

Edmund Burke and the Invention of Modern Conservatism, 1830-1914: An Intellectual History

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Edmund Burke has long been regarded as the founder of both conservatism considered as a distinct ideology transcending time and context, and—in a British context—of Conservatism as a party-political creed. In textbooks on ideologies, versions of Burke's attack on the French Revolution provide the mainstay of the ideology and inform scholarly analysis of its political implementation, enhanced but never supplanted by other figures identified with the Right.

Generations of students have imbibed this understanding of both Burke and the political ideology with which he is associated. However, following the publication of Emily Jones's book, its days are numbered, as is confusion over whether to capitalise the term 'conservatism' and, if so, when. At the outset, Jones makes clear that she reserves the label 'Conservatism' for political Conservatism in the sense of party affiliation, 'conservatism' for the wider intellectual tradition, and uses the inelegant but precise label 'C/conservatism' when both are designated. Her richly detailed study of the reception of Burke's thought since his death emphasises that Burke only became a C/conservative figurehead towards the close of the 19th century. Previously, different aspects of his complex legacy were praised and denounced, and there was no common agreement on his stature, other than his merits as a writer and orator, who was the subject of extensive biographies. As Jones points out, as a proponent of political doctrine, much less C/conservative doctrine, Burke had little recognition or appreciation before the 1870s. On the contrary, in the first few decades after his death, he was often vilified for splitting the Whig party, and for either abandoning the principles of constitutional reform he had upheld in *Thoughts on the Present Discontents* (1770) or assailing the monarchy for party advantage when the occasion arose, in tracts such as *Thoughts*. His attack on the French Revolution was widely regarded by the Whigs as nothing less than apostasy, explicable only in terms of a 'madness' that had overcome him; no other reason could be found for his sudden shift in becoming an unqualified friend of monarchy, regardless of the depths of its abuses. Burke's 'Toryism' after 1790 was noted by Radicals in distancing him from the political reform taking place after 1832, suggesting that his vested interests in the existing system were stronger than his principles. But his Toryism—such as it was—was not seized on by the Conservative party as an intellectual asset until many decades later.

This book explores the complex reasons for Burke's delayed role as a Conservative touchstone, from his Irish roots and Roman Catholic sympathies, to his divided legacy on reform. On all three accounts he was distanced by ambitious Tory statesmen such as Peel and Disraeli. The book makes clear that, certainly in England, Burke was largely a pariah figure, whose intellectual legacy was problematic. This runs contrary to the influential view of John Burrow—a leading intellectual historian of 19th-century Britain—that a 'diffused Burkeanism' pervaded the 19th century in constitutional argument. The book emphasises that English constitutionalism found varied forms of expression, Whig, Tory, and Radical, often in opposition to Burke, whose refusal to move beyond the terms of 1688 was rejected by many who shared his incremental approach to reform, including the Whig historian T. B. Macaulay, who featured prominently in Burrow's work. Burke's 'passion' was especially difficult for his status as a serious political thinker, and some critics believed that it unbalanced his judgement, however much it enabled him to warm to his themes. His reputation was also dogged by question marks over his financial affairs. In Ireland his star rose higher, signalled not only in the Irish provenance of the two main biographies that followed his death—by James Prior (1824–6) and Thomas Macknight (1858), both admirers of Burke—but also the statue of him that was erected outside Trinity College, Dublin, in 1868, which is included on the dust-jacket of the book.

The book shows that the turning point in recognition of Burke as a political thinker came in the 1860s. He then found new acclaim among a generation of intellectual liberals, most of whom appreciated the high premium he seemed to attach to experience as the source of political wisdom; and to the cumulative nature of historical development. This reappraisal of Burke was fuelled by the new interest in evolution exemplified in the writings of Leslie Stephen, and concern for the shallowness of democratic liberalism on the part of his brother, James Fitzjames Stephen. John Morley amplified this current in his biographies of Burke in 1867 and 1879, praising Burke's level-headedness in practical political issues—save that of parliamentary reform—and his general refusal to sacrifice his principles for party advantage. To this phase in critical acclaim of Burke also belongs an edition of his selected works published by Oxford University Press (1874–8), with an introduction by the Oxford historian, E. J. Payne. In general, the distinctive feature of commentary emanating from this group was their concern to balance praise with criticism, developing new areas of interest in Burke as a politician, writer, and thinker, often with due regard for his historical context. Jones here brings out superbly the points of contrast and comparison between these commentators, and the different sources of their interest in Burke—professional, political, and intellectual. Most of all, she highlights the significance of Morley's claim that Burke was a consistent political thinker of some stature, and that of a conservative (small 'c') kind, despite the exception Morley made of Burke's later works, from the *Appeal from the Old to the New Whigs* (1791) until his death. While this claim was not wholly convincing to reviewers in 1867, at the same time it was dismissed as half-hearted by Payne, who included all of Burke's writings—pre- and post-Revolutionary—in his defence of Burke as a 'systematic and complete' political thinker (p. 101). This struck a new note in the reception of Burke that resonated in later decades as he not only came to be seen as a conservative political thinker, but became the in-house philosopher of the Conservative and Unionist Party, too.

