

*Carlyle, Burke, and Biography:*  
Biographer-Worship and the  
Biographical in History

OWEN DUDLEY EDWARDS

PROFESSOR RICHARD BOURKE, OF QUEEN MARY COLLEGE, University of London, has produced a 1040-page tome entitled *Empire and Revolution: The Political Life of Edmund Burke* (2015) that may be described at once as an admirable though not infallible commentary on Burke and a major work of scholarship, indispensable to anyone wanting to think seriously about Burke. It is less easy to digest than either Professor David Bromwich's *The Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke: From the Sublime and Beautiful to American Independence* (2014), whose formidable account flows more accessibly if as yet inconclusively, or Jesse Norman's *Edmund Burke* (2013), which caters to the intellectual limits of British Conservative Party MPs. Two other recent Burkean studies deserve notice here: Drew Maciag's *Edmund Burke in America* (2013), a study of Burke's American reputation from 1776 onwards, and Yuval Levin's *The Great Debate* (2014), an analysis of the intellectual duel between Burke and Thomas Paine on the French Revolution.

This profusion of new writings on Burke immediately invites an investigation of his relation to Thomas Carlyle. Most obviously the two stand at either end of Britain's discovery of the French Revolution in contemporary history, insular but intense, dominating the Anglophone world. Their importance for Europe in general and France in particular is limited but engaging. They towered over Britain from 1790 to 1837 in relation to France. Burke was the greatest intellect in the

previous quarter-century of British and Irish politics, and Carlyle dominated the ensuing Victorian culture. Each was born and spent vital formative years in English peripheral satellites, and each retained visible marks of alien origin including accent, metaphysics, and forms of speech. Carlyle was washed in Teutonisms, whereas Burke could erupt into occasional post-Gaelic fire breathing. For example, in his speech of February 1785 on the Nabob of Arcot's debts, Burke tries to make his audience think Indian:

Figure to yourself, Mr. Speaker, the land in whose representative chair you sit; figure to yourself the form and fashion of your sweet and cheerful country from Thames to Trent, north and south, and from the Irish to the German sea east and west, emptied and embowelled (may God avert the omen of our crimes!) by so accomplished a desolation. (*Political Miscellanies* 161)

The sudden interjection of a prayer, relevant but distracting, would be standard practice in Gaelic narrative when a disaster was mentioned. It occurred the more naturally because the Ireland in which Burke had grown up still talked of the horrors of the seventeenth-century civil war raging from Boyne to Shannon, from Atlantic to Irish sea, and its victorious Protestant Episcopalians still retained their brutal penal laws degrading to the Gaelic-speaking Roman Catholics. Carlyle's Ecclefechan and Craigenputtoch were farther in time from the sufferings of the Covenanters, but in so oral a Calvinist culture and so remote a rural fastness, time may have made little difference to the intensity of the folklore of persecution.

Burke and Carlyle may have been alien in England, but many English down the years would hold them saviors of the nation. Their divergent admirers often bathed in the same intellectual streams, but not necessarily with the same people. Macaulay thought Burke the greatest man of his time and derided Carlyle, but Macaulay's intellectual heirs, his nephew and great-nephew, Sir George Otto Trevelyan (1838–1928; *ODNB*) and George Macaulay Trevelyan (1876–1962; *ODNB*), both revered Carlyle. John Morley (1838–1923; *ODNB*) was Burke's admiring biographer and ultimate repudiator of Carlyle, but Carlyle had been crucial to Morley's biographical formation. Coming to terms with alien antecedents was less

avoidable for Carlyle, although the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in its great Eleventh Edition found “British” a useful catch-all for both. Even James Anthony Froude (1818–94; *ODNB*), be his biographical sins what they were, recognized that the “history” of his slightly tarnished hero had to begin with two volumes of his four set in Scotland. Froude’s most massive biographical opponent, the six-volumed David Alec Wilson (1864–1933), an Ayreshireman himself with all that that implied. Other Scots biographers have followed, with Professor Ian Campbell the most authoritative. But future biographers of Carlyle who seek to de-Scottify him—however English, American, or otherwise remote from Scotland they might be—are likely to get what they deserve. Burke’s Irishness does not seem to have become urgently vital to biographers until English-born Thomas MacKnight (1829–99; *ODNB*), who wrote Burke’s life in three volumes (1856–60). He was Hibernicized from 1866 until his death as the editor of the Liberal but Unionist *Northern Whig*. It is notable that during his period of tenure, MacKnight broke with his former patron of his Burke studies W. E. Gladstone (1809–98; *ODNB*) on Irish Home Rule and attempted unsuccessfully to stop Gladstone’s persistent citations of Burke in favor of his own policy. In contrast, Burke’s next major biographer, Morley, would also grow more involved with Ireland, in his case to become Gladstone’s strongest political supporter on Irish Home Rule. He also became Gladstone’s biographer after being Burke’s, as did subsequently Sir Philip Magnus (1906–88; *ODNB*). The pursuit of Burke’s Irishness in its own right had to await an Irish politician, the brilliant crusading journalist from north Cork, William O’Brien (1852–1928; *ODNB*), editor of the Parnellite weekly *United Ireland* in the 1880s, whose *Edmund Burke as an Irishman* was published in 1924.

