EDMUND BURKE

BURKE'S SPEECH ON CONCILIATION WITH AMERICA

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Содержание

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PREFACE

The introduction to this edition of Burke's speech on Conciliation with America is intended to supply the needs of those students who do not have access to a well-stocked library, or who, for any reason, are unable to do the collateral reading necessary for a complete understanding of the text.

The sources from which information has been drawn in preparing this edition are mentioned under "Bibliography." The editor wishes to acknowledge indebtedness to many of the excellent older editions of the speech, and also to Mr. A. P. Winston, of the Manual Training High School, for valuable suggestions.

INTRODUCTION

POLITICAL SITUATION

In 1651 originated the policy which caused the American Revolution. That policy was one of taxation, indirect, it is true, but none the less taxation. The first Navigation Act required that colonial exports should be shipped to England in American or English vessels. This was followed by a long series of acts, regulating and restricting the American trade. Colonists were not allowed to exchange certain articles without paying duties thereon, and custom houses were established and officers appointed. Opposition to these proceedings was ineffectual; and in 1696, in order to expedite the business of taxation, and to establish a better method of ruling the colonies, a board was appointed, called the Lords Commissioners for Trade and Plantations. The royal governors found in this board ready sympathizers, and were not slow to report their grievances, and to insist upon more stringent regulations for enforcing obedience. Some of the retaliative measures employed were the suspension of the writ of habeas corpus, the abridgment of the freedom of the press and the prohibition of elections. But the colonists generally succeeded in having their own way in the end, and were

not wholly without encouragement and sympathy in the English Parliament. It may be that the war with France, which ended with the fall of Quebec, had much to do with this rather generous treatment. The Americans, too, were favored by the Whigs, who had been in power for more than seventy years. The policy of this great party was not opposed to the sentiments and ideas of political freedom that had grown up in the colonies; and, although more than half of the Navigation Acts were passed by Whig governments, the leaders had known how to wink at the violation of nearly all of them.

Immediately after the close of the French war, and after George III. had ascended the throne of England, it was decided to enforce the Navigation Acts rigidly. There was to be no more smuggling, and, to prevent this, Writs of Assistance were issued. Armed with such authority, a servant of the king might enter the home of any citizen, and make a thorough search for smuggled goods. It is needless to say the measure was resisted vigorously, and its reception by the colonists, and its effect upon them, has been called the opening scene of the American Revolution. As a matter of fact, this sudden change in the attitude of England toward the colonies, marks the beginning of the policy of George III. which, had it been successful, would have made him the ruler of an absolute instead of a limited monarchy. He hated the Tories only less than the Whigs, and when he bestowed a favor upon either, it was for the purpose of weakening the other. The first task he set himself was that of crushing the

Whigs. Since the Revolution of 1688, they had dictated the policy of the English government, and through wise leaders had become supreme in authority. They were particularly obnoxious to him because of their republican spirit, and he regarded their ascendency as a constant menace to his kingly power. Fortune seemed to favor him in the dissensions which arose. There grew up two factions in the Whig party. There were old Whigs and new Whigs. George played one against the other, advanced his favorites when opportunity offered, and in the end succeeded in forming a ministry composed of his friends and obedient to his will.

With the ministry safely in hand, he turned his attention to the House of Commons. The old Whigs had set an example, which George was shrewd enough to follow. Walpole and Newcastle had succeeded in giving England one of the most peaceful and prosperous governments within in the previous history of the nation, but their methods were corrupt. With much of the judgment, penetration and wise forbearance which marks a statesman, Walpole's distinctive qualities of mind eminently fitted him for political intrigue; Newcastle was still worse, and has the distinction of being the premier under whose administration the revolt against official corruption first received the support of the public.

For near a hundred years, the territorial distribution of seats in the House had remained the same, while the centres of population had shifted along with those of trade and new

industries. Great towns were without representation, while boroughs, such as Old Sarum, without a single voter, still claimed, and had, a seat in Parliament. Such districts, or "rotten boroughs," were owned and controlled by many of the great landowners. Both Walpole and Newcastle resorted to the outright purchase of these seats, and when the time came George did not shrink from doing the same thing. He went even further. All preferments of whatsoever sort were bestowed upon those who would do his bidding, and the business of bribery assumed such proportions that an office was opened at the Treasury for this purpose, from which twenty-five thousand pounds are said to have passed in a single day. Parliament had been for a long time only partially representative of the people; it now ceased to be so almost completely.

