

Burke: The Later Phase

Burke and the Nature of Politics: The Age of the French Revolution, by Carl B. Cone. *Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 1964. 527 pp. \$9.00.*

IN THE FIRST volume of Mr. Cone's detailed study of Burke's political career, *Burke and the Nature of Politics: The Age of the American Revolution* (1957), the active political life of Burke as a Rockingham Whig was described and analyzed down to 1782. Mr. Cone's present volume covers the period from 1782 to Burke's death in 1797, and concludes with a brief chapter on the reasons for the perennial interest in Burke during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. A new dimension is added to the earlier portrait of Burke as a party man; he is also pictured as a political philosopher. Consequently, the historical and descriptive method of the first volume is here extended by considerations of political philosophy.

The book is divided into two parts: (1) "The Constitution: Domestic and Imperial." This section consists of Burke's activities and reflections concerning the domestic policies of the Rockingham Whigs, the Fox-North coalition, constitutional and imperial problems involving India and the impeachment of Warren Hastings, and the regency crisis; (2) "The French Revolution." This section describes Burke's political philosophy as revealed in his response to the French Revolution, his conception of "new" and "old" Whigs, his crusade against English and French Jacobin revolutionaries, his continued life-long concern for Ireland, and the tragedy of his last years of life.

Throughout these complex and varied public affairs Burke adhered to his early conviction that the political party was the necessary and good instrument for the practical fulfillment of the great ends of English society—domestic and imperial order under constitutional law, justice and civil liberty. In seeking political solutions to the great problems he

encountered, Burke remained flexible in his practical and prudential views, modifying them according to the circumstances created by changing historical events. But Mr. Cone also notes that a basic continuity of normative principles is evident throughout Burke's politics, centered in his belief that the ultimate duty of the statesman was to bring society into harmony with the moral law of God. Thus, Burke's practical and theoretical politics combined a reverence for history and change, and a profound conviction that society was based upon religion and natural law ethics.

In domestic affairs Burke continued his earlier efforts to preserve the constitutional order of Britain by making parliament independent of the influence and prerogative powers of the Crown. But the loss of the American colonies resulted in a loss of prestige by the Crown, and after 1782 the threat to the traditional balance of power within the British state passed increasingly from the Crown to the movement for parliamentary reform through an extension of the franchise, on the radical "rights of man" theory of popular sovereignty. Burke opposed this movement with the same vigor and with much the same arguments he had used against the King.

In imperial affairs, once the American colonies were lost, Burke strove to keep India under British rule, and the last twelve years of his political life were largely spent in trying to secure justice for the people of India. Mr. Cone's account of the impeachment of Warren Hastings is the fullest and most authoritative that has yet been published. Burke also continued his efforts to extend the rights and privileges of the English constitution to the people of Ireland, particularly in economic affairs and in religious freedom.

In the latter half of the book, the nature and extent of Burke's intense opposition to the rationalism of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment is made clear in the political philosophy he expressed to combat the new theories of human nature and society set forth in the French Revolution. Like John Morley, Woodrow Wilson, and many recent Burke scholars, Mr. Cone holds that the essential principles Burke expressed in the *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), were in no way different from those he had held or opposed throughout his mature life. Mr. Cone's exposition of this point is worth noting:

For over thirty years Burke had felt and occasionally expressed hostility to the doctrines of

the *philosophes*. But his contact with them had been only in their literary formulation. Only in the abstract or as theoretical propositions had he been able to fear the consequences of materialistic rationalism, of secularism, of the emphasis upon natural rights, of the perfectionist theories of human self-sufficiency, and of the contempt implied in them for history, prescription, tradition, and revealed religion. By November, 1789, there was sufficient evidence at hand, for example in the Declaration of the Rights of Man, to justify the view that the French Revolution was inspired and informed by principles of the nature of man and society that Burke had always considered false . . . Burke's former hostility to the "political metaphysicians" had been to a great extent rhetorical. Neither in the American Revolution nor in the problems of Ireland and India had he seen them at work, though he talked about them. He had viewed the American problem, for example, as one of imperial, constitutional relationships and practical administrative grievances, not as a great ideological assault upon an established social order. He had, therefore, never physically encountered the philosophy he detested until the French Revolution.

This passage is typical of Mr. Cone's clear, concise, vigorous and wholly functional prose style.

Mr. Cone has utilized all of the published and manuscript sources of writings by Burke. In addition, he has used many eighteenth-century newspapers, journals, letters, pamphlets, books, the *Parliamentary History*, *Commons Journals*, private papers of members of parliament, table-talk, memoirs, and other writings by Burke's contemporaries. Finally, he has made excellent use of the whole vast range of scholarship on Burke from the middle of the nineteenth century to the present, including related materials in the historiography of the eighteenth century, especially the work of the Namier historians. This enormous body of writings and scholarship is smoothly synthesized, and numerous details of Burke's life, political activities, and reflections are illuminated by Mr. Cone's insights beyond anything previously established. It is a superb achievement and makes the book a landmark in twentieth-century scholarship on Burke as a statesman and as a political philosopher.

Reviewed by PETER J. STANLIS