An instance of this is afforded in the course of a reference to George Grenville during the famous speech on American Taxation: "He was bred to the law, which is, in my opinion, one of the first and noblest of human

sciences; a science which does more to quicken and invigorate the understanding than all other kinds of learning put together; but it is not apt, except in persons very happily born, to open and liberalise the mind exactly in the same proportion."

Six years after going to London, namely in 1756, Burke published his anonymous *Vindication of Natural Society*—a satire, or prose parody, upon Bolingbroke's argument for natural as against revealed religion, demonstrating that this same argument could be used with as great effect in favour of natural as against civil, or as Burke called it, 'artificial' society. So closely did the parody follow the method and manner of the fluent sciolist—who 'patronised Providence' to the disgust of Carlyle—that some very excellent and discerning critics mistook it for a posthumously printed production of Bolingbroke's own pen wherein he was forced to eat a prodigious dish of crow in recanting his former errors. Altogether it was a great performance for a young man of twenty-seven, and curiously enough the argument used to demonstrate the fallaciousness of Bolingbroke's views was that employed by Burke over and over again in later life, namely, that institutions approved by the collective wisdom of the ages should not be disturbed at the bidding of mere doctrinaires—'upstart theorists' he called them.

The *Vindication* was followed shortly afterwards by the publication of the *Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. Dr. Johnson regarded this essay as "an example of true criticism" but this opinion was not shared by all of Burke's contemporaries in England. On the continent, however, it had so great a value for Lessing—the German critic of whom George Saintsbury speaks as having "all due apparatus of technical scholarship considering his time"—that he made a translation of it. Modern art criticism in treating Burke's contribution to its field as more or less negligible overlooks the fact that he was the first among English writers to consider the purely psychological side of aesthetics—that is, the mental reaction to sense stimulation expressing itself in the emotions of beauty. Concerning this feature of Burke's treatment of his subject Lord Morley says: "To approach it on the psychological side at all was to make a distinct and remarkable advance in the method of the inquiry which he had taken in hand." During the year which saw him launching his bark upon the literary tide Burke took Miss Nugent, the daughter of a Bath physician, to wife—whom but to know was to love according to such excellent judges of the qualities of their sex

as Miss Burney and Hannah More. This responsibility, coupled with the cessation of help from his father, spurred him to unceasing labour with his pen. After one or two unimportant works in the fields of the drama and history had been published, Burke conceived the idea of establishing a periodical which would annually survey the history, politics, and literature of the times, and the idea found expression in the *Annual Register* which was first issued in 1759 from Dodsley's printing house in Pall Mall. Although the new literary venture only contributed £100 per annum to his exchequer the while he was connected with it, he found it profitable in the way of extending his acquaintance with people of affairs as well as with members of the literary group who made London famous in his day. He became intimate with Dr. Samuel Johnson, and, along with Sir Joshua Reynolds and Oliver Goldsmith, was one of the original members of 'The Literary Club' which owned Johnson as its primate. In speaking of Burke in this atmosphere one recalls Boswell's praise of the quality of Burke's conversation, and Johnson's rejoinder: "Yes, Sir; if a man were to go by chance at the same time with Burke under a shed to shun a shower, he would say—'this is an extraordinary man'."

But it was in the political and not the literary sphere that Burke knew himself best fitted for worth while achievement. Like his brilliant fellow-countryman of our day who said "My destiny is to educate London"—and did it—Burke conceived it to be his duty to lead the English mind of his time into a deeper knowledge of the excellence of English political institutions. A side door to public life was opened for him in 1761 when he became private secretary to William Gerard Hamilton, Chief Secretary for Ireland. Hamilton is known to fame as one who made a speech in a certain debate which outshone those of the elder Pitt, Fox, Grenville and Murray, but who was never again able to secure the attention of the House of Commons. Hamilton only held his post for two years, and when he returned to England in 1763 Burke accompanied him. In order to retain the services of so valuable an assistant at small expense to himself he managed to wangle a pension of £300 per annum from the Irish treasury for Burke; but the quarrel that was bound to ensue between two men so unequally associated happened within a year or so after the pension was secured, and Burke surrendered it—but not before paying Hamilton his respects with true Celtic warmth.