With, the support which such methods secured, along with encouragement from his ministers, the king was prepared to put in operation his policy for regulating the affairs of America. Writs of Assistance (1761) were followed by the passage of the Stamp Act (1765). The ostensible object of both these measures was to help pay the debt incurred by the French war, but the real purpose lay deeper, and was nothing more or less than the ultimate extension of parliamentary rule, in great things as well as small, to America. At this crisis, so momentous for the colonists, the Rockingham ministry was formed, and Burke, together with Pitt, supported a motion for the unconditional repeal of the Stamp Act. After much wrangling, the motion was carried, and

the first blunder of the mother country seemed to have been smoothed over.

Only a few months elapsed, however, when the question of taxing the colonies was revived. Pitt lay ill, and could take no part in the proposed measure. Through the influence of other members of his party,—notably Townshend,—a series of acts were passed, imposing duties on several exports to America. This was followed by a suspension of the New York Assembly, because it had disregarded instructions in the matter of supplies for the troops. The colonists were furious. Matters went from bad to worse. To withdraw as far as possible without yielding the principle at stake, the duties on all the exports mentioned in the bill were removed, except that on tea. But it was precisely the principle for which the colonists were contending. They were not in the humor for compromise, when they believed their freedom was endangered, and the strength and determination of their resistance found a climax in the Boston Tea Party.

In the meantime, Lord North, who was absolutely obedient to the king, had become prime minister. Five bills were prepared, the tenor of which, it was thought, would overawe the colonists. Of these, the Boston Port Bill and the Regulating Act are perhaps the most famous, though the ultimate tendency of all was blindly coercive.

While the king and his friends were busy with these, the opposition proposed an unconditional repeal of the Tea Act. The bill was introduced only to be overwhelmingly defeated by the

same Parliament that passed the five measures of Lord North.

In America, the effect of these proceedings was such as might have been expected by thinking men. The colonies were as a unit in their support of Massachusetts. The Regulating Act was set at defiance, public officers in the king's service were forced to resign, town meetings were held, and preparations for war were begun in dead earnest. To avert this, some of England's greatest statesmen—Pitt among the number—asked for a reconsideration. On February the first, 1775, a bill was introduced, which would have gone far toward bringing peace. One month later, Burke delivered his speech on Conciliation with the Colonies.

EDMUND BURKE

There is nothing unusual in Burke's early life. He was born in Dublin, Ireland, in 1729. His father was a successful lawyer and a Protestant, his mother, a Catholic. At the age of twelve, he became a pupil of Abraham Shackleton, a Quaker, who had been teaching some fifteen years at Ballitore, a small town thirty miles from Dublin. In after years Burke was always pleased to speak of his old friend in the kindest way: "If I am anything," he declares, "it is the education I had there that has made me so." And again at Shackleton's death, when Burke was near the zenith of his fame and popularity, he writes: "I had a true honor and affection for that excellent man. I feel something like a satisfaction in the midst of my concern, that I was fortunate enough to have him under my roof before his departure." It can hardly be doubted that the old Quaker schoolmaster succeeded with his pupil who was already so favorably inclined, and it is more than probable that the daily example of one who lived out his precepts was strong in its influence upon a young and generous mind.

Burke attended school at Ballitore two years; then, at the age of fourteen, he became a student at Trinity College, Dublin, and remained there five years. At college he was unsystematic and careless of routine. He seems to have done pretty much as he pleased, and, however methodical he became in after life, his study during these five years was rambling and spasmodic. The

only definite knowledge we have of this period is given by Burke himself in letters to his former friend Richard Shackleton, son of his old schoolmaster. What he did was done with a zest that at times became a feverish impatience: "First I was greatly taken with natural philosophy, which, while I should have given my mind to logic, employed me incessantly. This I call my FUROR MATHEMATICUS." Following in succession come his FUROR LOGICUS, FUROR HISTORICUS, and FUROR PEOTICUS, each of which absorbed him for the time being. It would be wrong, however, to think of Burke as a trifler even in his youth. He read in the library three hours every day and we may be sure he read as intelligently as eagerly. It is more than probable that like a few other great minds he did not need a rigid system to guide him. If he chose his subjects of study at pleasure, there is every reason to believe he mastered them.

Of intimate friends at the University we hear nothing. Goldsmith came one year later, but there is no evidence that they knew each other. It is probable that Burke, always reserved, had little in common with his young associates. His own musings, with occasional attempts at writing poetry, long walks through the country, and frequent letters to and from Richard Shackleton, employed him when not at his books.

