

Jeffrey O. Nelson

Worth the Wait

Edmund Burke: Volume 1, 1730-1784

by F. P. Lock.

Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998.

Thomas Copeland, the editor of *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke* and a central figure in Burke's twentieth-century revival, once observed that of all the books written about Burke the most important was the work never written: his "official biography." Unfortunately for posterity, Burke's literary executors, having completed a sixteen-volume edition of his *Works*, died before completing a planned biography. Copeland's view is surely correct that this was a "decisive failure," for as Sir James Mackintosh observed of Burke at the dawn of the nineteenth century, "perhaps a fit biographer is more important to his just fame than ever such a person was before to a great man." Burke's reputation was also affected by another misfortune. Lost to historians were the papers and letters compiled by Burke's executors. This lacuna had obvious consequences on Burke scholarship, from the death of the last of his two executors in the 1820s until the papers were re-discovered and made available again in the 1930s. So an accident of history and the inability of the first chroniclers to complete their intended studies have made the pursuit of a definitive biography elusive.

Despite the lack of crucial primary resources, valiant attempts were made to write

a definitive life of Burke. They were, of course, too late to make use of the kind of oral interviews that would have helped us understand Burke's life better, especially to help us pierce the veil that still covers much of his private life. But by marshalling contemporary accounts and the extant documents that were available, credible, if understandably deficient, biographical efforts were made. James Prior, Thomas MacKnight, and John Morley each penned useful works in the nineteenth century, while A. I. Samuels, Bertram Newman, Robert Murray, Philip Magnus, and Carl Cone published worthy studies in the twentieth. There were many others besides, including popular and political studies, those by Russell Kirk and Isaac Kramnick falling in the latter category from opposite perspectives. In the early 1990s, Conor Cruise O'Brien's "thematic" biography, notwithstanding its obvious prejudices, contributed importantly to the literature.

However, as the bicentennial of Burke's death came and went in 1997 there still was

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no biography one could claim as “definitive”—a remarkable fact, since interest in and writing about Burke never ceased, indeed has steadily increased, since the time of his death in 1797. In the post-war years, renewed access to his papers resulted in the flourishing of a veritable Burke industry. During the half-century that followed the Second World War Burke students produced the ten-volume correspondence, bibliographies, monographs, dissertations, and voluminous specialized studies, a modern edition of his works and speeches, scholarly associations and newsletters—everything, it seemed, except the long anticipated definitive biography.

Happily, this brief history of Burke histories ends here. For with the publication of the first volume of Professor F. P. Lock’s *Edmund Burke*, we now have the initial installment of the long-awaited comprehensive, and, yes, “definitive” life of Burke. Was it worth the wait?

The first of Lock’s two-volume *Burke* is enough to answer that question with a decided yes. It covers the early years and writings of Burke, his movement from poetry to politics, and his involvement in the imperial crises and colonial causes of Ireland, America, and India through the decades of the 1760s, 70s, and 80s, leaving the heated years of the revolution in France for volume two. From the outset Lock grapples with, and generally settles so far as one is able, many questions that have perplexed Burke scholars for generations. One such issue is addressed in his subtitle, *1730-1784*. Heretofore, the date of Burke’s birth was fixed at 1729. Lock’s use of letters, parish records, calendars, and other documents convincingly re-sets the date, according to the Julian calendar then in use, at 1 January 1730—thus commencing at the dawn of a new year and new decade a life to be self-consciously lived as a “new man.”

The humble origins from whence Burke came forced him to apply his famously aristocratic mind to the reconciliation of his own lack of noble ancestry with the claims of high status so well justified by his native genius, industriousness, and literary and oratorical gifts. Lock asserts that a consequence of this was that “Burke found in ideas and intellectual loyalties the ancestors his humble genealogy denied him.” Such insights as this help the reader to better understand how in the *Reflections on the Revolution in France* “prejudice and tradition become the ‘canonized forefathers’ who bequeath ‘the idea of a liberal descent.’”

There is no doubt that Burke was born into “middling circumstances.” His father was a Dublin attorney, his mother a Roman Catholic. It is unclear whether his father, Richard, was a convert to the Established Church of England, which was a necessity if one desired position and reasonable income, or a born Protestant. Lock concludes from the record that the latter was the case. What we do know is that it was a mixed marriage, and that the Catholic half of it would tag Burke with the charge of harboring sinister Popish connections or sympathies throughout his life. Burke would only reinforce this charge by himself marrying a Catholic. While Burke was demonstrably not himself a Roman Catholic, his sympathies on many occasions were certainly aligned with that cause. Indeed, two of the threads that weave through Lock’s tapestry of Burke’s life are the centrality of his Irishness and the catholicity of his mind. The two are, of course, intimately bound together.

