



EDMUND BURKE

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EDMUND BURKE, a British statesman of Irish birth, orator and author, was born at Dublin, Jan. 12, 1729, and died July 9, 1797. His father was a successful lawyer and a Protestant, his mother a Catholic. At a small town, Ballitore, thirty miles from Dublin, he had his early schooling from a Quaker, Abraham Shackleton, to whom Burke in after days paid both honor and affection. At the age of fourteen, he became a student at Trinity College, Dublin, where he remained for five years, though pursuing his studies after a rambling and rather spasmodic fashion. In 1750, he went to London to keep terms at the Temple. The next ten years of his life seem to have been passed in obscure industry. In 1756, he published "An Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful," a crude performance which in England had considerable vogue, but has left no permanent trace in the development of æsthetic thought. Subsequently, he brought out an abridgment of the History of England as far as the reign of John, and about the same time, an "Account of the European Settlements in America." In 1759 he founded with the publisher, Dodsley, the "Annual Register," which was designed to present the chief events of each year. In 1759, he was introduced by Lord Charlemont to "Single Speech" Hamilton, and, when the latter was made Irish Secretary, Burke accompanied him to Dublin. When Hamilton retired from this post, Burke went back with him to London and obtained a pension of \$1,500 a year on the Irish Establishment. This pension, however, he retained only for a twelvemonth. In July, 1765, the Marquis of Rockingham, becoming Prime Minister, was induced to make Burke his private secretary; their relations continued to be those of close friendship and confidence until the Marquis's death in 1782. Having been returned to the House of Commons for the borough of Wendover, Burke delivered his first speech in January, 1766, and thenceforth, until 1790, was recognized as one of the chief guides and inspirers of the Whig party. His speech on "Conciliation with America," here reproduced, and the first of his orations against Warren Hastings, are generally deemed the most admirable examples of his eloquence. After the outbreak of the French Revolution, Burke parted company from most of his old Whig friends, advocated a war between England and the French Revolutionary Government, and wrote his famous "Reflections on the Revolution in France," and "Letters on a Regicidal Peace." These writings reveal Burke's power of passionate denunciation, and are suggestive of his methods as a speaker, so suited to declamation and oratory. He had splendid imaginative qualities, but his

literary style is almost too decorative and ornate, at least to modern ideas, though one is amazed at the exuberance of his fancy and at the amplitude, as well as richness, of his vocabulary. Something of the immense force of the man, as a speaker and writer, is due, at the same time, to his high moral tone and integrity of character, in spite of his vehement partisanship.

ON CONCILIATION WITH AMERICA

I HOPE, sir, that, notwithstanding the austerity of the chair, your good nature will incline you to some degree of indulgence toward human frailty. You will not think it unnatural that those who have an object depending, which strongly engages their hopes and fears, should be somewhat inclined to superstition. As I came into the House full of anxiety about the event of my motion, I found, to my infinite surprise, that the grand penal bill, by which we had passed sentence on the trade and sustenance of America, is to be returned to us from the other House. I do confess, I could not help looking on this event as a fortunate omen. I look upon it as a sort of providential favor, by which we are put once more in possession of our deliberative capacity, upon a business so very questionable in its nature, so very uncertain in its issue. By the return of this bill, which seemed to have taken its flight forever, we are, at this very instant, nearly as free to choose a plan for our American government as we were on the first day of the session. If, sir, we incline to the side of conciliation, we are not at all embarrassed (unless we please to make ourselves so) by any incongruous mixture of coercion and restraint. We are, therefore, called upon, as it were by a superior warning voice, again to attend to America; to attend to the whole of it together; and to review the subject with an unusual degree of care and calmness.

Surely it is an awful subject, or there is none so on this side of the grave. When I first had the honor of a seat in this House, the affairs of that continent pressed themselves upon us as the most important and most delicate object of parliamentary attention. My little share in this great deliberation oppressed me. I found myself a partaker in a very high trust; and having no sort of reason to rely on the strength of my natural abilities for the proper execution of that trust, I was obliged to take more than common pains to instruct myself in everything which relates to our colonies. I was not less under the necessity of forming some fixed ideas concerning the general policy of the British empire. Something of this sort seemed to be indispensable, in order, amid so vast a fluctuation of passions and opinions, to concentrate my thoughts; to ballast my conduct; to preserve me from being blown about by every wind of fashionable doctrine. I really did not think it safe or manly to have fresh principles to seek upon every fresh mail which should arrive from America.

At that period I had the fortune to find myself in perfect concurrence with a large majority in this House. Bowing under that high authority, and penetrated with the sharpness and strength of that early impression, I have continued ever since in my original sentiments without the least deviation. Whether this be owing to an obstinate perseverance in error, or to a religious adherence to what appears to me truth and reason, it is in your equity to judge.