Two years after taking his degree, Burke went to London and established himself at the Middle Temple for the usual routine course in law. Another long period passes of which there is next to nothing known. His father, an irascible, hot-tempered

man, had wished him to begin the practice of law, but Burke seems to have continued in a rather irregular way pretty much as when an undergraduate at Dublin. His inclinations were not toward the law, but literature. His father, angered at such a turn of affairs, promptly reduced his allowance and left him to follow his natural bent in perfect freedom. In 1756, six years after his arrival in London, and almost immediately following the rupture with his father, he married a Miss Nugent. At about the same time he published his first two books, [Footnote: A Vindication of Natural Society and Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful] and began in earnest the life of an author.

He attracted the attention of literary men. Dr. Johnson had just completed his famous dictionary, and was the centre of a group of writers who accepted him at his own valuation. Burke did not want for company, and wrote copiously.[Footnote: Hints for an Essay on the Drama. Abridgement of the History of England] He became associated with Dodsley, a bookseller, who began publishing the Annual Register in 1759, and was paid a hundred pounds a year for writing upon current events. He spent two years (1761-63) in Ireland in the employment of William Hamilton, but at the end of that time returned, chagrined and disgusted with his would-be patron, who utterly failed to recognize Burke's worth, and persisted in the most unreasonable demands upon his time and energy.

For once Burke's independence served him well. In 1765 Lord

Rockingham became prime minister, and Burke, widely known as the chief writer for the Annual Register, was free to accept the position of private secretary, which Lord Rockingham was glad to offer him. His services here were invaluable. The new relations thus established did not end with the performance of the immediate duties of his office, but a warm friendship grew up between the two, which lasted till the death of Lord Rockingham. While yet private secretary, Burke was elected to Parliament from the borough of Wendover. It was through the influence of his friend, or perhaps relative, William Burke, that his election was secured.

Only a few days after taking his seat in the House of Commons, Burke made his first speech, January 27, 1766. He followed this in a very short time with another upon the same subject—the Taxation of the American Colonies. Notwithstanding the great honor and distinction which these first speeches brought Burke, his party was dismissed at the close of the session and the Chatham ministry formed. He remained with his friends, and employed himself in refuting [Footnote: Observations on the Present State of the Nation] the charges of the former minister, George Grenville, who wrote a pamphlet accusing his successors of gross neglect of public duties.

At this point in his life comes the much-discussed matter of Beaconsfield. How Burke became rich enough to purchase such expensive property is a question that has never been answered by his friends or enemies. There are mysterious hints of successful

speculation in East India stock, of money borrowed, and Burke himself, in a letter to Shackleton, speaks of aid from his friends and "all [the money] he could collect of his own." However much we may regret the air of mystery surrounding the matter, and the opportunity given those ever ready to smirch a great man's character, it is not probable that any one ever really doubted Burke's integrity in this or any other transaction. Perhaps the true explanation of his seemingly reckless extravagance (if any explanation is needed) is that the conventional standards of his time forced it upon him; and it may be that Burke himself sympathized to some extent with these standards, and felt a certain satisfaction in maintaining a proper attitude before the public.

The celebrated case of Wilkes offered an opportunity for discussing the narrow and corrupt policy pursued by George III. and his followers. Wilkes, outlawed for libel and protected in the meantime through legal technicalities, was returned to Parliament by Middlesex. The House expelled him. He was repeatedly elected and as many times expelled, and finally the returns were altered, the House voting its approval by a large majority. In 1770 Burke published his pamphlet [Footnote: Present Discontents] in which he discussed the situation. For the first time he showed the full sweep and breadth of his understanding. His tract was in the interest of his party, but it was written in a spirit far removed from narrow partisanship. He pointed out with absolute clearness the cause of dissatisfaction

and unrest among the people and charged George III. and his councillors with gross indifference to the welfare of the nation and corresponding devotion to selfish interests. He contended that Parliament was usurping privileges when it presumed to expel any one, that the people had a right to send whomsoever they pleased to Parliament, and finally that "in all disputes between them and their rulers, the presumption was at least upon a par in favor of the people." From this time until the American Revolution, Burke used every opportunity to denounce the policy which the king was pursuing at home and abroad. He doubtless knew beforehand that what he might say would pass unnoticed, but he never faltered in a steadfast adherence to his ideas of government, founded, as he believed, upon the soundest principles. Bristol elected him as its representative in Parliament. It was a great honor and Burke felt its significance, yet he did not flinch when the time came for him to take a stand. He voted for the removal of some of the restrictions upon Irish trade. His constituents, representing one of the most prosperous mercantile districts, angered and disappointed at what they held to be a betrayal of trust, refused to reelect him.