Lock, however, careful scholar that he is, never pushes either thesis too far. And while not the advocate, say, as O’Brien is for this view, he does accept the essentials of what O’Brien and others have argued in recent years. As Lock states it, Burke’s “Irish upbringing conditioned in important ways

the development of his mind and ideas.... Just as he never lost his Irish accent, he never forgot his Irishness.” How could he, given his deep and sensitive nature and his impatience with injustice? “Growing up in the 1730s and 1740s,” Lock points out, “Burke not only read about Ireland’s problems and heard them talked about; he saw real poverty.... Few of Burke’s English contemporaries had seen people living in such degradation.” Ireland was a rigidly stratified and segregated society, and Lock shows us how estranged Burke felt from this world, his father’s world, and how he longed for a sense of belonging and place for much of his life.

He was most at home in his early years with his Catholic relatives, the Nagles, and with his Quaker schoolmaster and his circle of friends at the Quaker boarding school he attended prior to going back to Dublin and Trinity College, and then eventually to the Middle Temple for legal studies in London. The Nagles were on the “losing side” of recent Irish history by Burke’s time, and had lost much of their land. Lock finds here the source for the fact that the “plight of aristocrats or decayed gentlefolk living in reduced circumstances always exerted a powerful emotional appeal on Burke.” The non-denominational Quaker-run school at Ballitore was set in a serene and idyllic county, the academic atmosphere “though not sectarian, was serious.” The friendships he made, the playfulness of their epistolary discourses, and the classical grounding he received from a schoolmaster who likely was the first to recognize and encourage Burke’s genius, all rendered the three years

spent in this “pre-college” environment fundamental to the shaping of his personality. It was here, contends Lock, that Burke may first have fashioned his life-long notion that “moral qualities were more important than abstract ideas or political theories.” His loyalty to Irish friends and his attachment to the idea of place were rooted in Ballitore.

Surely, as Lock observes, “Burke’s early years were unusual. He experienced the life and culture of each of Ireland’s chief religious groups: the Anglicans, the Catholics, and the Protestant Dissenters (represented by the Quakers). Such an upbringing is the stuff of fiction....” And indeed, Burke esteemed, among others, Frances Burney’s novel *Cecilia*—for him, as Lock notes, like in the novel, “extreme contrasts of

character and setting...were actual and palpable.” Thus the liberality and catholicity of Burke’s mind.

Lord Charlemont, a long-time friend and Protestant, once observed that Burke’s “early habits...had given his mind an almost constitutional bent towards the Popish party.” Burke’s propensity to take the Catholic side of issues is reinforced throughout Lock’s text by many examples. One early example finds Burke opposing Hume on a point of Irish historiography surrounding a purported Catholic massacre of Protestants during the reign of Charles I. Burke “argued that the ‘massacre’ was virtually invented by the Protestants as an excuse for retaliation and confiscation.” According to Lock, Burke’s prejudice in this instance has, historically speaking, worn better. In another context, “Burke



Edmund Burke by James Barry (1771).

was sickened by what he took to be a recurrent theme in Irish history, the exploitation of imaginary Catholic misdeeds to justify ever more oppressive treatment of the Catholic underclass." More famously, this "revulsion" found an outlet in Burke's successful efforts to secure relaxation of Catholic penal laws in 1778, and in his "Fragments of a Tract on the Popery Laws." It is in this latter tract that scholars such as Peter Stanlis have found the best evidence for a natural law interpretation of Burke's thought.

Beyond a concern for injustices inflicted on the Irish and Catholics, Lock shows that Burke always viewed religion itself as a shaping force, a necessary civilizing force, in society; but importantly, he argues that Burke was quick to expose "the fallacy of treating religion as a social and political instrument." Furthermore, Lock reinforces Burke's famed and profound suspicion of "abstract enquiries, whether theological, philosophical, or political, which tended to question and therefore unsettle established 'truths' of proven social and moral value." As such, he held to a providential view of history, retaining through the course of his life, as Lock notes, "his faith in the inscrutable wisdom of Providence."

These beliefs animated Burke's approach to the crises he faced as a political figure. Burke stepped onto the political stage in 1766, a propitious moment for him, as controversy over the American Stamp Act occupied the House. Burke was as informed about the Colonies as anyone, probably more so than anyone, in that chamber. His party, led by Lord Rockingham, needed a figure with Burke's oratorical prowess. The fit was perfect; and Burke's political reputation was made, especially with the successful compromise he championed in the Declaratory Act.