Crucial to this transition were the political divisions over Home Rule. Initially, Home Rulers made most of the running in recruiting Burke to their cause, taking their lead from Gladstone in promoting a 'voluntarist' view of the Union on the strength of Burke's American speeches. Not all Home Rulers were convinced that Burke could be easily appropriated in this way, Morley especially. As Jones observes, his silence on Burke and Home Rule in his biographies is telling of his efforts to maintain his impartiality as a scholar and almost certainly of his recognition that Home Rule represented a constitutional revolution, out of keeping with the general temper of Burke's thought. However, Liberal Unionists soon had the better of the argument: as in the case of A. V. Dicey, they emphasised that Burke's later writings—where much of his wisdom was now located—were off-limits for Home Rulers. As Burke ceased to offer succour to Home Rule, and as the constitutional enormity of that measure became apparent, he developed the mantle of a Conservative elder statesman, to whom homage was paid by erstwhile Radicals such as Joseph Chamberlain and erstwhile Liberals such as Dicey and W. H. Lecky. This reflected a growing understanding that it was not Burke who had capsized the Whig party but his Foxite enemies; and that Tories and Whigs were not political foes but

friends.

What Jones terms ‘the New C/conservatism’ became consolidated in Burke’s image from 1885, helped by such developments as an expanding university curriculum in the study of politics and history, whose architects actively sought authorial anchors for the different traditions of political thought. His ‘political theory’ was extracted with the aid of the organicism that shaped much political and moral argument—including that of Idealist thinkers—in the 19th century, as well as historical inquiry. The turn to Burke was also assisted by a growing market in cheap texts in the new age of mass literacy, as debate about Burke in elite circles spread downwards; and by the parallel growth of University Extension lectures, building upon popular interest in the Revolution. These developments lent credence to the idea—increasingly supported by both Home Rulers and Unionists—that Burke was essentially a conservative, albeit of a Whig kind. The creation of Burke the Conservative was consolidated by politicians such as F. E. Smith and Lord Hugh Cecil; they used Burke to promote their own versions of Conservatism, whether consciously Tory, as in Smith’s case, or Free Trade and Anglican, as in Cecil’s case. Their texts on Conservatism became as canonical as those of Burke, which they sought to canonise in turn; indeed, this had been their intention in addressing the lack of clear statements of Conservative or Tory doctrine hitherto. Moreover, both were popular books, addressed to a broad reading public, not just the political and intellectual elite. Cecil’s book was published in the Home University Library—a staple of the autodidact market. While both the editor of the series—Gilbert Murray—and Cecil recognised its dated nature, and the need for a new edition, in the 1940s it is still regarded in modern textbooks as authoritative. (1)

As Jones well points out, the greater self-consciousness of C/conservatives is an important, if neglected, component of the rich culture of political ideas in Britain at the turn of the 20th century. This is an impressive book, steeped in the intellectual history of Britain in the 19th century, but touching luminously on wider aspects of political and cultural history in explaining Burke’s shifting fortunes. The resourcefulness and perceptiveness of the book strike the reader on every page, as does its feel for the different and often conflicting movements of thought that heightened interest in—and controversy about—Burke. It will inform new avenues of inquiry into C/conservatism, both in the period it has brought into focus and in others; also in related research areas. Most of all, this book underlines the nature of C/conservatism as a historical construct, rooted in claims and arguments that mobilise past thinkers in support of particular views rooted firmly in the present. If Burke’s place in the C/conservative canon is historically contingent, its permanence is not assured.

Notes

1. Gilbert Murray to Cecil, 10 Nov. 1942, Bodleian Library, Murray papers, 410/127, and Cecil’s reply, 11 Nov. 1942, Murray papers, 410/128. [Back to \(1\)](#)

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