Lord North's ministry came to an end in 1782, immediately after the battle of Yorktown, and Lord Rockingham was chosen prime minister. Burke's past services warranted him in expecting an important place in the cabinet, but he was ignored. Various things have been suggested as reasons for this: he was poor; some of his relations and intimate associates were objectionable;

there were dark hints of speculations; he was an Irishman. It is possible that any one of these facts, or all of them, furnished a good excuse for not giving him an important position in the new government. But it seems more probable that Burke's abilities were not appreciated so justly as they have been since. The men with whom he associated saw some of his greatness but not all of it. He was assigned the office of Paymaster of Forces, a place of secondary importance.

Lord Rockingham died in three months and the party went to pieces. Burke refused to work under Shelburne, and, with Fox, joined Lord North in forming the coalition which overthrew the Whig party. Burke has been severely censured for the part he took in this. Perhaps there is little excuse for his desertion, and it is certainly true that his course raises the question of his sincere devotion to principles. His personal dislike of Shelburne was so intense that he may have yielded to his feelings. He felt hurt, too, we may be sure, at the disposition made of him by his friends. In replying to a letter asking him for a place in the new government, he writes that his correspondent has been misinformed. "I make no part of the ministerial arrangement," he writes, and adds, "Something in the official line may be thought fit for my measure."

As a supporter of the coalition, Burke was one of the framers of the India Bill. This was directed against the wholesale robbery and corruption which the East India Company had been guilty of in its government of the country. Both Fox and Burke defended

the measure with all the force and power which a thorough mastery of facts, a keen sense of the injustice done an unhappy people, and a splendid rhetoric can give. But it was doomed from the first. The people at large were indifferent, many had profitable business relations with the company, and the king used his personal influence against it. The bill failed to pass, the coalition was dismissed, and the party, which had in Burke its greatest representative, was utterly ruined.

The failure of the India Bill marked a victory for the king, and it also prepared the way for one of the most famous transactions of Burke's life. Macaulay has told how impressive and magnificent was the scene at the trial of Warren Hastings. There were political reasons for the impeachment, but the chief motive that stirred Burke was far removed from this. He saw and understood the real state of affairs in India. The mismanagement, the brutal methods, and the crimes committed there in the name of the English government, moved him profoundly, and when he rose before the magnificent audience at Westminster, for opening the cause, he forced his hearers, by his own mighty passion, to see with his own eyes, and to feel his own righteous anger. "When he came to his two narratives," says Miss Burney, "when he related the particulars of those dreadful murders, he interested, he engaged, he at last overpowered me; I felt my cause lost. I could hardly keep my seat. My eyes dreaded a single glance toward a man so accused as Mr. Hastings; I wanted to sink on the floor, that they might be saved so painful a sight. I had no hope he

could clear himself; not another wish in his favor remained." The trial lasted for six years and ended with the acquittal of Hastings. The result was not a surprise, and least of all to Burke. The fate of the India Bill had taught him how completely indifferent the popular mind was to issues touching deep moral questions. Though a seeming failure, he regarded the impeachment as the greatest work of his life. It did much to arouse and stimulate the national sense of justice. It made clear the cruel methods sometimes pursued under the guise of civilization and progress. The moral victory is claimed for Burke, and without a doubt the claim is valid.

The second of the great social and political problems, which employed English statesmen in the last half of the eighteenth century, was settled in the impeachment of Warren Hastings. The affairs of America and India were now overshadowed by the French Revolution, and Burke, with the far-sighted vision of a veteran statesman, watched the progress of events and their influence upon the established order. In 1773 he had visited France, and had returned displeased. It is remarkable with what accuracy he pointed out the ultimate tendency of much that he saw. A close observer of current phases of society, and on the alert to explain them in the light of broad and fundamental principles of human progress, he had every opportunity for studying social life at the French capital. Unlike the younger men of his times, he was doubtful, and held his judgment in suspense. The enthusiasm of even Fox seemed premature, and he held

himself aloof from the popular demonstrations of admiration and approval that were everywhere going on. The fact is, Burke was growing old, and with his years he was becoming more conservative. He dreaded change, and was suspicious of the wisdom of those who set about such widespread innovations, and made such brilliant promises for the future. But the time rapidly approached for him to declare himself, and in 1790 his Reflections on the Revolution in France was issued. His friends had long waited its appearance, and were not wholly surprised at the position taken. What did surprise them was the eagerness with which the people seized upon the book, and its effect upon them. The Tories, with the king, applauded long and loud; the Whigs were disappointed, for Burke condemned the Revolution unreservedly, and with a bitterness out of all proportion to the cause of his anxiety and fear. As the Revolution progressed, he grew fiercer in his denunciation. He broke with his lifelong associates, and declared that no one who sympathized with the work of the Assembly could be his friend. His other writings on the Revolution [Footnote: Letter to a Member of the National Assembly and Letters on a Regicide Peace.] were in a still more violent strain, and it is hard to think of them as coming from the author of the Speech on Conciliation.

