

A Disciplined Sentiment

Against the berserk certitude of idealists, Burke urged a deference to tradition and to the wisdom of felt attachments.

By Jeffrey Collins

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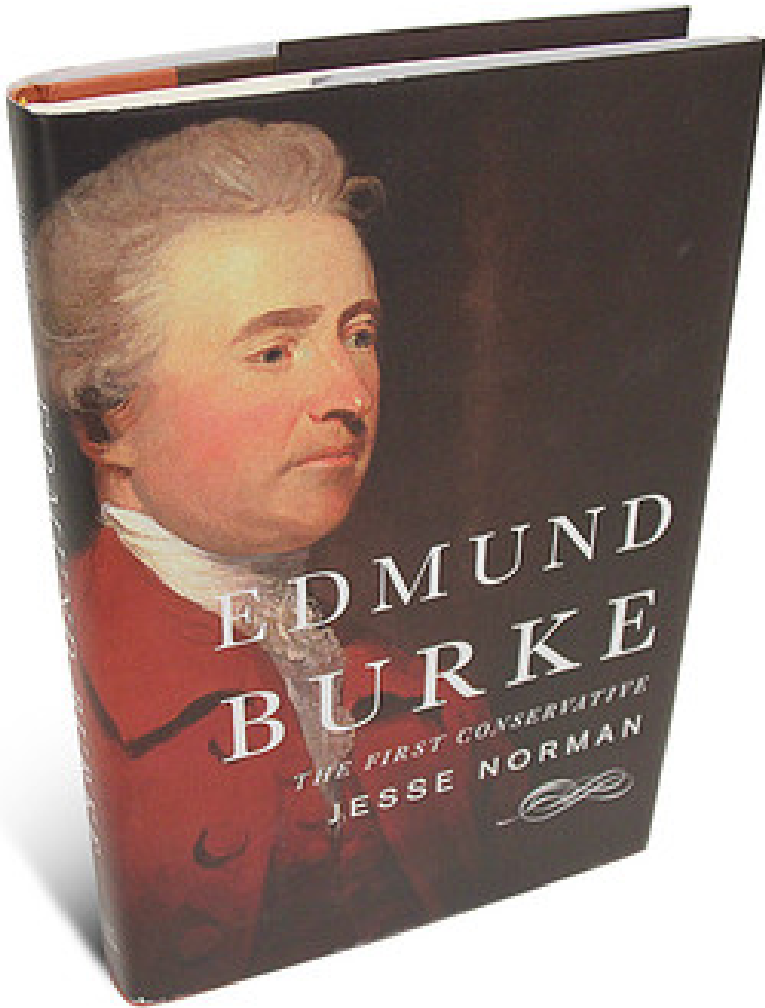
The great revolutions of history typically produce written works celebrating their achievement. The French Revolution, however, was immortalized by a denunciation. Edmund Burke's "Reflections on the Revolution in France" appeared in 1790, when Britons were still welcoming the Revolution as a blow to Bourbon tyranny. Burke's dissent has resounded through the ages. No reactionary diatribe, the "Reflections" promoted a "manly, moral, regulated liberty" and a cautious reform of the decadent French monarchy. But it vividly denounced the "short-sighted coxcombs of philosophy" seeking to remake France as a radical utopia, as if the "constitution of a kingdom be a problem of arithmetic." Armed with a doctrinaire logic of rights, these revolutionaries were indifferent to history and hostile to tradition. "The age of chivalry is gone," wrote Burke. "That of sophisters, economists, and calculators has succeeded; and the glory of Europe is extinguished forever."

The "Reflections" foretold, with a prescience that is freshly incredible on every rereading, the grisly mechanisms of the Terror, the execution of Louis XVI and the despotism of Napoleon. The book was faintly embarrassing when it first appeared. The British prime minister, William Pitt, derided it as "rhapsodies in which there is much to admire, and nothing to agree with." Time would rebuke this judgment. The "Reflections on the Revolution in France" became the most famous statement of conservatism ever written.

