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Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Edited by Frank M. Turner with essays by Darrin M. McMahon, Conor Cruise O'Brien, Jack N. Rakove and Alan Wolfe. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003. xliii + 322 pp. Notes, suggested readings, and glossary index. \$21.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-300-09978-9; \$9.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-300-09979-7.

Review by Rachel Hammersley, University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

In his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Edmund Burke famously asked “Who now reads Bolingbroke?” If the number of available editions is an accurate reflection of readership, then it is not necessary to ask the same question of Burke himself. I already have five separate copies of Burke’s *Reflections* on my bookshelves, and a quick look on Amazon suggests that there are at least ten different editions currently in print, in addition to the various versions available on-line. So the first question that must be asked of the book under review is why do we need yet another edition of Burke’s *Reflections*?

In the editor’s preface, Frank M. Turner offers an answer to this question. “This edition”, he explains, “is intended for the general reader wishing to reencounter this remarkable work or to become acquainted with it for the first time” (p. ix). Thus the scholarly apparatus is restricted to features designed to help the general reader to understand the work: additional editorial notes to explain Burke’s own references; translations of his Latin and Greek citations; and a Glossary Index. The latter is particularly welcome since none of my other five copies include any index whatsoever. In addition, the text itself is sandwiched between Turner’s introduction and a section entitled “Rethinking *Reflections on the Revolution in France*”, consisting of four essays which approach Burke’s text from different perspectives.

In reality, this edition is about more than just providing an edition of Burke’s *Reflections* for the general reader. It forms part of Yale University Press’s *Rethinking the Western Tradition* series, which is explicit in its intention to reprint key works of the Western tradition in order to “address the present debate” over that tradition. In its current state the series comprises an eclectic mix, ranging from Machiavelli’s *The Prince* and Descartes’s *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, through to Ruskin’s *Sesame and Lilies* and John Henry Newman’s *The Idea of a University*. The text itself is relatively uncontroversial, having been taken from the 1854 edition of *The Works of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke*. Consequently, the focus of this review will be the Introduction, essays, and scholarly apparatus that make this edition of Burke’s *Reflections* distinctive.

The introduction and essays are varied. There is, however, a central thread holding them together. It is the idea that Burke’s critique of the French Revolution rested on his opposition to the radical transformation of politics and society on the basis of abstract theory alone, coupled with the belief that this Burkean insight remains pertinent today. As Turner explains, “Burke’s fundamental intention is the defense and preservation of liberal political institutions against those people who would radically transform them on the basis of theory, philosophical ideas, or what would in contemporary terms be called ideology” (p. xiv).

Turner’s introduction “Edmund Burke: The Political Actor Thinking” provides much essential background on Burke’s life, political career, and writings—as well as on the French Revolution and on the speech to which Burke was responding, Richard Price’s *Discourse on the Love of our Country*. He also suggests that Burke’s attack on the French revolutionaries can be paralleled with attacks made against

Thomas Hobbes and, in particular, that of the seventeenth-century Church of Ireland Bishop John Bramhall in his pamphlet “The Catching of Leviathan, or the Great Whale” of 1658. While the argument is certainly an interesting one, I would have liked more evidence. Turner himself acknowledges that “Throughout his public and private writings Burke makes almost no references to Hobbes” (p. xxv), and he offers no clear demonstration that Burke had read Bramhall’s pamphlet.

In the spirit of the series, Turner also seeks to demonstrate the significance of Burke’s work today. In particular, he suggests that in challenging his own “liberal” values Burke encourages us to think more deeply about our liberal society. Though he acknowledges that Burke’s views on equality were of the eighteenth rather than the twenty-first century, this does not diminish—in Turner’s view—Burke’s contemporary relevance:

Burke’s is the politics of the thinking, skeptical liberal prepared to recognise complexity as inherent in political life. [...] Burke would ask political actors to think deeply so that they may act wisely. In the wake of more than two centuries of destructive political utopianism and now religious fundamentalism around the globe, Burke’s may prove a welcome though difficult invitation (p. xxxix).

In his two-edged approach—of providing essential and sometimes illuminating background for the general reader and emphasising the relevance of Burke’s work in the twenty-first century—Turner sets the tone for the essays that follow the text. Some focus more on the background, others on contemporary relevance, but all at least cast a glance in both directions.

The first of the four essays is by Conor Cruise O’Brien, whose own Penguin edition of Burke’s *Reflections* has been one of the main popular editions of this work, at least in Britain, since its first appearance in 1968. O’Brien’s essay is entitled “Edmund Burke: Prophet Against the Tyranny of the Politics of Theory”. It is based on ideas first explored in his monograph *The Great Melody: A Thematic Biography and Commented Anthology of Edmund Burke*, which appeared in 1992. The great strengths of this essay are that it provides more detail on the circumstances surrounding Burke’s writing of the *Reflections* and offers some discussion of Burke’s other writings on the French Revolution. In particular, it provides insight into the religious dimension of Burke’s position. According to O’Brien, the particular stance of the Revolution Society (the society established to commemorate the Glorious Revolution of 1688 to which Richard Price’s *Discourse on the Love of our Country* had been delivered) presented a problem for Burke. The society simultaneously supported 1688 and opposed Roman Catholicism. As a Whig, Burke was himself committed to the principles and legacy of the Glorious Revolution, but his own religious background had also made him sympathetic to Catholicism and to the plight of Catholics in both Britain and Ireland. Burke’s opposition to the anti-Catholicism of both the French revolutionaries and their British supporters provided—so O’Brien argues—an emotional dimension to Burke’s otherwise rational response to the Revolution.