If the biographical traffic on the road from Burke is rather heavy today, its nineteenth-century activity was pretty humdrum when contrasted with the dark and bloody terrain centered around Carlyle. The foremost intellect to assay Edmund Burke’s biography, Conor Cruise O’Brien (1917–2008; *ODNB*), summed up the history of Burke’s English reputation in his introduction to a 1988 reprint of Matthew Arnold’s edition of Burke’s *Irish Affairs* (1881):

For most of the nineteenth century, thoughtful members of the upper and middle classes in Britain regarded the writings of Edmund Burke as a treasure-house of political wisdom. Liberals and conservatives were agreed on that point, though not entirely agreed as to where Burke's wisdom had most clearly revealed itself. Liberals valued most his writings on America and India, with their emphasis on respect for the principle of consent of the governed. Tories were naturally more impressed by his writings on what he significantly called, not the French Revolution but the Revolution in France—the point being that the revolution which began in France was an international one; he was warning against English Jacobins perhaps even more than against French ones (compare George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* which is as much a polemic against English sympathisers with Stalinism as it is against Stalinism itself).

Liberals might think that Edmund Burke might have gone too far in at least part of his polemic against the French Revolution; Tories might feel little enough enthusiasm, even retrospectively, for his arguments in favour of the American colonists. But on the whole there was a feeling, general among educated people, that broadly Burke had been right, both about the American and French revolutions. Certainly, he had shown a kind of prophetic power in that he had realized, earlier and more clearly than his contemporaries, that what was taking shape, both in America and in France, was something of world-historical importance.

It was mainly on his writings about America and France that Burke's great posthumous reputation rested, casting a long shadow over British and European political thought especially in the period 1814 to 1914. (vii–viii)

To this Cruise O'Brien added a footnote (before going on to discuss Burke as a commentator on Ireland):

If Burke's political wisdom was perhaps over-estimated up to the First World War, I believe it had been underestimated since. I think the mere fact that he had had such a reputation for wisdom up to 1914 tended to discredit him thereafter. If the generation and the classes [that] had brought the world into the disaster

of the First World War had venerated Burke for his political wisdom, then the post-war generation decided, without reading him, that Burke must have been a fool or a fraud. They would have done better to read him.  
(xxxiv)

Cruise O'Brien had previously written major works including *Maria Cross* (1952), a study of certain major Irish, English, French Catholic writers, and *Parnell and His Party 1880–90* (1957), a behaviorist party analysis indebted to Sir Lewis Namier (1888–1960) and successful because least imprisoned intellectually by Namier. In 1992 Cruise O'Brien published a biography of Burke entitled *The Great Melody*. It had been preceded by his Penguin edition of Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1968), in which he launched his thesis that Burke's perceptions and conclusions were profoundly affected by his crypto-Catholic roots, which influenced his anger against British (and Irish) misrule in India and attenuated his fury at the spoliation of the Roman Catholic Church in France.

In his essay "White Gods and Black Americans" published in the *New Statesman* in May 1964, Cruise O'Brien quoted a very militant American Black man, Sylvester Leaks, on James Baldwin's claims to be "just a writer": "The Negro people love Mr. Baldwin. And rightly so! He is of us. And no matter what you say, Jimmy—Oh! yes you are—Oh! yes you are a Negro writer" (qtd. in Akenson 64). The twentieth-century Irish Catholic or ex-Catholic culture in which Cruise O'Brien and I grew up, separated by 21 years, shared something very close to that conviction about Edmund Burke as a writer. Implicit was the assumption that Burke and Baldwin were accessible to persons of their ethno-religious origins in ways not easily visible to outsiders, especially those from self-obsessed metropolitan cultures. The Scottish apologists for Carlyle in answer to Froude would seem driven by similar assumptions.

Cruise O'Brien went to the Protestant Trinity College Dublin in the 1930s when it had become pre-eminently the custodian, not to say the mausoleum, of the dethroned Irish Protestant Ascendancy, but it had paid an honorable tribute to Irish identity by placing statues of first Oliver Goldsmith (1864) and then Edmund Burke (1868), both by John Henry Foley (1818–74; *ODNB*), within the railings but outside the

gates that marked the boundaries of Trinity, where Burke and Goldsmith had been fellow-students between 1746 and 1748. Both were firmly regarded in our Dublin as having testified to their Irishness, not only by birth but by a Protestantism unusual in its goodwill towards the degraded and outlawed Roman Catholicism of Ireland. Cruise O'Brien was less inclined to credit Goldsmith with Catholic affinities. Burke we knew to be the man whose influence in 1793 won the great Catholic emancipation from the penal laws and their major prohibitions, which was in actual fact a far greater achievement than the final emancipation of 1829 so spectacularly won by Daniel O'Connell and his mobilization of Irish public opinion to force Catholics into the Westminster Parliament itself.