Sir, Parliament having an enlarged view of objects, made, during this interval, more frequent changes in their sentiment and their conduct than could be justified in a particular person upon the contracted scale of private

information. But though I do not hazard anything approaching to a censure on the motives of former Parliaments to all those alterations, one fact is undoubted—that under them the state of America has been kept in continual agitation. Everything administered as remedy to the public complaint, if it did not produce, was at least followed by a heightening of the distemper; until, by a variety of experiments, that important country has been brought into her present situation—a situation which I will not miscall, which I dare not name, which I scarcely know how to comprehend in the terms of any description.

In this posture, sir, things stood at the beginning of the session. About that time, a worthy member of great parliamentary experience, who, in the year 1766, filled the chair of the American committee with much ability, took me aside, and, lamenting the present aspect of our politics, told me things were come to such a pass that our former methods of proceeding in the House would be no longer tolerated. That the public tribunal (never too indulgent to a long and unsuccessful opposition) would now scrutinize our conduct with unusual severity. That the very vicissitudes and shiftings of ministerial measures, instead of convicting their authors of inconstancy and want of system, would be taken as an occasion of charging us with a predetermined discontent, which nothing could satisfy; while we accused every measure of vigor as cruel, and every proposal of lenity as weak and irresolute. The public, he said, would not have patience to see us play the game out with our adversaries: we must produce our hand. It would be expected that those who, for many years had been active in such affairs, should show that they had formed some clear and de-

ecided idea of the principles of colony government, and were capable of drawing out something like a platform of the ground which might be laid for future and permanent tranquillity.

I felt the truth of what my honorable friend represented, but I felt my situation, too. His application might have been made with far greater propriety to many other gentlemen. No man was, indeed, ever better disposed or worse qualified for such an undertaking than myself. Though I gave so far into his opinion that I immediately threw my thoughts into a sort of parliamentary form, I was by no means equally ready to produce them. It generally argues some degree of natural impotence of mind, or some want of knowledge of the world, to hazard plans of government, except from a seat of authority. Propositions are made, not only ineffectually, but somewhat disreputably, when the minds of men are not properly disposed for their reception; and, for my part, I am not ambitious to ridicule—not absolutely a candidate for disgrace.

Besides, sir, to speak the plain truth, I have in general no very exalted opinion of the virtue of paper government, nor of any politics in which the plan is to be wholly separated from the execution. But when I saw that anger and violence prevailed every day more and more, and that things were hastening toward an incurable alienation of our colonies, I confess my caution gave way. I felt this is one of those few moments in which decorum yields to a higher duty. Public calamity is a mighty leveller, and there are occasions when any, even the slightest, chance of doing good, must be laid hold on, even by the most inconsiderable person.

To restore order and repose to an empire so great and so distracted as ours, is merely in the attempt an undertaking that would ennoble the flights of the highest genius, and obtain pardon for the efforts of the meanest understanding. Struggling a good while with these thoughts, by degrees I felt myself more firm. I derived, at length, some confidence from what in other circumstances usually produces timidity. I grew less anxious, even from the idea of my own insignificance. For, judging of what you are by what you ought to be, I persuaded myself that you would not reject a reasonable proposition because it had nothing but its reason to recommend it. On the other hand, being totally destitute of all shadow of influence, natural or adventitious, I was very sure that if my proposition were futile or dangerous—if it were weakly conceived or improperly timed, there was nothing exterior to it of power to awe, dazzle, or delude you. You will see it just as it is, and you will treat it just as it deserves.

The proposition is peace. Not peace through the medium of war; not peace to be hunted through the labyrinth of intricate and endless negotiations; not peace to arise out of universal discord, fomented from principle, in all parts of the empire; not peace to depend on the juridical determination of perplexing questions, or the precise marking the shadowy boundaries of a complex government. It is simple peace, sought in its natural course and its ordinary haunts. It is peace sought in the spirit of peace, and laid in principles purely pacific. I propose, by removing the ground of the difference, and by restoring the former unsuspecting confidence of the colonies in the mother country, to give permanent satisfaction to your people;

and, far from a scheme of ruling by discord, to reconcile them to each other in the same act, and by the bond of the very same interest, which reconciles them to British government.

My idea is nothing more. Refined policy ever has been the parent of confusion, and ever will be so long as the world endures. Plain good intention, which is as easily discovered at the first view as fraud is surely detected at last, is (let me say) of no mean force in the government of mankind. Genuine simplicity of heart is a healing and cementing principle. My plan, therefore, being formed upon the most simple grounds imaginable, may disappoint some people when they hear it. It has nothing to recommend it to the pruriency of curious ears. There is nothing at all new and captivating in it. It has nothing of the splendor of the project which has been lately laid upon your table by the noble lord in the blue ribbon. It does not propose to fill your lobby with squabbling colony agents, who will require the interposition of your mace at every instant to keep the peace among them. It does not institute a magnificent auction of finance, where captivated provinces come to general ransom by bidding against each other, until you knock down the hammer, and determine a proportion of payments beyond all the powers of algebra to equalize and settle.

The plan which I shall presume to suggest derives, however, one great advantage from the proposition and registry of that noble lord's project. The idea of conciliation is admissible. First, the House, in accepting the resolution moved by the noble lord, has admitted, notwithstanding the menacing front of our address, notwithstanding our heavy bill of pains and penalties, that we do