Darrin M. McMahon’s essay “Edmund Burke and the Literary Cabal: A Tale of Two Enlightenments” addresses one of the many paradoxes of Burke’s position. Though often presented as a conservative reactionary, Burke was in fact committed to the Enlightenment ideals of reason, toleration, and progress. He opposed the French Revolution and its philosophic initiators, not because he was opposed to the Enlightenment *per se*, but rather because he viewed its radical French form as a threat to “the more moderate intellectual culture of Britain”, the legacy of 1688 (p. 234). McMahon’s assessment of Burke fits within his broader understanding of the Counter-Enlightenment (and, in particular, the French Counter-Enlightenment) as discussed in his excellent book *Enemies of the Enlightenment*.^[1] Burke was in direct contact with the French opponents of the Enlightenment and Revolution, including the abbé Barruel, and, as McMahon demonstrates, his position was very similar to theirs. Like them, he believed religion to be the essential foundation of government and society; like them, he saw

Enlightenment ideas as threatening both religion and monarchy; like them, he drew a connection between Enlightenment and Revolution—through the idea of a *philosophe* conspiracy; and, like them (and here McMahon's essay dovetails neatly with that of O'Brien), he acknowledged the link between the Enlightenment and Protestantism. McMahon ends his perceptive essay with the ironic observation that Burke was effectively condemning what we would now call ideology and yet he failed to realise that the French enemies of the Enlightenment were "emerging as an ideological force of their own" and that they would use Burke's name in order to support their cause (p. 245).

Jack Rakove's essay, "Why American Constitutionalism Worked", examines the contrast between the late eighteenth-century constitution-building experiments on the two sides of the Atlantic. Though Burke had been heavily involved in American affairs during the 1770s, Rakove acknowledges that this former supporter of the American Revolution had little to say about events in America after 1783. In particular, Rakove wonders what Burke would have made of what recent historians have seen as the innovative and experimental quality of "the American exercise in republican constitutionalism" (p. 249). Despite referring to Burke's parliamentary speech of 6 May 1791—in which he compared the British, French, and American constitutional models—Rakove acknowledges that there is not really enough material on Burke's attitude towards American constitutionalism to be able to pass judgement. So, instead, Rakove addresses the issue (through Burke-tinted spectacles) of why the Americans succeeded where the French failed. He thus offers some suggestions as to the grounds on which Burke might have continued to support the Americans whilst condemning the French.

The final essay, Alan Wolfe's "Democracy, Social Science, and Rationality: Reflections on Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*", is by far the most present-centred of all the essays. Wolfe opens with the suggestion that Burke's critique of the French Revolution, and, in particular, his attack on the application of rationality to social and political problems, touches on issues relevant to the social sciences in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. He goes on to explore that relevance in some detail.

Given the diversity in subject matter of these essays, and the fact that they are all based on detailed research, it is difficult to know exactly what kind of "general reader" the book is aimed at. This issue is compounded by the nature of the scholarly apparatus that is provided. The editorial notes and the Glossary Index are undoubtedly excellent additions to the text. However, there are signs that they were perhaps not as carefully thought through and executed as they should have been. On occasions additional information could perhaps have been provided to supplement Burke's own notes. Can it be assumed that the "general reader" would be able to make sense of "1st Mary, sess. 3, ch. I" (p. 17 n. 14)? Equally, there is a reference to Turgot (p. 95 n. 58), but no explanation of who he was and no mention of him in the index. Similarly, though Calonne does feature in the index, no mention is made there of his authorship of *L'Etat de France*, and where Burke refers to that book (p. 158 n. 98), no indication is given of the particular edition to which he is referring. Of greater concern are the factual/typographical errors. Bordeaux is in western, not eastern, France (p. 295); the correct spelling is Champ de Mars not Champs de Mars (p. 296); and the Revolution of 1688 involved the deposition of James II not James I. It is a shame that these slips were not spotted during the editorial process, because there is much to be gained here, both from this index and from some of the essays. However, I am still left wondering which general readers now read Burke and, of those that do, whether this edition is really the best one for them.

LIST OF ESSAYS

- Frank M. Turner, "Introduction: Edmund Burke: The Political Actor Thinking"
- Edmund Burke, "Reflections on the Revolution in France"
- Conor Cruise O'Brien, "Edmund Burke: Prophet Against the Tyranny of the Politics of Theory"

- Darrin M. McMahon, “Edmund Burke and the Literary Cabal: A Tale of Two Enlightenments”
- Jack N. Rakove, “Why American Constitutionalism Worked”
- Alan Wolfe, “Democracy, Social Science, and Rationality: Reflections on Burke’s Reflections on the Revolution in France”

NOTES

[1] D. M. McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment: The French Counter-Enlightenment and the Making of Modernity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001)

Rachel Hammersley
University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK
Rachel.Hammersley@ncl.ac.uk

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