Despite a promising start, practical political success was fleeting for Burke. A man

of causes, most of his causes were lost from the beginning. But it was principle and loyalty that drove him—and beyond that, Lock shows, it was the "perception" of his "unimpeachable personal integrity" that was key to whatever solace he took in adversity or defeat. Lock demonstrates how Burke grew from poet to party tactician and spokesman through the years leading up to the American Revolution. He provides learned treatments of Burke's great speeches of that time and of his representation of the commercial city of Bristol, in addition to his preoccupation with Irish and Indian affairs after that. It is to posterity's advantage that Burke was unsuccessful politically. For he was far less burdened, and more imaginatively engaged, in opposition—and the time he spent at his country home, the Gregories, was put to crafting many of the memorable writings that have secured his fame as a lasting font of political wisdom.

For this reviewer, it is the chapters dealing with Burke's early life and initial entry into politics that prove the most fascinating. The details of Burke's political life being better known, Lock is especially compelling when discussing Burke's earliest experiences and views, and then connecting many of these with the unfolding of his more mature thoughts, political positions, and principles. Burke's first connections and interests being "chiefly literary and not political," Lock spends four of his thirteen chapters—including one entire chapter devoted to *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*—assessing Burke's earliest literary efforts. The reader also gets glimpses of Burke's role in the famous "Literary Club," as well as his life-long patronage of the arts, including his personal role in launching the careers of the painter James Barry and the poet George Crabbe.

Of particular interest, though, is Lock's

treatment of Burke's collaboration with his kinsman Will Burke on a history of the American colonies and his efforts at penning an abridged history of England (only the first volume on medieval Britain was finished, but it has been viewed as a remarkable work of historical scholarship by modern students of the period such as Acton and Butterfield). Burke's was foremost an historical mind, and as such, history was the basis of his thought. As Lock shows, these works were philosophical histories, contributing "to an understanding of human nature," and animated by the belief, captured in Bolingbroke's famous aphorism, that "History is philosophy teaching by examples." Burke's historical mind is also amply demonstrated in his influential role as anonymous editor of the famed *Annual Register*. The length and extent of his involvement has long been debated; Lock settles on the view that Burke actively edited the *Register* until 1765, and after that exercised considerable influence through his surrogate Thomas English. It is via the *Register's* annual historical articles and book reviews that some, foremost Russell Kirk, have traced an influence of Burke on the minds of leading colonial and, later, American Revolutionary figures.

Two final assessments are in order. First, Lock puts to rest the "rage of Edmund Burke" thesis advanced by Issac Kramnick. Though Burke could certainly be intemperate, irascible, and occasionally boorish, there is little evidence to suggest he was consumed with rage and pent-up aggression, to say nothing of the unsavory side effects of such a temperament as alleged by Kramnick. Rather, Burke emerges from Lock's pages as most himself and at peace with close friends and family. He comes across as alternately playful, charming, witty, humorous, loving, and loyal. As Burke was famously reticent in revealing his private thoughts

and feelings, it is, Lock observes, "the hatreds" that primarily dominate the surviving records. "The result is an unbalanced record, in which Burke the affectionate husband and playful father rarely appears."

A second and more significant assessment for the future of Burke scholarship might be Lock's deflation of the view held by many prominent scholars, most especially Sir Lewis Namier and his energetic disciples, that Burke was a mendacious party hack bent on maligning George III and the King's commitment to constitutional monarchy. Lock provides a balanced and nuanced assessment of Burke's motivations in opposing George III and "the King's Friends." He does so in a path-breaking section considering Burke's influential 1770 tract *Thoughts on the Cause of Our Present Discontents*. In a decade, the 1760s, when political writing was "bitterly personal," Lock shows how remarkable Burke is in his restraint. Burke's targets were not individuals, but rather the "whole system of favoritism" that he believed was effectively undermining "the substance of the constitution while maintaining its forms." His bold and positive advocacy of party government and disinterested statesmanship flowed from the general principles he appealed to, contends Lock, and which in turn have made *Present Discontents* one of Burke's most widely read pamphlets.

Burke was a figure of "protean interests": an historian, journalist, orator, political philosopher, legal thinker, poet, and man of letters. As one scholar has noted, "very few biographers are capable of describing and analyzing such multifarious subjects, much less passing valid judgments on a man unusually competent in all of them." Lock, a professor of English, can be counted among such select biographers. In fact, one of the great advantages of Lock's *Burke* is that the author employs his great knowl-

edge of eighteenth-century literature and politics to provide the kind of contemporary accounts that enrich such a study, but which in Burke's case are usually not available. Peppared throughout are asides from Johnson, Boswell, Goldsmith, or Swift, contemporary correspondences, memoirs, and diaries that help keep the reader always aware of the world in which Burke moved

and lived. As a piece of literature in itself, Lock's is a work of considerable merit.

And so two centuries after his death, Edmund Burke finally has a biographical monument befitting his stature. Meticulously researched, richly detailed, and elegantly written, Lock's *Volume I* gives us every reason to believe that *Volume II* will also be worth the wait.

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