Burke and Carlyle were outsiders who became insiders, creatures from the English periphery who became revered founding fathers of Englishness. Burke came to England at a time when the peripheries invited greatest English suspicion. The '45 had prompted the Irish Viceroy, Chesterfield (1694–1773), to tell the Duke of Newcastle (1693–1768) that no credence should be given to the possibility of even one loyal Scot, and that the place should be starved, without so much as a single oatcake being permitted to penetrate its borders. To suggest that Burke might have been influenced by growing up in a forcefully dishonored culture seems on the face of it obvious, and the deeper origins and consequent results have been beautifully argued by Cruise O'Brien.

In the opening to *Empire and Revolution*, Bourke explains, "This book is not a work of psychological biography. It does not seek to uncover the hidden motives that drove its protagonist" (24). In the accompanying footnote he remarks, "For the leading works in this genre, see Isaac Kramnick, *The Rage of Edmund Burke: Portrait of an Ambivalent Conservative* (New York: Basic Books, 1977); Conor Cruise O'Brien, *The Great Melody: a Thematic Biography of Edmund Burke* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1992)." Professor Bourke had in fact previously footnoted Cruise O'Brien's biography (16, n. 10) describing it as "drawing on Isaac Kramnick." Wisely, he does not specify

further, since readers of Kramnick's work will find no evidence that Cruise O'Brien's was influenced by the earlier book. But shortly after, Bourke employs another dubious strategy to diminish Cruise O'Brien's achievement. In a footnote he alleges, "O'Brien set the terms of debate for subsequent discussion of the Irish context of Burke's writing, which is given to suppose a native allegiance underlying publicly expressed doctrines. O'Brien derived his understanding of Burkean nativism from 'Ali Al' Amin Mazrui, 'Edmund Burke and Reflections on the Revolution in the Congo', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 5:2 (1963), pp. 121–33. On this debt, see Conor Cruise O'Brien, 'Burke', New York University Archives 9, Papers of the Albert Schweitzer Chair in the Humanities, Conor Cruise O'Brien Files, Box 5, Folder 8, pp. 7, 15–16" (34n43).

"Nativism," as his Princeton publishers might have pointed out to their British author, means claiming or seeking to protect interests of native-born persons from immigrants. Professor Bourke's misuse of dark terminology certainly coheres in an argument that impudently tells readers to "see" a document few can reach, emanating from 1963, to explain a book published thirty years later. This McCarthyite tactic of waving mysterious and inaccessible documents around to hint at subversion and conspiracy hardly strengthens Bourke's case. Why not use a quotation from Cruise O'Brien's own published writings? Bourke then compounds his sniffy pedantry in an ensuing statement that "this kind of hypothesis is, of course, a recipe for substituting one's own ideas for those of one's subject of study" (35). The supposedly relevant footnote states: "For the perils of psychobiography, see Quentin Skinner, 'Interpretation, Rationality and Truth'" (35n45). Professor Skinner's article is shrewd, amusing, and stimulating and, like the flowers that bloom in the spring, has nothing to do with the case. It looks as though in his quest for epithets, Bourke has run adrift of intelligent design. If he really wants to discover the perils of psychobiography—as opposed to merely annexing the word as a term of abuse—he should read Sigmund Freud's biography of Woodrow Wilson.

If Professor Bourke does this in the green tree, what will he do in the dry? So we might wonder, yet his book, though to be handled with considerable caution, is most valuable

and crammed with useful data. His arguments are normally rational. He is no stylist of Cruise O'Brien's quality, but neither is anyone else. Bourke does seem to realize that Burke is Irish, although his fear of psychobiography leads him to soft-pedal Burke's Irishness, as well as his own (he won his first degree from University College Dublin, but his publicity says nothing of previous antecedents). His adoring critics include Professor David Womersley, Warton Professor of English Literature at Oxford, who readily responded to Bourke's tome by telling historians what they ought to think. In his review of *Empire and Revolution*, Womersley asserted that Bourke "takes aim at works such as Kramnick's study and Cruise O'Brien's *The Great Melody*—both books now somewhat passed into the vale of years, yet still with a power to mislead" ("Reflections," *Standpoint*). Womersley assures his readers that Bourke "understands very well that to succumb to psychobiographical temptations endangers genuine historical understanding." In older times it would have been sufficient to denounce *The Great Melody* for being over-preoccupied with Ireland and Irishness instead of keeping Ireland in its diminutive place and concentrating on Burke's place in the importance of being English. Ethic sensibilities nowadays make that weapon liable to explode in the face of marksmen taking aim with it, and hence the need for reviewer as well as biographer to go to war against the chimera of psychobiography.

