

# Burke's Early Genius

THOMAS I. COOK

*A Note-Book of Edmund Burke*,  
H. V. F. Somerset, ed., *New York: Cambridge University Press, 1957. 120 pp.*

WHETHER, when the Burke papers, hitherto in the possession of Earl Fitzwilliam, and now made publicly available for the use of scholars, have been fully examined, edited, and commented on, there will occur any radical change in the assessment of Burke's thought, may well be doubted, whatever the gains in knowledge and understanding of the course of his life, or of the facts of and motives for his behavior. With their aid, however, we may come to a more full and just appreciation of the continuity and coherence in development of that great conservator, and with good fortune may forever dispose of some controversies about, and some facile strictures on, his position, which have long and, on a careful overall reading, needlessly plagued us. (From what I have been told some little time since by one then engaged in examining the newly available correspondence, there is a real possibility that those who, despite our awareness since the early works of Charles Beard of the humanly meaningful motivations of statesmen and

thinkers, use the relatedly romantic realism of muck-raking to discredit public thought and action by the exhibition of a private Achilles heel, may raise new controversies as to Burke's public-spiritedness, may subject him to a very belated posthumous humiliation, and may thereby endeavor to suggest, by highly illogical inference, that his thought is neither profound nor lastingly significant and creative.)

Among the first fruits of the new inquiries now possible is the present collection of pieces, largely by Edmund Burke, though partly written by his life-long, and possibly but not probably blood, connection, William Burke. Though the full twenty-four pieces make a very modest volume, one may hazard a guess that they will be of major significance from the point of view of any new perspective. Nor will that significance consist simply in knowledge of some of the things he thought and wrote during the period after he left Ireland and before he published the *Vindication of Natural Society* and brought out the first volume of the Annual Register; though, as Sir Ernest Barker points out in his perceptive and illuminating foreword, knowledge of any sort about Burke during those hitherto mysterious years is of great value to the biographer. Part of the value rests in something also noted by Sir Ernest, the further demonstration of

what was already partially known but readily forgotten, namely, the width and range of Burke's cultural and intellectual interests beyond the realm of politics, and the evidence, *inter alia*, of far from trifling poetic powers—as well as of an ambition to poetry, toward a poet's calling, deliberately, and probably wisely, abandoned. Some of these pieces do, however, render more intelligible the writing of the celebrated *Essay on the Sublime and Beautiful*, published in 1757, though one has to add that that essay is rarely read (I note as a curiosity that it was my own first introduction to Burke, and a somewhat discouraging one, as required reading for a youth sixteen or seventeen at an English public school). That Essay is invariably noted, and then dismissed, as a work which had influence on Lessing in the composing of *Laocoon*; and, despite an equally invariable emphasis on the aesthetic and imaginative elements in Burke's political thinking, it is rarely used in relation thereto in an endeavor to present or discover his overall philosophy.

The best pieces in this notebook, despite their being private efforts in analysis and expression which are not in all cases even completed, but peter out in unfinished jottings, foreshadow the philosophic statesman, and, what is more, reveal an extraordinary maturity, judgment and insight, as well as the burgeoning of a great and unmistakable style. They were, however, seemingly designed either in their process to clarify Burke's own thinking, or, reflection completed, to record systematically for his benefit his structured conclusions.

"Some Political Scattered Observations," the one piece centrally political in avowed theme, is not, indeed, of profound significance. While it shows some insight and judiciousness, and indicates that Burke had already ranged widely in his reflections on politics and the arts of governing, it is in form imitative, and harks back to such works as Halifax's *Maxims of State*. Its doing was no doubt of some lasting profit to Burke in clarify-

ing judgments, especially since this *genre* almost compels the writer to concentrate on issues of practical statesmanship, and to seek precision as to criteria for decision-making. (For that reason, indeed, one might suggest the desirability of its revival, and complementary use, in these days of laborious and extensive analysis of the decision-making process.) Nevertheless, the root of Burke's genius did not lie here, but consisted rather in an imaginative ranging up to and away from these philosophically barren though precise points. Thereby he sensed and suggestively explicated their origins, setting, and conditions; the ethics and metaphysics necessary to their effective making; and their broad consequences, whereof foreknowledge and anticipation were essential to the mature statesman.

Nor are three companion pieces, "The Character of a Fine Gentleman," "The Character of a Wise Man," and "The Character of a Good Man," quite fundamental to Burke's subsequent thought, though they do reveal his capacity for psychological penetration, and his awareness that personality types have their interrelated virtues and effects, and as wholes have capacities and limitations which determine the roles which their bearers can most appropriately play. The last of the three, however, unlike the preceding two, may reflect Burke himself; and, as the editor suggests, contains foreshadowings of his own mixed destiny.

Of the three most mature, profound and penetrating essays, only one, entitled "Religion of No Efficacy Considered as a State Engine," has formal political reference. That essay is a bare two pages in length; and its second part, which develops out of, yet moves away from, its formal theme, constitutes a brief initial statement of Burke's lasting thesis as to the dangers of exclusive reliance on the vulgar and utilitarian, or, as he here calls it, "a mean Species of Reason." He there animadverts on the unwisdom of a purely sceptical attitude; on the virtue, whatever its dangers,

of enthusiasm, and emotion that goes beyond the reaches of calculating reason; and on the ideal of a sufficient balance and interplay between such enthusiasm and a proper reason judiciously used, and itself restrained.

