

**REFLECTIONS ON
THE REVOLUTION IN
FRANCE, PP. 1-279**

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EDMUND BURKE

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTICE OF THE AUTHOR

THE Author of the following pages was born in Dublin, on the 12th of January, 1728. He was descended from an ancient family in Ireland, several of whose branches had been ennobled. His father, Richard Burke, was an attorney, who, after residing for some time at Limerick, removed to Dublin. Edmund Burke was elected a Scholar of Trinity College, Dublin, on the 20th of May, 1746. In 1747 he was entered of the Middle Temple. In 1748 he took the degree of B.A. In February, 1750, he arrived in London for the purpose of keeping his terms at the Temple; but he was never called to the bar. He took the degree of M.A. in 1751. In 1756 he published his first acknowledged work, entitled "A Vindication of Natural Society," an ironical exposure of Lord Bolingbroke's false philosophy; and, in the same year, his "Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful." In 1757 he married the daughter of Dr. Christopher Nugent, an eminent physician, residing at Bath. This lady survived him. About this time the "Annual Register" was projected, and published by Dodsley, in the compilation of which Mr. Burke was much engaged, and he continued

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his connexion with it for nearly the remainder of his life. In 1761, upon the appointment of Mr. William Gerard Hamilton as Chief Secretary for Ireland, Burke accompanied him to Dublin in the capacity of private secretary. In 1763 his services were rewarded by a pension of £300 per annum. In July, 1765, when the Marquis of Rockingham became Prime Minister, Mr. Burke was appointed his private secretary, but declined to receive any salary; and was about the same time brought into Parliament, at his own cost, for the Borough of Wendover. In 1768 he purchased the estate and residence at Beaconsfield. In 1774 he was returned to Parliament for the Borough of Malton, but, soon afterwards, being solicited by a deputation of merchants from Bristol to become their representative, he was returned on 2nd November for that city. In February, 1780, he delivered his admirable speech on Economical Reform, which was received with unprecedented applause by the nation. In the same year he was returned to Parliament for Malton. In March, 1782, upon the return of the Marquis of Rockingham to power, Mr. Burke was made a Privy Councillor, and appointed Paymaster of the Forces, which latter post he held for three months only, after having, during this short interval, effected, in the most disinterested manner, by an Act of Parliament, a large and permanent reduction in the income of the office. In 1783 he distinguished himself in the important debates on the affairs of India, which question, however, occasioned the dissolution of the ministry, and his consequent resignation of office. In April, 1786, Mr. Burke brought before the House of Commons the charges against Warren Hastings, then ex-governor-general of India. The trial began in February, 1788, Mr. Burke

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conducting the impeachment. It was brought to a close in May, 1794, when he delivered his concluding address, which occupied nine days. During three years the extraordinary course of events in France occupied much of his attention, and in November, 1790, he published the celebrated "Reflections on the French Revolution," contained in the following pages. The popularity of this work was immense. It is said that no less than 30,000 copies were sold at that period. Its publication, however, caused a rupture of his long friendship with Mr. Fox, and occasioned some severe attacks upon him in Parliament from his political opponents, which he answered in the spirited vindication of his consistency, entitled an "Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs." Mr. Burke attended the House of Commons for the last time on the 20th of June, 1794, when the thanks of the House were voted to the managers of the impeachment of Mr. Hastings, and the prosecution was concluded. In the following August he lost his only son, a misfortune which so preyed upon his mind as to hasten his decease. In 1795 he received a grant of two pensions, amounting together to £3,700 per annum, at the express wish of the King. In February, 1797, he visited Bath in the hope of restoring his health, but, after a residence of four months without success, he returned to Beaconsfield, where he died on the 8th of July, 1797; after having attained the highest eminence as an author, an orator, and a statesman.

REFLECTIONS

ON

THE REVOLUTION IN FRANCE, 1790

DEAR SIR,—You are pleased to call again, and with some earnestness, for my thoughts on the late proceedings in France. I will not give you reason to imagine that I think my sentiments of such value as to wish myself to be solicited about them. They are of too little consequence to be very anxiously either communicated or withheld. It was from attention to you, and to you only, that I hesitated at the time when you first desired to receive them. In the first letter I had the honour to write to you, and which at length I send, I wrote neither for, nor from, any description of men; nor shall I in this. My errors, if any, are my own. My reputation alone is to answer for them.

You see, sir, by the long letter I have transmitted to you, that though I do most heartily wish that France may be animated by a spirit of rational liberty, and that I think you bound, in all honest policy, to provide a permanent body in which that spirit may reside, and an effectual organ by which it may act, it is my misfortune to entertain great

doubts concerning several material points in your late transactions.