The substitution of psychobiography for Hibernicity as a usable term in fashionable denunciation seems to have originated in what looks like an academic joke from Belfast-born Professor Ian McBride, Professor Bourke's former University of London colleague and now Professor of Irish History at Oxford. In "Burke and Ireland," his contribution to *The Cambridge Companion to Edmund Burke* (2012), McBride described *The Great Melody* as "a lengthy psychoanalysis of Burke (and, perhaps, of the author himself) as a closet Jacobite successfully making his way in a political landscape that had long been monopolised by Whigs. . . . While O'Brien regarded himself as a Burkean, it might be truer to say that Edmund Burke—as presented in *The Great Melody* was an ardent O'Brienite" (182–83). The joke in prototype is older than Burke, but it may be taken as original in London academic common-rooms. It won't do as history,



when adorned by such gems as Cruise O'Brien's "defiance of the Catholic Church" (183), thus inviting us to psychoanalyze Professor McBride in order to determine whether his own Belfast Protestant roots make this a compliment or otherwise: it hardly describes a prominent Irish civil servant of the 1950s and Dublin politician from 1968–77. Professor McBride imagined that Cruise O'Brien was "unusually prone to conspiracy theories" (183), but that hardly immunizes himself, given his co-editorship along with Professor Bourke of *The Princeton History of Modern Ireland* (2016) and his thanks to Bourke in the acknowledgments of his *Eighteenth-Century Ireland* (2009) for his "intellectual integrity and scurrilous gossip."

One of these two otherwise first-class historians subjects the pioneer modern historian of Burke's Irishness to cod-psychoanalysis, after which the other then denounces the same historian for psychoanalysis, throwing in Quentin Skinner to play the Oracle at Delphi. The excuse is that Cruise O'Brien thought that Burke's barrister father may have been a Catholic convert to Protestantism to avoid career prohibition under the Penal Laws, for which Professor McBride finds no "hard evidence" (183): nevertheless, many such conversions took place in those days. But Burke really did grow up amidst female Catholic relatives. These women did not make Burke a "closet Jacobite" in the eighteenth century any more than the women in Cruise O'Brien's life made him one in the twentieth century. It would have made Burke more sympathetically aware of the disabilities forced upon his relatives, the present and former fellow-Catholics. Bourke's shortcomings are those of his former London colleague. In his otherwise thorough commentary on the public life of Burke, the industrious and capable Princeton professor knows what he cannot do, even if he enunciates this realization as what others ought not to do. We cannot expect him to see as clearly as Edmund Burke—or Conor Cruise O'Brien.



Edmund Burke was a historian, less eminent for his actual historical works (mostly unfinished but including his essays

in contemporary history published in at least the first years and first pages of the *Annual Register*), and thereby reminiscent of Newman also at his historical best when not confronting a formally historical subject. In her sparkling cartography *English Historians on the French Revolution* (1968), Hedva Ben-Israel affirmed, "Burke's contribution to the historiography of the event was that he treated the Revolution in its widest historical context. He detected underlying tendencies which others did not see" (15). She was referring to Burke's handling of the French Revolution, but it was applicable to any other topic that Burke treated. The perennial question with him was why he should have favored the American Revolution and condemned the French. For one thing, the convulsion in the United States bankrupted France. For another, it exerted a profound ideological impact on the French Revolution and shared many of the same personnel, such as Tom Paine and Lafayette, or, in terms of active sympathy, Thomas Jefferson and James Monroe.

Naturally participants in revolution found bits of revolution they did not like, or that did not like them, or both. Burke had not favored the American Revolution itself, but he had shown much sympathy for its creators; he had in fact done all he could to prevent it from eventuating by advocating saner policies than those carried out by the Grenville, Chatham, Grafton, and North governments, and indeed by George III himself. Given his condition as a usual suspect for the likes of the Duke of Newcastle, he required far more physical courage to defend the disaffected colonists than he would need to attack the French Revolution, and far more moral courage to oppose his closest political friends on Revolution in France than to disagree with a few friends and many agreeable acquaintances on dissident Americans. But in the face of relentless pressure, Burke tenaciously held to his central thesis that whereas the American Revolution derived itself from history, the French Revolution had rejected it.

