Ian Crowe examines the career and political thought of Edmund Burke (1730–97) – normally thought of as a Conservative philosopher, but a political thinker whose writing has much of relevance to Liberals.

BIOGRAPHY: EDMUND BURKE

Edmund Burke was born in Ireland in 1730, the second surviving son of Richard Burke, an attorney, and his wife, Mary. After graduating from Trinity College, Dublin, Burke travelled to London to train for the Bar at the Middle Temple; but by the mid 1750s his lukewarm interest in the legal profession had given way to an uncertain career in academic writing and journalism. His prospects brightened with the publication of two books of significance, A Vindication of Natural Society (1756) and A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful (1757), and his publisher, Robert Dodsley, commissioned him to edit a new venture, a periodical of current events, political and cultural reviews and essays entitled the Annual Register, which first appeared in 1759. By the time he was elected to parliament, in 1765, Burke had gained a secure reputation in literary and academic circles: he was, for example, a well-respected member of Dr Johnson’s circle and one of the founding members of ‘The Club’.

Burke’s political career began when he was appointed private secretary to William Hamilton, a wealthy and promising politician, some time around 1760. Hamilton became Chief Secretary to the Lord-Lieutenant of Ireland, the Earl of Halifax, in 1761, and Burke followed him to Dublin. Four years later, after an acrimonious break with his employer, Burke was appointed private secretary to the great Whig landowner Charles Watson-Wentworth, Marquis of Rockingham, and that December was provided with the ‘pocket’ parliamentary seat of Wendover through the favour of Lord Verney, a friend of his close friend, Will Burke (no family link has ever been proved).

Although he made an immediate impact on the House as a speaker, and consolidated his position among the Rockingham Whigs with his Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents (1770) – a defence of political party as a counter to supposed ‘hidden influences’ working close to the person of the monarch, George III – Burke really rose to prominence as a parliamentarian after he was elected to represent Bristol, then England’s second port, in 1774. This was the occasion of his famous statement upon the duty of a member of parliament to his constituents: ‘Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion.’ The statement, in hindsight, was highly unfortunate, for Burke’s six years as the member for Bristol were neither entirely happy nor successful. His sympathetic judgment of the American colonists in their quarrel with parliament, his promotion of the relaxation of Irish trade restrictions, his support for Catholic Relief, and his absorption in the broader political struggles...
at Westminster, produced ten-
sions and enmities among his
constituents that resulted in his
withdrawal from the poll in 1780.
For the remainder of his parlia-
mentary career, until 1794, he sat
for the Yorkshire seat of Malton.
Burke remained loyal to
Rockingham up to, and well
beyond, the latter's death in 1782,
and his campaigns during this
period were particularly directed
at perceived encroachments of
royal power upon the preroga-
tives of parliament. This impec-
cably Whiggish stand – liberal in
its sensitivity to the preservation
of constitutional liberty in Brit-
ain – was extended to a defence
of the 'chartered rights' of the
American colonists, criticism of
the penal laws imposed upon
Irish Catholics under the 'Protest-
ant Ascendancy', opposition
to the institution of slavery in
the British Empire, and, from
the early 1780s to 1794, an exhaust-
tive attack on what he perceived
as the arbitrary and tyrannical
rule of East India Company official
ners over Britain's Indian subjects.
One personal source of this com-
mittment to justice within the
nation's Imperial responsibility
may be found in Burke's own
upbringing in Ireland, the son of
a Protestant father and Roman
Catholic mother.
Burke held office (as Paymas-
ter-General) for about twelve
months in all; in 1782, during
Rockingham's brief second
administration, and for several
months under the ill-fated
Fox–North coalition, in 1783.
After the collapse of the coaliti-
on in December 1783 and its
replacement by Pitt the Young-
er's first administration, Burke
was never to be in power again.
He remained close to Charles J.
Fox during the early years of the
impeachment of Warren Hastings,
Governor-General of Bengal, and
through the first regency crisis
of 1788–89, but broke with the
Foxites in 1791 over their sympa-
thetic reception of the French
Revolution, ending his para-
lamentary life in the company of
the less radical Portland Whigs.

Burke's most famous work,
Reflections on the Revolution in
France, appeared late in his career,
in 1790. Its penetrating attacks
upon the French revolution-
ary philosophy of the 'rights
of man' seemed to many of his
contemporaries, and to some of
his closest political friends, an
inexplicable abandonment of his
earlier commitment to liberty;
but Burke set out to show in suc-
ceeding works – particularly in
An Appeal from the New to the Old
Whigs (1791) and his Letters on a
Regicide Peace (1795–97) – that
he had consistently propounded
an understanding of the rights
and duties of man in society
that was based not on abstract
propositions but upon universal
principles necessarily mediated
through circumstances, history,
cultural forms of social behaviour
and inherited institutions.

The last years of Burke's life
were filled with personal and
professional disappointment. The
impeachment of Warren Hast-
ings failed, the revolutionary
spirit appeared to pose increas-
ing threats to Britain's heritage
of chartered liberties and rights,
and Burke's only surviving son,
Richard, died weeks after being
elected as the new member for
Malton. Burke's grief was only
relieved by the consolations of his
extremely successful and happy
marriage to Jane Nugent.

In many ways, Burke's legacy,
and with it his significance for
modern-day liberalism, has been
distorted by the extraor-
dinary success of the Reflections.
For example, Burke's critique
of the French Revolution has
been taken as an assault on the
Enlightenment, or 'Modernity',
and a defence of monarchy,
aristocracy, and feudalism. But
his criticisms of British policy
in Ireland, America, and India,
his observations on slavery and
and coexistence among diverse
cultures, and his insistence that
there is more to the political
and social animal than mere rational
formulae, can help us to appre-
ciate more fully the enduring
human impulse for liberty, while
also understanding the vital
importance of community life.