You imagined, when you wrote last, that I might possibly be reckoned among the approvers of certain proceedings in France, from the solemn public seal of sanction they have received from two clubs of gentlemen in London, called the Constitutional Society, and the Revolution Society.

I certainly have the honour to belong to more clubs than one, in which the constitution of this kingdom, and the principles of the glorious Revolution, are held in high reverence; and I reckon myself among the most forward in my zeal for maintaining that constitution and those principles in their utmost purity and vigour. It is because I do so that I think it necessary for me that there should be no mistake. Those who cultivate the memory of our Revolution, and those who are attached to the constitution of this kingdom, will take good care how they are involved with persons who, under the pretext of zeal towards the Revolution and constitution, too frequently wander from their true principles; and are ready on every occasion to depart from the firm but cautious and deliberate spirit which produced the one, and which presides in the other. Before I proceed to answer the more material particulars in your letter, I shall beg leave to give you such information as I have been able to obtain of the two clubs which have thought proper, as bodies, to interfere in the concerns of France; first assuring you that I am not, and that I have never been, a member of either of those societies.

The first, calling itself the Constitutional Society, or Society for Constitutional Information, or by some such title, is, I believe, of seven or eight years' standing. The institution of this society appears to be of a charitable, and so far of a laudable, nature: it was intended for the circulation, at the expense of the members, of many books, which few others would be at the expense of buying; and which might lie on the hands of the booksellers, to the great loss of an useful body of men. Whether the books,

so charitably circulated, were ever as charitably read, is more than I know. Possibly several of them have been exported to France; and, like goods not in request here, may with you have found a market. I have heard much talk of the lights to be drawn from books that are sent from hence. What improvements they have had in their passage (as it is said some liquors are meliorated by crossing the sea) I cannot tell: but I never heard a man of common judgment, or the least degree of information, speak a word in praise of the greater part of the publications circulated by that society; nor have their proceedings been accounted, except by some of themselves, as of any serious consequence.

Your National Assembly seems to entertain much the same opinion that I do of this poor charitable club. As a nation, you reserved the whole stock of your eloquent acknowledgments for the Revolution Society; when their fellows in the Constitutional were, in equity, entitled to some share. Since you have selected the Revolution Society as the great object of your national thanks and praises, you will think me excusable in making its late conduct the subject of my observations. The National Assembly of France has given importance to these gentlemen by adopting them: and they return the favour, by acting as a committee in England for extending the principles of the National Assembly. Henceforward we must consider them as a kind of privileged persons; as no inconsiderable members in the diplomatic body. This is one among the revolutions which have given splendour to obscurity, and distinction to undecerned merit. Until very lately I do not recollect to have heard of this club. I am quite sure that it never occupied a moment of my thoughts: nor, I believe, those of any person out of their own set. I find, upon inquiry, that on the anniversary of the Revolution in 1688, a club of dissenters, but of what denomination I know not, have long had the custom of hearing a sermon in one of their churches; and that afterwards they spent

the day cheerfully, as other clubs do, at the tavern. But I never heard that any public measure, or political system, much less that the merits of the constitution of any foreign nation, had been the subject of a formal proceeding at their festivals; until, to my inexpressible surprise, I found them in a sort of public capacity, by a congratulatory address, giving an authoritative sanction to the proceedings of the National Assembly in France.

In the ancient principles and conduct of the club, so far at least as they were declared, I see nothing to which I could take exception. I think it very probable, that for some purpose, new members may have entered among them; and that some truly Christian politicians, who love to dispense benefits, but are careful to conceal the hand which distributes the dole, may have made them the instruments of their pious designs. Whatever I may have reason to suspect concerning private management, I shall speak of nothing as of a certainty but what is public.

For one, I should be sorry to be thought, directly or indirectly, concerned in their proceedings. I certainly take my full share, along with the rest of the world, in my individual and private capacity, in speculating on what has been done, or is doing, on the public stage, in any place ancient or modern; in the republic of Rome, or the republic of Paris; but having no general apostolical mission, being a citizen of a particular state, and being bound up, in a considerable degree, by its public will, I should think it at least improper and irregular for me to open a formal public correspondence with the actual government of a foreign nation, without the express authority of the government under which I live.

I should be still more unwilling to enter into that correspondence under anything like an equivocal description, which to many, unacquainted with our usages, might make the address, in which I joined, appear as the act of persons in some sort of corporate capacity, acknowledged by the laws of this kingdom, and authorised to speak the sense of