Lord Holland (1773–1840; *ODNB*) remembered that what turned Burke against the French Revolution was its suppression of Catholic Church revenues. To an Irish Catholic witness of eighteenth-century Irish poverty, Catholic clerical funds benefited the people and were maintained when they could be against a state that had formed its religious legislation

to eradicate the Irish Roman Catholic clergy. In the French Revolutionary decade in Ireland, this conflict was evident in the disputes between the historian of Irish Catholic subjection Theobald Wolfe Tone (1763–98; *ODNB*) and his anti-historical comrades in the pro-French rebellion such as Lord Edward Fitzgerald (1763–98; *ODNB*). Like Burke, Tone had a Catholic mother. Burke and Carlyle would make similar journeys away from their peripheral identities that they would submerge but not extinguish in their conquests of the metropolis. But both men would retain suspicions that in some vital respects their peripheral identities were morally superior to the metropolis.

In turn, the metropolis would always assume that its values must be superior to the primitive peripheries, and its second-generation immigrants would naturally take such a view, as did Macaulay, for instance. When considered at all by the metropolis, history would serve as an affirmation of its overall activities, albeit with sometimes severe repudiation of spectacular exceptions. History from the periphery would question the wisdom, and the morality of the metropolis. Burke and Carlyle both needed to affirm loudly what they could find to admire in the history of the metropolis, but both were all the more urgently anxious to make the metropolis accept the superior virtue of their peripheries in what they saw as the most important particulars. History of the metropolis also enabled Burke to admire and enjoy the redemptive quality of the Revolution of 1688, and deny that it was a revolution, while the history of the periphery from the Boyne to Killiecrankie told of a bloody conflict, revolutionary in its social effects and a precedent (however much Burke wished to deny it) for the French Revolution.

In this same context, Carlyle's British hero as priest must be Knox rather than Thomas Cromwell, Cranmer, Latimer, or Tyndale. His "hero as man of letters" must be Burns as well as Dr. Johnson. Actual English choices such as Johnson and Shakespeare were justified by integrity perhaps owing more to peripheries of their own, Lichfield and Stratford, than to the London that made them famous. Similarly, history for Burke involved the same need to vindicate his periphery whether publicly or secretly. Like Carlyle he could write the history of his chosen metropolis with enthusiasm, but for him history must also show the virtue

of his cultural background in opposition to the contempt with which the metropolis treated it when it bothered to think of it. The metropolis could extol a bloodless revolution of 1688 and conceal its peripheral horrors. In particular, true history was needed to vindicate, and still more to understand, a people whose degradation by the metropolis justified itself in the name of history, in particular the question of how much genocide was practiced by the Catholic insurgents of 1641. Burke thundered about the contrast of 1688 with 1789 all the louder because he was acutely conscious of the parallels between the two.

The ironies of history as Burke found it in Ireland are admirably illustrated by his supposed kinship to Edmund Spenser (1552?–99; *ODNB*), who from Kilcolman Castle ruled rich land in the Blackwater valley of north Cork, elevated it into sublime if conqueror's poetry, and roistered there with his friend and fellow magnate Walter Raleigh, whose extermination of the native Irish population left little to the imagination. Spenser's *View of the Present State of Ireland* (1596) touchingly describes their sufferings while insisting their fate was their own fault. Edmund Burke for a time lived among Catholic relatives there 150 years later. The London-born lawyer Peter Burke (1811–81; *ODNB*) mused on the psychological impact that this terrain exercised on Burke's imagination in *The Public and Domestic Life of the Right Hon. Edmund Burke* (1854):

The locality was classic ground and imagination may easily trace the youthful Edmund wandering amid such scenes, now absorbed in the quaint but glowing verse of that other Edmund whom he might in some measure associate with his ancestry, now all-attentive to some marvellous tale of the Elizabethan times which touched upon history, his favourite theme. It is but natural to suppose that upon the beautiful banks of the Blackwater, England's future orator imbibed in the poetry of the *Faerie Queene* the taste for ornate and eastern imagery which gave such splendour to his eloquence; that amid the memories hanging around the ruins of Kilcolman, he first thirsted for the historic knowledge which was to throw such power and prophetic force into his reasoning and language. (5)

Book V of *The Faerie Queene* (1590) would certainly assist such musings with its demand for ruthless destruction of the subversive

natives. Peter Burke was probably right about the influence of Spenser's Ireland on the other Edmund. But what we know of Edmund Burke's interest in Irish history indicates that the future power and prophetic force won their wings from his reflections on the sufferings of the natives more than the triumphs of their conquerors. Similarly, Oliver Cromwell's massacres in Drogheda and Wexford were justified by the English as just retribution for 1641. When his time came, Carlyle felt the need to justify them because they were the work of Cromwell.