Three years before his death, at the conclusion of the trial of Warren Hastings, Burke's last term in Parliament expired. He did not wish office again and withdrew to his estate. Through the influence of friends, and because of his eminent services, it was

proposed to make him peer, with the title of Lord Beacons field. But the death of his son prevented, and a pension of twenty-five hundred pounds a year was given instead. It was a signal for his enemies, and during his last days he was busy with his reply. The "Letter to a Noble Lord," though written little more than a year before his death, is considered one of the most perfect of his papers. Saddened by the loss of his son, and broken in spirits, there is yet left him enough old-time energy and fire to answer his detractors. But his wonderful career was near its close. His last months were spent in writing about the French Revolution, and the third letter on a Regicide Peace—a fragment—was doubtless composed just before his death. On the 9th of July, 1797, he passed away. His friends claimed for him a place in Westminster, but his last wish was respected, and he was buried at Beaconsfield.

BURKE AS A STATESMAN

There is hardly a political tract or pamphlet of Burke's in which he does not state, in terms more or less clear, the fundamental principle in his theory of government. "Circumstances," he says in one place, "give, in reality, to every political principle, its distinguishing color and discriminating effect. The circumstances are what renders every civil and political scheme beneficial or obnoxious to mankind." At another time he exclaims: "This is the true touchstone of all theories which regard man and the affairs of men; does it suit his nature in general, does it suit his nature as modified by his habits?" And again he extends his system to affairs outside the realm of politics. "All government," he declares, "indeed, every human benefit and enjoyment, every virtue and every prudent act, is founded on compromise and barter."

It is clear that Burke thought the State existed for the people, and not the people for the State. The doctrine is old to us, but it was not so in Burke's time, and it required courage to expound it. The great parties had forgotten the reason for their existence, and one of them had become hardened and blinded by that corruption which seems to follow long tenure of office. The affairs of India, Ireland, and America gave excellent opportunity for an exhibition of English statesmanship, but in each case the policy pursued was dictated, not by a clear perception of what was needed in

these countries, but by narrow selfishness, not unmixed with dogmatism of the most challenging sort. The situation in India, as regards climate, character, and institutions, counted for little in the minds of those who were growing rich as agents of the East India Company. Much the same may be said of America and Ireland. The sense of Parliament, influenced by the king, was to use these parts of the British Empire in raising a revenue, and in strengthening party organization at home. In opposing this policy, Burke lost his seat as representative for Bristol, then the second city of England; spent fourteen of the best years of his life in conducting the impeachment of Warren Hastings, Governor-General of India; and, greatest of all, delivered his famous speeches on Taxation and Conciliation, in behalf of the American colonists.

Notwithstanding the distinctly modern tone of Burke's ideas, it would be wrong to think of him as a thoroughgoing reformer. He has been called the Great Conservative, and the title is appropriate. He would have shrunk from a purely republican form of government, such as our own, and it is, perhaps, a fact that he was suspicious of a government by the people. The trouble, as he saw it, lay with the representatives of the people. Upon them, as guardians of a trust, rested the responsibility of protecting those whom they were chosen to serve. While he bitterly opposed any measures involving radical change in the Constitution, he was no less ardent in denouncing political corruptions of all kinds whatsoever. In his Economical Reform

he sought to curtail the enormous extravagance of the royal household, and to withdraw the means of wholesale bribery, which offices at the disposal of the king created. He did not believe that a more effective means than this lay in the proposed plan for a redistribution of seats in the House of Commons. In one place, he declared it might be well to lessen the number of voters, in order to add to their weight and independence; at another, he asks that the people be stimulated to a more careful scrutiny of the conduct of their representatives; and on every occasion he demands that the legislators give their support to those measures only which have for their object the good of the whole people.

It is obvious, however, that Burke's policy had grievous faults. His reverence for the past, and his respect for existing institutions as the heritage of the past, made him timid and overcautious in dealing with abuses. Although he stood with Pitt in defending the American colonies, he had no confidence in the thoroughgoing reforms which the great Commoner proposed. When the Stamp Act was repealed, Pitt would have gone even further. He would have acknowledged the absolute injustice of taxation without representation. Burke held tenaciously to the opposing theory, and warmly supported the Declaratory Act, which "asserted the supreme authority of Parliament over the colonies, in all cases whatsoever." His support of the bill for the repeal of the Stamp Act, as well as his plea for reconciliation, ten years later, were not prompted by a firm belief in the injustice of England's course.