It was through the favour of the Whig peer, Lord Rockingham,

who was summoned by George III to form a government on the dismissal of Grenville from office in 1765, that Burke entered the main door of public life in England. Much against the will of the old Duke of Newcastle—whom G. M. Trevelyan calls “the greatest borough-monger England ever produced”—Rockingham made Burke his private secretary. Rockingham held office for a little over a year, but his tenure was long enough to enable Burke to enter the House of Commons in January 1766 as member for the borough of Wendover, a seat controlled by the Irish Peer, Lord Verney. This was indeed a triumph for a practically unknown man of early middle age, rich in intellect but destitute of means, whose laudable desire to use his abilities in the service of his adopted country was so misunderstood that he had been slightly spoken of as a mere Irish adventurer and a papist in disguise. But he nobly lived down all such slanders. What could be finer than the defence of his honesty of purpose when the Duke of Bedford attacked Pitt’s proposal to grant the old statesman who had served his country for thirty years a modest pension? It was contained in his *Letter to a Noble Lord*, which Lord Morley declares to be the “most splendid repartee in the English language”:

I was not made for a minion or a tool. As little did I follow the trade of winning the hearts by imposing on the understandings of the people. At every step of my progress in life, for in every step was I traversed and opposed, and at every turnpike I met, I was obliged to show my passport, and again and again to prove my sole title to the honour of being useful to my country, by a proof that I was not wholly unacquainted with its laws and the whole system of its interests both abroad and at home; otherwise no rank, no toleration even, for me.

Space will not permit us to speak with comprehensiveness of the tremendous part played by Burke in holding England true to her traditions and her best interests during his long public career. He fought a persistent and bitter fight against the coercion of the American colonies, and the corruption and general incapacity of Lord North’s long administration. His pamphlet on the *Causes of the Present Discontents* (1770), while designed as an apologia for the Rockingham Whigs, contrasting them with the Bedford and Grenville factions to the disparagement of the latter, was in reality a document of national importance presenting a forceful argument for the revival of genuine party government as against personal government attempted to be exercised by the King. His speeches on the Quebec Act (1774), American Taxation (1774) and on Conciliation with America (1775), together with his *Letter to the*

Sheriffs of Bristol (1777), were the ablest expositions both of sound imperial policy and of colonial freedom founded on legal right that Englishmen had up to that time been favoured with. We in Canada should not allow his wise words in the debate on the Quebec Act to pass into forgetfulness: "Give them English liberty, give them an English constitution, and then, whether they speak French or English, whether they go to mass, or attend our own communion, you will render them valuable and useful subjects of Great Britain."

The influence of his assaults upon the French Revolution on the minds of Englishmen have already been alluded to but the force of his argument against the *idéologues* who made, as he said, "a sort of institute and digest of anarchy called the 'Rights of Man'," had a much wider and more lasting effect. His warning against constitution-mongering for the future without first mastering the lessons in statecraft furnished by the past adumbrated the historical theory of political science and jurisprudence developed in the nineteenth century. As Mr. G. H. Mair says:

He was an innovator in modern political thought, and his application of the historical method to the study of institutions is in its way a not less epoch-making achievement than Bacon's application of the inductive method to science. At a time when current political thought, led by Rousseau, was drawing its theories from the abstract conception of 'natural rights' Burke was laying down that sounder and deeper notion of politics which has governed thinking in that department of knowledge since.

What had come down to his generation as the supreme achievement of political thought and experiment was Burke's constant object of reverence: "The King, and his faithful subjects, the Lords and Commons of this realm—the triple cord, which no man can break." Pondering this conception of a constitution that must be kept inviolate in order to function, and recalling the disturbance of equilibrium between Lords and Commons created by the Parliament Act of 1911, we could wish that Walter Savage Landor might be permitted to transmit to us from the shades an imaginary conversation on these matters between Burke and the Earl of Oxford and Asquith.

Oliver Goldsmith sang of Burke as one—

Who born for the universe, narrowed his mind,
And to party gave up what was meant for mankind.

This is entirely wide of the mark. He was in no sense a partisan. As John Buchan observes in his recent volume of Essays: "Long ago Burke lost all party character. Even before his death he was

regarded as an armoury from which both sides could draw their shafts." In the nineteenth century both Disraeli and Gladstone found texts in Burke to support the diverse political views which they espoused. That, of course, means that Burke was not always consistent with himself. He called himself a 'philosopher in action,' and ambulatory philosophers have had need to 'watch their step' ever since the days of Thales. But there is no doubt of Burke's universal side. Modern German jurists frankly admit that Savigny leaned on him in formulating his theory of historical jurisprudence. The French critic and historian H. A. Taine held him to be "the first mind of the age . . . learned in law, history, philosophy, literature, master of such a universal erudition that he has been compared to Bacon". Another French writer says of him: "Ecrivain de premier ordre, profond philosophe, . . . Burke a exercé une action puissante sur son époque, et plus d'un réformateur contemporain a puisé largement dans ses oeuvres".

Surely men of English speech throughout the world have reason to honour the bicentenary of Edmund Burke.

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