History in Burke's time meant more than scholarly rhetoric. Until he manipulated the great Catholic emancipation of 1793, Burke knew that 1641 was kept in its way as the core of Protestant justification of Catholic subjection. Much less had been made of Spenser's fellow-conquistadors after the immortal verse and prose of Spenser himself: their plantations in Munster had ultimately failed and his fortress fallen. The horrors of 1641 were a less philosophical topic for regurgitation. Fifty years ago in two pivotal articles, Professor Walter D. Love showed how earnestly Burke sought to question Protestant consensus as to Catholic genocide, and how he struggled to sponsor a philosophical history fair-minded in treating the Catholics. According to Love, Burke was frustrated by Irish literary wars to the extent that he set aside his literary career in favor of politics. Love was convinced that Burke determined on a House of Commons career in 1765–66 first because of "the situation in Ireland; he saw it was 'rotten' and he detested it." Burke had to be very judicious in choice of intervention on Catholic questions in view of the whispers as to his own Catholicism. Love concluded that from Burke's entry into Parliament "the values he discovered were two: independence and a means of self-expression" ("Transition" 380).

Love was an intensely direct scholar and made little if any allusion to the Namierite snobbish insistence on Burke's being the lackey of Rockingham. As Macaulay demonstrated, Burke's club reputation as the only conversational match for Dr. Johnson put him well ahead of the field in self-expression—he was already a giant when first elected to Westminster. And as Goldsmith showed, however limited Burke's House of Commons success, his mastery in oratory, management, diplomacy, government, and the major issues was unquestionable. The

Duke of Newcastle was absurd, but if one worried by nature, Burke was a man to worry about. As to 1641, it would be idle to dispute the term “genocide” as anachronistic: if Froude had known the term he would have used it and so would the more impassioned—and the more unscrupulous—previous Protestant commentators and inflators of the actual 1641 massacres committed by Catholics.

Initially Burke had been intrigued by work on Celtic civilization ranging from his own writing on Druids (perhaps the high point of his *An Essay Towards an Abridgment of English History* [1757]) to his allocation of additional review-space in the *Annual Register* to introduce appropriate extracts from James Macpherson’s *Ossian* in the issues of 1760 (253–56) and 1761 (276–86). Walter Love explored Burke’s frustrated quest for a reputable Catholic history of Ireland in the context of the literary feuds as to whether ancient Irish civilization was at its best Celtic or Scandic. Carlyle was on the Scandic side, forcing it on the audience he conquered in London by making Odin the first subject of his *On Heroes and Hero-Worship* (1841) and by concluding his career with the *The Early Kings of Norway* (1875). This courageous if cautious approach was basic to Burke’s and Carlyle’s conquests of London: their evangelism meant that the metropolis they were feeding must be taught to swallow moderate Hibernophilia and Scotophilia in its diet. Both of them believed in Union of Ireland and Britain with a flamboyant nationalism as a means to prevent local Irish or Scots oligarchies or pressure-groups from tyrannizing over their vulnerable fellow-Irish or fellow-Scots.

It was not simply a matter of Westminster and Whitehall saving Irish Catholics or Scots dissidents: home rule in the eighteenth century meant a free hand for the Irish Parliament with repression of Catholics. Celtic was for the most part pre-Catholic, and Catholic did not always mean Celtic. Under Burke’s editorship, the *Annual Register* of 1761 (305–16) supported a forceful defense of Mary Queen of Scots (1542–87; *ODNB*), in which David Hume was also denounced for employing dubious evidence of homicide against her in *The History of England* (1754–61). This piece looks like a direct ancestor of Burke’s great prophetic lament for Marie Antoinette in *The Reflections on the Revolution in France*.

What the history of the eighteenth-century Penal Laws against Irish Roman Catholics meant to Burke may be seen from his draft of a *Tracts on the Popery Laws* (1760–65) written about 1764, shortly before the first Rockingham government was formed:

The great prop of this whole system is not pretended to be its justice or its utility, but the supposed danger to the State which gave rise to it originally, and which, they apprehend, would return if this system were overturned. Whilst, say they, the Papists of this Kingdom were possessed of landed property, and of the influence consequent to such property, their allegiance to the Crown of Great Britain was ever insecure; the public peace was ever liable to be broken, and Protestants never could be a moment secure either of their properties or of their lives. Indulgence only made them arrogant, and power daring; confidence only excited and enabled them to exert their inherent treachery; and the times, which they generally selected for their wicked and desperate rebellions were those in which they enjoyed the greatest ease and the most perfect tranquillity.

Such are the arguments that are used both publicly and privately, in every discussion upon this point. They are generally full of passion and of error, and built upon facts which, in themselves, are most false. (Cruise O'Brien, *Irish Affairs* 63)

The draft *Tract* was ultimately published by Matthew Arnold in his edition of Burke on *Irish Affairs*, which was reprinted in 1988 with Cruise O'Brien's introduction. This edition includes descriptions of psychological terror fostered by the insemination of mutual suspicions which are all too reminiscent of sufferings of Christians under twentieth- and twenty-first century totalitarian regimes. The American conservatives of the 1950s who took up Burke in a spirit of anti-Communism had a more direct line of argument to him on Irish history than some of them may have realized.