He expressly states, in both cases that to enforce measures so repugnant to the Americans, would be detrimental to the home government. It would result in confusion and disorder, and would bring, perhaps, in the end, open rebellion. All of his speeches on American affairs show his willingness to "barter and compromise" in order to avoid this, but nowhere is there a hint of fundamental error in the Constitution. This was sacred to him, and he resented to the last any proposition looking to an organic change in its structure. "The lines of morality," he declared, "are not like ideal lines of mathematics. They are broad and deep, as well as long. They admit of exceptions; they demand modifications. These exceptions and modifications are made, not by the process of logic, but the rules of prudence. Prudence is not only first in rank of all the virtues, political and moral, but she is the director, the regulator, the standard of them all."

The chief characteristics, then, of Burke's political philosophy are opposed to much that is fundamental in modern systems. His doctrine is better than that of George III, because it is more generous, and affords opportunity for superficial readjustment and adaptation. It is this last, or rather the proof it gives of his insight, that has secured Burke so high a place among English statesmen.

A GROUP OF WRITERS COMING IMMEDIATELY BEFORE BURKE

Addison. . . . 1672-1719
Steele 1672-1729
Defoe. 1661-1731
Swift. 1667-1745
Pope 1688-1744
Richardson . . 1689-1761

A GROUP OF WRITERS CONTEMPORARY WITH BURKE

Johnson 1709-1784
Goldsmith . . . 1728-1774
Fielding. . . . 1707-1754
Sterne. 1713-1768
Smollett. . . . 1721-1771
Gray. 1716-1771
Boswell 1740-1795

BURKE IN LITERATURE

It has become almost trite to speak of the breadth of Burke's sympathies. We should examine the statement, however, and understand its significance and see its justice. While he must always be regarded first as a statesman of one of the highest types, he had other interests than those directly suggested by his office, and in one of these, at least, he affords an interesting and profitable study.

To the student of literature Burke's name must always suggest that of Johnson and Goldsmith. It was eight years after Burke's first appearance as an author, that the famous Literary Club was formed. At first it was the intention to limit the club to a membership of nine, and for a time this was adhered to. The original members were Johnson, Burke, Goldsmith, Reynolds, and Hawkins. Garrick, Pox, and Boswell came in later. Macaulay declares that the influence of the club was so great that its verdict made and unmade reputations; but the thing most interesting to us does not lie in the consideration of such literary dictatorship. To Boswell we owe a biography of Johnson which has immortalized its subject, and shed lustre upon all associated with him. The literary history of the last third of the eighteenth century, with Johnson as a central figure, is told nowhere else with such accuracy, or with better effect.

Although a Tory, Johnson was a great one, and his lasting

friendship for Burke is an enduring evidence of his generosity and great-mindedness. For twenty years, and longer, they were eminent men in opposing parties, yet their mutual respect and admiration continued to the last. To Burke, Johnson was a writer of "eminent literary merit" and entitled to a pension "solely on that account." To Johnson, Burke was the greatest man of his age, wrong politically, to be sure, yet the only one "whose common conversation corresponded to the general fame which he had in the world"—the only one "who was ready, whatever subject was chosen, to meet you on your own ground." Here and there in the Life are allusions to Burke, and admirable estimates of his many-sided character.

Coming directly to an estimate of Burke from the purely literary point of view, it must be borne in mind that the greater part of his writings was prepared for an audience. Like Macaulay, his prevailing style suggests the speaker, and his methods throughout are suited to declamation and oratory. He lacks the ease and delicacy that we are accustomed to look for in the best prose writers, and occasionally one feels the justice of Johnson's stricture, that "he sometimes talked partly from ostentation", or of Hazlitt's criticism that he seemed to be "perpetually calling the speaker out to dance a minuet with him before he begins."

There may be passages here and there that warrant such censure. Burke is certainly ornate, and at times he is extremely self-conscious, but the dominant quality of his style, and the

one which forever contradicts the idea of mere showiness, is passion. In his method of approaching a subject, he may be, and perhaps is, rather tedious, but when once he has come to the matter really in hand, he is no longer the rhetorician, dealing in fine phrases, but the great seer, clothing his thoughts in words suitable and becoming. The most magnificent passages in his writings—the Conciliation is rich in them—owe their charm and effectiveness to this emotional capacity. They were evidently written in moments of absolute abandonment to feeling—in moments when he was absorbed in the contemplation of some great truth, made luminous by his own unrivalled powers.