Nowadays, Burke's
anti-ideo-
logical stand is
particularly appealing
to many conserva-
tives, but it should be equally relevant to liberals.
civic duty and a respect for the wisdom of tradition in the preservation of that liberty. These are all facets of the human condition that have, in the past, been central to the liberal heart, and they may still convey a sense of the inherent dignity of the human individual far surpassing that to be found in the writings of the many ‘scientific’ humanitarian planners who have emerged since Burke’s death.

In large part, recent developments in Burke scholarship have stemmed from the disintegration of the ideological context within which Burke’s thought had come to be analysed in the decades after the Second World War — i.e., the Cold-War world — when Burke’s significance as a thinker was often debated in a way that identified Communism as a twentieth-century form of Jacobinism. Conor Cruise O’Brien’s Introduction to his famous biography of Burke, *The Great Melody* (London: Sinclair–Stevenson, 1992), offers, perhaps, the final serious contribution to this debate. Since the end of the Cold War, attention has turned increasingly to the recovery of aspects of Burke’s thought that transcend the anti-Jacobin stance of his later years. These include his campaigns against British corruption in India, his understanding of the social and moral significance of custom, tradition, and culture in relation to a ‘science’ of human nature, and the origins and political context of his religious beliefs.

Several recent, outstanding, scholarly publications have helped to chart these new paths in Burke studies, opening up fresh perspectives on his life and the relevance of his thought: F.P. Lock’s biographical study, *Edmund Burke, Volume One: 1730–1784* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998); David Bromwich’s anthology of Burke’s writings, *On Empire, Liberty, and Reform: Speeches and Letters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); and, most recently, J.C. D. Clark’s new edition of Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Stanford University Press, 2001). The appearance of the *Viking Portable Edmund Burke*, edited by Isaac Kramnick (Harmondsworth, 1999), and of *Edmund Burke: His Life and Legacy* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1997), a collection of essays by scholars, politicians and journalists published to commemorate the bicentenary of Burke’s death, also illustrate the continuing vibrancy of interest in Burke’s thought.

A really sound introduction to Burke and his thought remains to be written, but Peter Stanlis’s introduction to *Edmund Burke: Select Writings and Speeches* (Washington, D.C., 1963) covers the ground very effectively, and Russell Kirk’s *Edmund Burke: A Genius Reconsidered* (Arlington House, 1967, revised and updated by the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, Wilmington, 1997) provides an accessible and often penetrating study for the interested reader. Also helpful is the commentary of Nicholas Robinson in his collection of contemporary prints and cartoons *Edmund Burke: A Life in Caricature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996). More difficult, but highly rewarding of perseverance, is Gerald Chapman’s *Edmund Burke: The Practical Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967). A recent publication of interest is *Edmund Burke of Beaconsfield* by Elizabeth Lambert (University of Delaware Press, 2003) which is an absorbing study of Burke’s domestic life, focusing particularly on his relationship with his wife, Jane. Readers would find it highly instructive not only about aspects of Burke’s personality but about the wider context of the life of the landed gentry in late-eighteenth-century England.

For those interested in reading Burke’s original writings, there are a number of options. Besides the anthologies mentioned above, there are very good, affordable selections available from Liberty Fund, Inc., Indianapolis, USA, (including a new imprint of E.J. Payne’s three-volume *Select Works of Edmund Burke*, which first appeared in the 1870s). The Oxford University Press edition of the *Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke* (general editor Paul Langford) is largely excellent, particularly those volumes edited by P.J. Marshall and containing Burke’s Indian writings. In selecting original works of Burke, readers should seek out, in particular, the ‘Speech on Fox’s East Indiam Bill’ (1783), the ‘Speech on Conciliation with the [American] Colonies’ (1775), the ‘Letter to the Sheriffs of Bristol’ (1777), the posthumously published ‘Tracts on the Popery Laws in Ireland’, and Burke’s opening speech at the impeachment trial of Warren Hastings (1788).

For discussions of Burke’s thought in the contemporary context, see Jim McCue’s trenchant and well-wrought *Edmund Burke and Our Present Discontents* (London, 1997) and Terry Eagleston’s short but stimulating article ‘Saving Burke from the Tories,’ which appeared in the *New Statesman*, 4 July 1997.

Ian Crowe is director of the Edmund Burke Society of America. Educated at St. Catherine’s College, Oxford, and the University of Bristol, he is now pursuing research at the University of North Carolina. In 1997 he edited Edmund Burke: His Life and Legacy, a collection of essays marking the bicentenary of the death of Edmund Burke, which was published by Four Courts Press, Dublin.
A short biography of the Eighteenth century statesman and author, Edmund Burke. Burke is remembered today as an intellectual who distrusted reason, and as a political theorist who condemned theory. Profoundly moved by concrete injustice, he opposed any attempt to alter existing institutions on the basis of abstract principles, or to apply a delusive geometrical accuracy in moral arguments. The biographical entry for Edmund Burke, from ‘A Compendium of Irish Biography’, by Alfred Webb, 1878. Burke, Edmund, was born in the house now numbered 12 Arran-quay, Dublin, 1st January 1728/9. [12th January 1729 New Style calendar—libraryireland.com note.] Edmund Burke After the picture by G. Romney. Burke’s parentage. Edmund Burke Biography. Below is the detailed biography of an Anglo Irish politician in Great Britain during the 17th century. He was a parliamentary orator and was known to be active during the years 1765 to 1795. He was a prominent political thinker in the Victorian era. Table of Contents. Early Life of Edmund Burke. Political Life of Edmund Burke. Personal Life of Edmund Burke. Death of Edmund Burke. Quotes by Edmund Burke. Early Life of Edmund Burke. A portrait of Edmund Burke.