Peter Burke has provided a forceful reminder that Edmund Burke's history was not the usual magnet attracting aristocratic and monarchical preoccupations. No more was Carlyle's. Each man befriended individual aristocrats—Rockingham

for Burke, and the Ashburtons for Carlyle—but both were conscious of themselves as coming from outlawed and formerly dispossessed theocracies. Burke had a very sharp cutting edge to his more anti-aristocratic polemics, right up to the publication of *A Letter to a Noble Lord* (1796) in his last days, when he dissected the Duke of Bedford. Carlyle refused to include kings when treating of the hero as king, banished them from his pantheon of heroes, and insisted that readers of *Past and Present* (1843) understand the supreme value of an obscure monk to the recovery of the past.

Carlyle may never have set foot on the stage of a theater, or a Parliamentary floor, but he was one of the most dramatic non-fiction writers to enter what was to him the alien English language, and make it his own, whether in the exotic labyrinths of *Sartor Resartus* (1833–34), the declamations, soliloquies, odes, and litanies of *The French Revolution* (1837), the oratorical conjurings of *On Heroes and Hero-Worship*, the apocalypticism of *Chartism* (1839), or the insidious time-machinery of *Past and Present*. By contrast orator-historians such as Burke (too prolix) and Macaulay (too monotonous) made less of performance, and more of contrivance. Carlyle also knew how to manage the place of rivals and targets in his expositions, whether avoiding admission of the common ground he shared with Macaulay, or acknowledging his polarity or proximity to Burke. He knew the ground he intended to conquer whether historiographical or archival. Whatever he did on the Revolution in France, Burke, forty years dead, rose far above all existing English prose, and Carlyle had to fix Burke in clear place in his own narrative: Burke must not be surfeited or skimmed. So he wins an early recognition, in the “Astræa Redux” chapter of Book II in *The French Revolution*:

Philosophism sees, for the first time, a Philosophe (or even a Philosopher) in office: she in all things will applausively second him; neither will light old Maurepas obstruct, if he can easily help it.

Then how “sweet” are the manners; vice “losing all its deformity”; becoming *decent* (as established things, making regulations for themselves, do); becoming almost a kind of “sweet virtue”! (*FR* 1: 32)

The quotations are derived in reality and in parody from the most famous passage in Burke’s *Reflections*, beginning “It is now



sixteen or seventeen years since I saw the queen of France.” In it Burke all but prophesizes the execution of Marie Antoinette (1755–93):

I thought ten thousand swords must have leaped from their scabbards to avenge even a look that threatened her with insult.—But the age of chivalry is gone.—That of sophisters, œconomists, and calculators, has succeeded; and the glory of Europe is extinguished for ever. Never, never more, shall we behold that generous loyalty to rank and sex, that proud submission, that dignified obedience, that subordination of the heart, which kept alive, even in servitude itself, the spirit of an exalted freedom. The unbought grace of life, the cheap defence of nations, the nurse of manly sentiment and heroic enterprise is gone! It is gone, that sensibility of principle, that chastity of honour, which felt a stain like a wound, which inspired courage whilst it mitigated ferocity, which ennobled whatever it touched, and under which vice itself lost half its evil, by losing all its grossness. (Cruise O’Brien, *Reflections* 170)

The origins of this passage in the *Reflections* merit more attention. It has a startling resemblance to Irish-Gaelic Jacobite poems on the destruction of Gaelic Ireland as completed after 1689. The poets mourned the end of their own status as bards at the courts of clan chieftains, the expulsion of the Catholic clergy, and the degraded queenship of their imagined Ireland. Burke may have heard some of those as a boy in rural Ireland when visiting Catholic relatives. “The age of chivalry is gone” perfectly summarizes the sentiment of these poems. Carlyle resembled Goldsmith enough to mock Burke while revering his stature, including noting his place as a tourist landmark in describing the Odyssey of Anacharsis Clootz (1755–94), who would die without a door to save him: “[Clootz] has wandered over this terraqueous Planet; seeking, one may say, the Paradise we lost long ago. He has seen English Burke; has been seen of the Portugal Inquisition; has roamed, and fought, and written” (*FR* 1: 325).

In *The French Revolution* Carlyle luxuriated in descriptive adjectives and epithets almost as freely as Homer, from whom he might well have learned the trick. His selections seldom reached Homeric dignity, but while there is mockery there is also magnificat:

But now comes the third thing that bodes ill for the marching of this French Constitution: besides the French people, and the French King, there is thirdly—the assembled European World. It has become necessary now to look at that also. Fair France is so luminous: and round and round it, is troublous Cimmerian Night. Calonnes, Breteuils hover dim, far-flown; overnetting Europe with intrigues. From Turin to Vienna; to Berlin and utmost Petersburg in the frozen North! Great Burke has raised his great voice long ago; eloquently demonstrating that the end of an Epoch is come, to all appearance the end of Civilized Time. Him many answer: Camille Desmoulins, Cloutz Speaker of Mankind, Paine the rebellious Needleman, and honourable Gaelic Vindicators in that country and in this: but the great Burke remains unanswerable; “the Age of Chivalry *is* gone,” and could not but go, having now produced the still more indomitable Age of Hunger. (*FR* 2: 36)

