

Burke's Early Genius

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A Note-Book of Edmund Burke,
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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-

Ballade Des Pendus

*(L'Építaphe en forme de ballade que feit
Villon pour luy et ses compagnons, s'at-
tendant estre pendu avec eux.)*

O brother men, whom we here prede-
cease,
Don't judge too harshly of us wretched
ones.

If you show pity for our luckless case
God may in turn look kindly on your sins.
You see us dangling here, or see our bones,
The mouldering relics of some half-a-dozen
Who cosseted the flesh that once bedizened
And now rots piecemeal from its brittle
frame.

Don't look on us as objects of derision
But pray God to absolve us all from blame.

Don't take it much amiss that we, pre-
destined

Gallows-birds, accost you as our brothers.
All men have not good sense; and we're
well chastened.

Have mercy then, and with our Mary
Mother's

Blest Son make intercession for us others
Whom folly held in thrall: May grace not
fail

To us, unworthy though we be, nor Hell
Consume us in its everlasting flame.

The game is up for us—what use to rail?
But pray God to absolve us all from blame.

Scoured clean by rain, blackened and
desiccated

By sun, our wretched bones; magpies and
crows

Have emptied our eyesockets, depilated
Our shrunken features—plucked both
beard and brows.

Swung round on every vagrant wind that
blows,

More pecked than pears that rot beneath
the tree,

No rest for us who hang here, as you see.
Consider well our folly and our shame

And keep well clear of our fraternity—
But pray God to absolve us all from blame.

Prince Jesus, you to whom the mastery
Of all is given, snatch from the signory
Of Hell our souls, and checkmate Satan's
game.

Men, no occasion's here for mockery,
But pray God to absolve us all from blame.

Translated by DONALD C. YELTON