The first part of the essay is, however, a profound protest against the misuse of re-

ligion for direct political and legal ends. For Burke rightfully insists that the influence of religion, concerned with eternal things, is properly indirect, through its impact on persons; that it ceases to operate to its own high ends when debased by immediate, utilitarian, trivial and ephemeral concerns. Such abuse works to the detri-

ment at once of the spiritual life and of the state.

This thesis supplements, and in a sense constitutes a foundation for, Burke's subsequent defense of religious toleration. Yet it at once emphasizes, and corrects certain misinterpretations of, his life-long insistence on the ultimate religious foundation of the social order. On so modest a basis, indeed, it would not be proper to argue that Burke, despite contrary appearances in some of his more mature writing, was an advocate of separation of church and state, which in some senses of that concept he certainly was not. But his teaching was, I think, consonant with its root idea; and his profound concern lest political society be damaged and destroyed by forgetfulness or deliberate rejection of the spiritual part of life was manifestly no advocacy for politicization thereof, and was utterly opposed to Voltaire's sceptical perception of the practical uses of belief as an added, and perhaps more effective, sanction for positive law. Burke's position, indeed, today still constitutes a timely warning as to the dangers of a public religiosity as evidence of and buttress for civil loyalty, as well as against the view of religion as a this-worldly commodity or service — a corruption against which one of our most outspoken contemporary conservatives, Peter Viereck, has inveighed recently with force and effectiveness.

The following essay consists of a long series of propositions, partly aphoristic in character, but sometimes in their sequence (though not in strict form) syllogistic, concerned with the relation of man to God his Creator and to his fellow men; and with the interdependence of their respective duties to each. It is beyond the scope of this review to analyze or criticize these propositions in detail. I will note only two points. The first is Burke's insistence that the perspective of eternity puts human relations in rightful proportion and leads to that clarified and long-sighted vision which is a restraint on immediate selfishness and pettiness. In Burke's subsequent

political philosophy a sense of eternity and a perspective of history alike work to limit pride and the unrestrained seeking of self and power; to combat both the arrogance of a reason which believed it could render the present or the finite future perfect, and the arrogance of an arbitrariness whose root idea (though Burke would have applied it elsewhere) was the apocryphal "After me, the deluge."

The other, and perhaps even more important, point is that, while morality does not necessarily include religion, religion necessarily includes morality. In our own time there are some dangers of forgetfulness of both these points, and of their implications. For some of the most earnest advocates of the Christian polity, as embracing at once the duties and the freedom of the Christian man, have on occasion argued the impossibility of an effective morality discovered by human reason and grounded in a humanist natural law. Given the nature of our global world, and the diversities of religious faiths (or the absence and rejection thereof) today, that counsel, for all the universalism of Christian teaching and promise, becomes one of despair and alienation; and Burke at least, for all his spiritual awareness and religious commitment, manifestly avoided that error. On the other hand, the proper current concern (which Burke would fully share) to insure that religion be conceived in relation to a higher power, and be not transformed into a purely social gospel which, in its course and ultimate emphasis, will render worship unimportant or incidental, sometimes leads to a mystic and otherworldly extremism, whereby, however blameless the individual, moral duties of man to man in society are rendered unimportant, and in practice faith becomes a substitute for works. That corruption, whose error would of course be insisted on by serious thinkers on this high subject, even though they may unintentionally provide the basis for such debasing misinterpretations, is properly rejected by Burke; and that rejection in turn makes clear

what he does *not* mean by his insistence in the prior essay, that religion is not a political utility.

Finally, I turn to the best, longest, and most typically Burkean piece in the book, and trust that readers will not be deterred by its awkwardly lengthy and atypical title "Several Scattered Hints concerning Philosophy and Learning, Collected here from my Papers." Full of wisdom concerning the range, diversity and depth, as well as the fallibility and folly of men, these hints, generous in their positive tone, are profoundly and incisively critical of narrow dogmatisms and ignorant superiorities. They should be studied alike by the contemptuous critic of the scholar and by the cultural dilettante, since Burke firmly defends disciplined training and thorough knowledge, and pinpoints the sundry dan-

gers of a little knowledge; while on the other hand he properly condemns the cult of the petty and the trivial, and unbalanced absorption into exquisite refinements, to the loss of perspective, and with a failure to grasp the core and key ideas properly derived from a learning which, while sure and sound, is also broad. Here are compassed the sins of anti-intellectualism and the ills of the ivory tower. I hazard the opinion that those evils, jointly and in their interplay, are closer to the source of real weakness in contemporary American society than the recently much deplored absence therein of a body of scientists putatively adequate to security in the days of Sputnik. At best, such an inadequate, or inadequately used, supply is consequence of the deeper weakness, and not itself causative.

**We Urge**  
**MODERN AGE** Subscribers to Renew Promptly