Whatever their differences on the French Revolution, Burke and Carlyle shared an obsession with history: in vital respects, Carlyle forced historical consciousness on the Revolution itself, and above all in his own incessant dialogue with it in *The French Revolution*. He did not instruct its readers to “close thy Burke” or, alternatively, to open it (and both instructions would have been appropriate to what he was writing), and in his correspondence he seldom alluded to Burke. But Carlyle was steeped in Burke as a source if not as an instructor. Burke might not have expected to dominate future historiography of the “Revolution in France,” though no doubt he would have been glad if he knew of his enduring significance. Carlyle may have repudiated Burke (perhaps more indirectly than otherwise), but he fundamentally recognized that Burke enabled him to move the subject to the next historiographical stage.

In many respects Carlyle was closer to Burke than he was to Macaulay, who in the 1820s had fought for the final stage of Catholic Emancipation with weapons of ridicule as neat as Carlyle’s. Carlyle himself made little use of his skills beyond the bemused tolerance of his essay, “Signs of the Times” (1829). Yet what had ensured Burke would write the *Reflections* was the attack on the Roman Catholic Church both in France and in Britain, and the history of anti-Catholicism in Ireland. Burke

was keenly aware that the Glorious Revolution settlement in Ireland had been imposed in the name of liberty and the Penal Laws in its futherance. He also knew that supporters of the French Revolution in England were using this argument to justify their enthusiasm. As Cruise O'Brien observed in an essay in 2003, Burke felt "disqualified from sharing the feelings of normal English Whigs toward that Revolution: Burke needed to play down its anti-Catholic elements. When the Revolution Society played up the latter, Burke suffered and needed to strike back" (215).

Moreover, Burke was instrumental in negotiating the passage of the Catholic Relief Act of 1778, which secured ownership by Roman Catholics. Cruise O'Brien succinctly summarized the dire consequences of this legislative "success": "The anti-Catholic reaction that followed that act found its most dramatic expression in the massively destructive Gordon riots during the summer of 1780. The fanatically anti-Catholic Lord George Gordon, leading thousands of members of the Protestant Association, had publicly blamed Burke for the 1778 measure. . . . Later in 1780 Burke lost his seat in Parliament for Bristol at least in part because of his efforts on behalf of Roman Catholics" (2003: 216). Comparably anti-human imperial government confronted Burke in India under Warren Hastings (1732–1818) and in the United States under Charles Townshend (1725–67) and Lord North (1732–92). In both instances, Burke witnessed the same ruthless readiness to stamp down indigenous beliefs and traditions, forms of law, and custom.

The French Revolution may have eclipsed the Gordon Riots from London memory, although both would flourish in the imagination of Carlyle's greatest creative disciple, Charles Dickens (1812–70), in *Barnaby Rudge* (1841). Carlyle himself would have had no difficulty in making the connection between the two outbursts. An Edinburgh anti-Catholic mob in 1779 had wrecked the Library of Principal the Revd. Dr William Robertson (1721–93; *ODNB*) of Edinburgh University for his support for Catholic Emancipation. Burke's fire chiefly burned below the surface of the Carlylean iceberg, but it flamed into visibility. In *The French Revolution* Carlyle envisaged the destruction of a country and its religion, though not for the same reasons as Burke:

Scarcely after fifteen months' debating, can a Civil Constitution of the Clergy be so much as got to paper; and then for getting it into reality? Alas, such Civil Constitution is but an agreement to disagree. It divides France from end to end, with a new split, infinitely complicating all the other splits:—Catholicism, what of it there is left, with the Cant of Catholicism, raging on the one side, and sceptic Heathenism on the other; both, by contradiction, waxing fanatic. What endless jarring, of Refractory hated Priests, and Constitutional despised ones; of tender consciences, like the King's, and consciences hot-seared, like certain of his People's: the whole to end in Feasts of Reason and a War of La Vendée! So deep-seated is Religion in the heart of man, and holds of all infinite passions. If the dead echo of it still did so much, what could not the living voice of it once do? (*FR* 1: 312–13)

Without drinking from the wellsprings of Burke, Carlyle understood how populist Scottish Calvinism could flourish its hard crop from the graves of its martyrs and how its Popish counterpart could multiply in Ireland during the very heyday of the laws designed for its extirpation. Both men saw and knew that abundance of clerical poverty holding its beneficial tyranny over unquestioning devotees regardless of fat Bishops and Moderators visible in their pompous emptiness to the official historian. Here Carlyle's place at the end of a historiography begun by Burke complements as well as contradicts.

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