Closely allied to this intensity of passion, is a splendid imaginative quality. Few writers of English prose have such command of figurative expression. It must be said, however, that Burke was not entirely free from the faults which generally accompany an excessive use of figures. Like other great masters of a decorative style, he frequently becomes pompous and grandiloquent. His thought, too, is obscured, where we would expect great clearness of statement, accompanied by a dignified simplicity; and occasionally we feel that he forgets his subject in an anxious effort to make an impression. Though there are passages in his writings that justify such observations, they are few in number, when compared with those which are really masterpieces of their kind.

Some great crisis, or threatening state of affairs, seems to furnish the necessary condition for the exercise of a great mind,

and Burke is never so effective as when thoroughly aroused. His imagination needed the chastening which only a great moment or critical situation could give. Two of his greatest speeches —Conciliation, and Impeachment of Warren Hastings—were delivered under the restraining effect of such circumstances, and in each the figurative expression is subdued and not less beautiful in itself than, appropriate for the occasion.

Finally, it must be observed that no other writer of English prose has a better command of words. His ideas, as multifarious as they are, always find fitting expression. He does not grope for a term; it stands ready for his thought, and one feels that he had opportunity for choice. It is the exuberance of his fancy, already mentioned, coupled with this richness of vocabulary, that helped to make Burke a tiresome speaker. His mind was too comprehensive to allow any phase of his subject to pass without illumination. He followed where his subject led him, without any great attention to the patience of his audience. But he receives full credit when his speeches are read. It is then that his mastery of the subject and the splendid qualities of his style are apparent, and appreciated at their worth.

In conclusion, it is worth while observing that in the study of a great character, joined with an attempt to estimate it by conventional standards, something must always be left unsaid. Much may be learned of Burke by knowing his record as a partisan, more by a minute inspection of his style as a writer, but beyond all this is the moral tone or attitude of the man himself.

To a student of Burke this is the greatest thing about him. It colored every line he wrote, and to it, more than anything else, is due the immense force of the man as a speaker and writer. It was this, more than Burke's great abilities, that justifies Dr. Johnson's famous eulogy: "He is not only the first man in the House of Commons, he is the first man everywhere."

A GROUP OF WRITERS COMING IMMEDIATELY AFTER BURKE

Wordsworth 1770-1850

Coleridge 1772-1834
Byron 1788-1824
Shelley 1792-1822
Keats 1795-1821
Scott 1771-1832

TOPICS FOR SPECIAL REPORTS

1. "Like Goldsmith, though in a different sphere, Burke belongs both to the old order and the new." Discuss that statement.

2. Burke and the Literary Club. (Boswell's Life of Johnson.)

3. Lives of Burke and Goldsmith. Contrast.

4. An interpretation of ten apothegms selected from the Speech on Conciliation.

5. A study of figures in the Speech on Conciliation.

6. A definition of the terms: "colloquialism" and "idiom" Instances of their use in the Speech on Conciliation.

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4. History of the English People. Green. Vol. IV., pp 193-271.
5 History of Civilization in England. Buckle. Vol I, pp. 326-338
6. The American Revolution. Fiske. Vol. I, Chaps. I., II.
7. Life of Johnson. Boswell. (Use the Index)

EDMUND BURKE

ON MOVING HIS RESOLUTIONS FOR CONCILIATION WITH THE COLONIES. HOUSE OF COMMONS, MARCH 22, 1775

I hope, Sir, that notwithstanding the austerity of the Chair, your good nature will incline you to some degree of indulgence towards human frailty. You will not think it unnatural that those who have an object depending, which strongly engages their hopes and fears, should be somewhat inclined to superstition. As I came into the House full of anxiety about the event of my motion, I found, to my infinite surprise, that the grand penal bill, [1] by which we had passed sentence on the trade and sustenance of America, is to be returned to us from the other House. I do confess I could not help looking on this event as a fortunate omen. I look upon it as a sort of providential favor, by which we are put once more in possession of our deliberative capacity upon a business so very questionable in its nature, so very uncertain in its issue. By the return of this bill, which seemed to have taken its flight forever, we are at this very instant nearly as free to choose a plan for our American Government as we were on the first day of the session. If, Sir, we incline to the side of conciliation, we are not at all embarrassed (unless we please to make ourselves so) by any incongruous mixture of coercion and restraint. We are therefore called upon, as it were by a superior warning voice,

again to attend to America; to attend to the whole of it together; and to review the subject with an unusual degree of care and calmness.