Edmund Burke: The First Conservative

By Jesse Norman

(Basic, 325 pages, \$27.99)



The Revolution's devotees have never forgiven Burke. Thomas Paine excoriated him with luminous outrage. Karl Marx considered him a "vulgar bourgeois." Modern academics often snicker at him as an overwrought paternalist. To Jesse Norman, however, Burke is the "most underrated political thinker of the past 300 years." The case can certainly be made.

Burke was born in 1729 in Ireland, the son of a Protestant lawyer and his Catholic wife. Educated at Trinity College, Dublin, Burke abandoned a legal career and moved to London. He supported himself, barely, as a miscellaneous writer. Slowly his reputation grew. In 1757 he published an influential aesthetic study of the "sublime." David Hume and Samuel Johnson became admirers. But it was politics, rather than literature, that brought him glory. A reforming Whig (Burke was never a Tory), he entered Parliament in 1766. He would serve for nearly three decades, largely in opposition. Burke was the

outstanding parliamentarian of his age, a mesmerizing debater and ingenious pamphleteer. His oratory, observed Edward Gibbon, was a "water mill of words and images." Mr. Norman, himself a Tory member of Parliament, brings an insider's appreciation to this dimension of Burke's biography.

Burke was, to be sure, excitable. Johnson described him as a "lion who lashes himself into fury with his own tail." But his moral judgment was fearless and unerring. He supported religious toleration, opposed slavery and inexorably prosecuted the venality of the king's government. During the American Revolution, Burke urged conciliation, unpopular advice that might have saved the empire if heeded. He loved his country but relentlessly berated its imperial conduct, particularly in Ireland and India.

And Burke's criticisms were designed to be remembered. He shamed the imperial officials of India as "birds of prey and passage, with appetites continually renewing for a food that is continually wasting." He savaged Rousseau as the "insane Socrates of the National Assembly" and Jacobinism as a "cannibal philosophy."

The conservative and reforming aspects of Burke were reconciled by a theory of sentiment. Against the triumphalism of Enlightenment science and reason, Burke trusted the inherently conservative impulses of our felt attachments. From Paris, Robespierre would show how an undisciplined Rousseauian sentiment could animate the berserk certitude of a homicidal revolutionary. Burkean sentiment, by contrast, disciplined the ego and encouraged deference to collective wisdom. In the face of the Enlightenment's universalizing laws, it rallied to the particularity of tradition.

Burke accommodated the precepts of modern political life, but he claimed to clothe their nakedness with the "wardrobe of a moral imagination." He believed in individual rights but tempered their atomizing potential with communal duties. He accepted that sovereignty was formed by the social contract of free individuals. But Burke's social contract wasn't "dissolved by fancy." It bound "those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born." He prized "civil liberty," but only for citizens capable of putting "moral chains upon their own appetites."

Mr. Norman is a theorist of "compassionate conservatism," an outlook adopted by British Prime Minister David Cameron and anticipated by George W. Bush. Burke's thought certainly has its uses for those who prefer their conservatism "kinder and gentler." Mr. Norman, unfortunately, tries to demonstrate Burke's "relevance" with chapters of trendy

social science. There is something small in reading Burke as the forerunner of popular sociologists such as David Brooks and Robert Putnam. Society may be, as Mr. Norman asserts, a "relational and networked" scramble for "social capital" requiring a version of Burkean attachments. But such dreary tropes diminish the power of Burke's thought.

The biographical sections of "Edmund Burke: The First Conservative," though derivative, are well written and informative. In this history one discovers Burke's continuing importance, even if our age of hyper-individualism and headlong social experimentation seems ill-suited to his genius. Burke died in 1797 in defeat, shattered by the death of his last son, aghast at the still-cresting power of revolutionary France. He requested an unmarked grave, lest invading Jacobins defile his corpse. But his ideas survived their revolution.

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