

MAJOR CONSERVATIVE AND LIBERTARIAN THINKERS

EDITED BY JOHN MEADOWCROFT

EDMUND BURKE

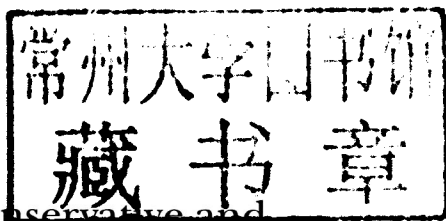


Edmund Burke

Dennis O'Keeffe

*For the good are always the merry,
Save by an evil chance*

W.B. Yeats, *The Fiddler of Dooney*



Major Conservative and
Libertarian Thinkers

Series Editor
John Meadowcroft

Volume 6



continuum

NEW YORK • LONDON

2010

The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc.
80 Maiden Lane, New York, NY 10038

The Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd.
The Tower Building, 11 York Road, London SE1 7NX

www.continuumbooks.com

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ISBN 9780826429780

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
O'Keeffe, Dennis.

Edmund Burke/Dennis O'Keeffe.

p. cm. – (Major conservative and libertarian thinkers; v. 6)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-8264-2978-0 (hardcover: alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-8264-2978-5 (hardcover: alk. paper)

1. Burke, Edmund, 1729-1797. 2. Conservatism. I. Title. II. Series.

JC176.B83O335 2010
320.5092–dc22

2009017317

Typeset by Newgen Imaging Systems Pvt Ltd, Chennai, India
Printed in the United States of America

Edmund Burke

Series Introduction

The *Major Conservative and Libertarian Thinkers* series aims to show that there is a rigorous, scholarly tradition of social and political thought that may be broadly described as 'conservative', 'libertarian' or some combination of the two.

The series aims to show that conservatism is not simply a reaction against contemporary events, nor a privileging of intuitive thought over deductive reasoning; libertarianism is not simply an apology for unfettered capitalism or an attempt to justify a misguided atomistic concept of the individual. Rather, the thinkers in this series have developed coherent intellectual positions that are grounded in empirical reality and also founded upon serious philosophical reflection on the relationship between the individual and society, how the social institutions necessary for a free society are to be established and maintained, and the implications of the limits to human knowledge and certainty.

Each volume in the series presents a thinker's ideas in an accessible and cogent manner to provide an indispensable work for both students with varying degrees of familiarity with the topic as well as more advanced scholars.

The following twenty volumes that make up the entire *Major Conservative and Libertarian Thinkers* series are written by international scholars and experts.

The Salamanca School by Andre Azevedo Alves and José Manuel Moreira

Thomas Hobbes by R. E. R. Bunce

John Locke by Eric Mack

David Hume by Christopher J. Berry

Adam Smith by James Otteson

Edmund Burke by Dennis O'Keeffe

Alexis de Tocqueville by Alan S Kahan

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Ludwig von Mises by Richard Ebeling

Joseph A. Schumpeter by John Medearis

F. A. Hayek by Adam Tebbel

Michael Oakeshott by Edmund Neill

Karl Popper by Phil Parvin

Ayn Rand by Mimi Gladstein
Milton Friedman by William Ruger
Russell Kirk by John Pafford
James M. Buchanan by John Meadowcroft
The Modern Papacy by Samuel Gregg
Murray Rothbard by Gerard Casey
Robert Nozick by Ralf Bader

Of course, in any series of this nature, choices have to be made as to which thinkers to include and which to leave out. Two of the thinkers in the series – F. A. Hayek and James M. Buchanan – have written explicit statements rejecting the label ‘conservative’. Similarly, other thinkers, such as David Hume and Karl Popper, may be more accurately described as classical liberals than either conservatives or libertarians. But these thinkers have been included because a full appreciation of this particular tradition of thought would be impossible without their inclusion; conservative and libertarian thought cannot be fully understood without some knowledge of the intellectual contributions of Hume, Hayek, Popper and Buchanan, among others. While no list of conservative and libertarian thinkers can be perfect, then, it is hoped that the volumes in this series come as close as possible to providing a comprehensive account of the key contributors to this particular tradition.

John Meadowcroft
King’s College London

This book is dedicated to the memory of two young Irishmen – to my grandfather and namesake, Denis John O'Keeffe, who died aged 26 years at the Battle of Coronel, on 1 November 1914, when HMS Monmouth was lost with all hands, and to his son, my father, Patrick Joseph O'Keeffe, who died in 1942, aged 27 years.

