

**A LETTER TO THE
SHERIFFS
OF BRISTOL**

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A Letter to the Sheriffs of Bristol by Edmund Burke & James Hugh Moffatt

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EDMUND BURKE & JAMES HUGH MOFFATT

**A LETTER TO THE
SHERIFFS
OF BRISTOL**

A LETTER
TO THE SHERIFFS OF BRISTOL
EDMUND BURKE

EDITED
WITH AN INTRODUCTION AND NOTES
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PREFACE.

A regulation of the State Board of Law Examiners of Pennsylvania, which went into effect in January, 1903, requires that all applicants for examination and registration as students at law "must be able to pass a satisfactory examination upon the subject-matter, the style and the structure, and to answer simple questions on the lives of the authors" of twelve English classics, among which are Burke's *Speech on Conciliation with America*, and his *Letter to the Sheriffs of Bristol*. The lack of any well annotated edition of Burke's *Letter* led to the preparation of this volume, which aims to present in convenient form the facts of Burke's life, the text of the *Letter*, and the notes necessary to a full understanding of the text. In the Notes facts of special interest to students at law have been pointed out.

The interest and value of this *Letter* is not limited to students at law. It will be found of great value in all schools as a model of style and reasoning. Its subject-matter is also of great interest, for it reveals the attitude and arguments of many English statesmen in the critical struggle which led to the founding of our nation.

The text of the *Letter* is that of the first edition, corrected by comparison with the fourth edition, and the first edition of Burke's collected works. In the prepara-

tion of the Notes, the editor acknowledges his indebtedness to earlier editors, especially to Prof. F. G. Selby. He desires to express his appreciation of the sympathetic help of his colleagues, Professors Albert H. Smyth and John Louis Haney, and of his classmate, Irvin Shupp, Jr. He is especially grateful to Prof. Franklin Spencer Edmonds for his concise account of the origin and application of THE WRIT OF HABEAS CORPUS, which forms the third section of the Introduction; and to David Wallerstein, Esq., whose enthusiastic admiration of Burke and acquaintance with his writings led to many valuable suggestions in the Introduction and the Notes. The editor hopes that those who read this *Letter* may show in their practice of law and their criticism of the principles of law the same spirit of humanity which characterises all of Burke's writings.

J. H. M.

*Central High School,
May 21, 1904.*

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INTRODUCTION.

I

THE LIFE OF EDMUND BURKE.

WHEN Edmund Burke died in 1797, George Canning wrote to one of Lord Malmesbury's embassy: "There is but one event, but that is an event for the world,—Burke is dead. . . . He is the man that will mark this age, marked as it is in itself by events, to all time."¹ During the twenty-nine years from 1765 to 1794, in which Burke was a member of the House of Commons, he was actively interested in every measure of constitutional and colonial importance. As a political pamphleteer and legislator, he helped to remove the unjust restrictions from Ireland's commerce; to grant the privileges of citizenship to Roman Catholics; to preserve the independence of the representatives of the people in Parliament from the unconstitutional influence of the King; and to protect the King and the Church from the destructive influence of the French Revolutionists. His greatest work was in discussing and determining the relation of the imperial government to the colonies, both in the case of the Americans, who claimed their rights as Englishmen, and of the people of India whose sufferings from English injustice were scarcely known in England.

¹ Malmesbury's *Diaries*, London, 1844, III. 393.

Burke's writings have been prized for one hundred and twenty years by statesmen and scholars, not so much for their historical value as for their political principles and literary style. "Burke is the one Englishman who has succeeded in attaining first rate eminence both in politics and in literature by one and the same set of writings."¹ Yet he was always handicapped by the circumstances of his life. His family had none of that social influence which is so essential to success in English public life; he was seldom in good health and always more or less in debt. The secret of his success can be found in his unselfish sympathy and far-reaching ability and zeal for work. As his cousin said, Burke was "full of real business, intent upon doing solid good to his country as much as if he was to receive twenty per cent from the commerce of the whole empire which he labours to improve and extend."² Burke himself, in the *Letter to a Noble Lord*, said, "*Nitor in adversum* is the motto for a man like me. . . . At every step of my progress in life, (for in every step was I traversed and opposed), and at every turnpike I met, I was obliged to show my passport, and again and again to prove my sole title to the honour of being useful to my country, by a proof that I was not wholly unacquainted with its laws and the whole system of its interests both abroad and at home."³

Burke's father was a well-to-do lawyer of Dublin and gave his son a good education at the boarding school of Abraham Shackleton, a Quaker, and afterwards at

¹ Sir J. F. Stephen, *Howe Sabbaticæ*, 3rd Series, 1884, p. 93.

² Prior's *Life of Burke*, 5th Edition, London, 1854, p. 89.

³ Burke's *Works*, Boston, 1899, V. 193.