Surely it is an awful subject, or there is none so on this side of the grave. When I first had the honor 2 of a seat in this House, the affairs of that continent pressed themselves upon us as the most important and most delicate object of Parliamentary attention. My little share in this great deliberation oppressed me. I found myself a partaker in a very high trust; and, having no sort of reason to rely on the strength of my natural abilities for the proper execution of that trust, I was obliged to take more than common pains to instruct myself in everything which relates to our Colonies. I was not less under the necessity of forming some fixed ideas concerning the general policy of the British Empire. Something of this sort seemed to be indispensable, in order, amidst so vast a fluctuation of passions and opinions, to concentre my thoughts, to ballast my conduct, to preserve me from being blown about by every wind of fashionable doctrine. I really did not think it safe or manly to have fresh principles to seek upon every fresh mail which should arrive from America.

At that period I had the fortune to find myself in perfect concurrence with a large majority in this House. Bowing under that high authority, and penetrated with the sharpness and strength of that early impression, I have continued ever since, without the least deviation, in my original sentiments. 3 Whether this be owing to an obstinate perseverance in error, or to a

religious adherence to what appears to me truth, and reason, it is in your equity to judge.

Sir, Parliament having an enlarged view of objects, made, during this interval, more frequent changes in their sentiments and their conduct than could be justified in a particular person upon the contracted scale of private information. But though I do not hazard anything approaching to a censure on the motives of former Parliaments to all those alterations, one fact is undoubted—that under them the state of America has been kept in continual agitation. 4 Everything administered as remedy to the public complaint, if it did not produce, was at least followed by, an heightening of the distemper; until, by a variety of experiments, that important country has been brought into her present situation—a situation which I will not miscall, which I dare not name, which I scarcely know how to comprehend in the terms of any description.

In this posture, Sir, things stood at the beginning of the session. About that time, a worthy member 5 of great Parliamentary experience, who, in the year 1766, filled the chair of the American committee with much ability, took me aside; and, lamenting the present aspect of our politics, told me things were come to such a pass that our former 6 methods of proceeding in the House would be no longer tolerated: that the public tribunal (never too indulgent to a long and unsuccessful opposition) would now scrutinize our conduct with unusual severity: that the very vicissitudes and shiftings of Ministerial

measures, instead of convicting their authors of inconstancy and want of system, would be taken as an occasion of charging us with a predetermined discontent, which nothing could satisfy; whilst we accused every measure of vigor as cruel, and every proposal of lenity as weak and irresolute. The public, he said, would not have patience to see us play the game out with our adversaries; we must produce our hand. It would be expected that those who for many years had been active in such affairs should show that they had formed some clear and decided idea of the principles of Colony government; and were capable of drawing out something like a platform of the ground which might be laid for future and permanent tranquillity.

I felt the truth of what my honorable friend represented; but I felt my situation too. His application might have been made with far greater propriety to many other gentlemen. No man was indeed ever better disposed, or worse qualified, for such an undertaking than myself. Though I gave so far in to his opinion that I immediately threw my thoughts into a sort of Parliamentary form, I was by no means equally ready to produce them. It generally argues some degree of natural impotence of mind, or some want of knowledge of the world, to hazard plans of government except from a seat of authority. Propositions are made, not only ineffectually, but somewhat disreputably, when the minds of men are not properly disposed for their reception; and, for my part, I am not ambitious of ridicule—not absolutely a candidate for disgrace.

Besides, Sir, to speak the plain truth, I have in general no very exalted opinion of the virtue of paper government; [7] nor of any politics in which the plan is to be wholly separated from the execution. But when I saw that anger and violence prevailed every day more and more, and that things were hastening towards an incurable alienation of our Colonies, I confess my caution gave way. I felt this as one of those few moments in which decorum yields to a higher duty. Public calamity is a mighty leveller; and there are occasions when any, even the slightest, chance of doing good must be laid hold on, even by the most inconsiderable person.

To restore order and repose to an empire so great and so distracted as ours, is, merely in the attempt, an undertaking that would ennoble the flights of the highest genius, and obtain pardon for the efforts of the meanest understanding. Struggling a good while with these thoughts, by degrees I felt myself more firm. I derived, at length, some confidence from what in other circumstances usually produces timidity. I grew less anxious, even from the idea of my own insignificance. For, judging of what you are by what you ought to be, I persuaded myself that you would not reject a reasonable proposition because it had nothing but its reason to recommend it. On the other hand, being totally destitute of all shadow of influence, natural or adventitious, I was very sure that, if my proposition were futile or dangerous—if it were weakly conceived, or improperly timed—there was nothing exterior to it of power to awe, dazzle, or delude you. You will see

it just as it is; and you will treat it just as it deserves.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.