Series Editor's Preface

Edmund Burke is today widely appreciated as one of the foremost exponents of the conservative philosophical position. But curiously for much of his life Burke was perceived to be a leading progressive and radical figure in British public life. This perception was ended, however, by his response to the French Revolution of 1789. Burke's denunciation of that revolution in his most famous work, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, written and published as the revolution was unfolding, was founded upon a deep scepticism as to the capacity of individual reason to guide human action to beneficent results. Burke believed that social institutions could not be constructed anew each generation according to a particular generation's view of what was fair or just. Rather, social institutions were the result of an historical process of evolution often dating back many generations. Consequently, their beneficent effects may not be deductible by rational scrutiny or detached reason. It is difficult, for example, to provide a rational justification for the hereditary principle in government, but, according to a Burkean perspective, that does not mean that the hereditary principle does not perform some important function in the maintenance of social order.

Burke's great fear was that if the settled government of a society could be violently overthrown because it did not accord with a particular generation's reason, as he believed had happened in France during the revolution, then any government or social institution was liable to be destroyed if it did not happen to fit with the prevailing ideas of the day. Burke foresaw a descent into terror and chaos as different groups fought to destroy and

rebuild social institutions in accordance with their own inevitably fallible ideas. In such a situation, Burke warned, 'no law be left but the will of a prevailing force'. As such, it can be argued that Burke foresaw the terror that came in the later years of the French revolution and that which was wrought by subsequent attempts to create brave new worlds in, for example, the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany and Pol Pot's Cambodia.

In this excellent volume, Professor Dennis O'Keeffe of the University of Buckingham places Burke in his historical context and carefully sets out the whole of Burke's philosophical contribution. O'Keeffe then goes on to describe Burke's reception by his contemporaries and to consider the implications of Burke's ideas for politics and policy today. No account of conservative thought would be complete without a thorough treatment of the contribution made by Burke; by presenting Burke's ideas in such an accessible and cogent form the author has made a crucial contribution to the Major Conservative and Libertarian Thinkers series.

Finally, I would like to thank Ian Hill for his editorial assistance with the preparation of this volume for publication.

John Meadowcroft
King's College London

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Edmund Burke: The Contradictions of Benevolence

Birth and Name, Background and Religion

Edmund Burke was born in Dublin on 12 January 1729, the son of Richard Burke, a Dublin attorney, who seems to have converted to the Church of Ireland, abandoning, at least formally, his native Catholicism. Richard is a shadowy figure and his precise history is not known. But a Richard Burke did convert, or as it was called at the time, 'conform', to the Established Church in 1722, seven years before Edmund's birth. The supposition is that this was indeed Edmund's father and that the departure from the ancestral faith was made so that Richard could practise law. Such opportune conversions were at times denounced by Church of Ireland Bishops (O'Brien 1988: xxix). The religious rupture was never full, however, if indeed it possessed any substance at all, for Richard married a Catholic, Mary Nagle, from County Cork, where Nagle is one of the great names (*ibid.*: xxix).¹

Burke always maintained his Catholic and Irish connections. Initially, of course, these were maintained *for* him. Edmund was sent at the age of six to Ballyduff, in County Cork, to live with his mother's brother, Patrick (McCue 1997: 13). There he attended a hedge school, an illegal Catholic open air teaching arrangement, of the kind made famous in our day by the Ulster playwright, Brian Friel.² Burke himself retained a lifetime interest in Irish and Irish literature (O'Brien 1997: 13).

In 1741 Edmund went to the Quaker school at Ballitore in County Kildare (Hill 1975: 11). Here he came under the loving influence of the headmaster, Abraham Shackleton, with whose son Richard he maintained a long friendship (M'Cue 1997: 13). Burke's profound sense of history evidently got off to an early start, as did his love of literature, since Richard later reported on Burke's delight in history and poetry. Apparently he liked the Classics too, though as 'his diversion rather than his business' (ibid.: 13).

In 1744, in his mid-teens, at an age which most people today would consider too young for higher education, Burke entered Trinity College Dublin, where Oliver Goldsmith was a fellow student (ibid.: 13). O'Brien says that young Burke's letters to Richard Shackleton are *not* marked by precocious brilliance (O'Brien 1997: 9–11). Even so, within two years he had been made 'scholar' of the House, graduating in 1748 at the age of nineteen (ibid.: 13). He had engaged in literary pursuits and debating and also organized a short-lived newspaper, *The Reformer*, which ran to thirteen issues (ibid.: 13). The title does not mean he was a headstrong or meddlesome youth. Nor does it mean that Burke was not fundamentally a conservative. As we will argue later, Burke's intelligence combines, without clash, a deep reverence for proven practice and an ever vigilant eye to the reform of abuses. For Burke, knowing what needs to be changed is of the essence of successful conservatism.

Burke moved to England two years after graduation and enrolled at the Middle Temple in 1750, with the ostensible intention of returning to Dublin to follow in his father's footsteps (Hill 1975: 11). His father having observed that Edmund's legal studies were desultory and that he was devoting himself to literature, entertainment and debating, concluded that the youth was not, after all, going to be a lawyer and duly cut off his allowance (M'Cue 1997: 13–14). Indeed it is difficult to conclude from subsequent events that this young man ever seriously intended to be a lawyer, despite a lifelong fascination with law and constitutionalism.