



BORIS JOHNSON BIOGRAPHY

Edmund Burke: Philosopher, Politician, Prophet

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★★★★★

More than money, more than sex, what politicians really crave is to be proved thumpingly and resoundingly right about the great controversy of their age. Such was the good fortune of Edmund Burke.

When the Bastille was stormed in July 1789, the reaction of civilised London ranged from complacency to outright jubilation. 'How much the greatest event it is that ever happened in the world!' gibbered the leading Whig, Charles James Fox. 'And how much the best!'

Even William Pitt, the Tory Prime Minister, thought the whole thing would 'terminate in general harmony'.

One man foretold disaster. Bloodshed, anarchy, ruin – all these would inevitably follow the overturning of the established order in Paris, said Burke, a 59-year-old Irish-born British MP.

He went on to prophesy that the chaos would throw up an opportunistic military autocrat, and that Britain would be drawn into a terrible European conflict.

The mystery is how Burke – and Burke alone – came to see a truth that was missed by his

illustrious contemporaries. This brilliant and elegant appreciation explains why. The answer is often surprising.

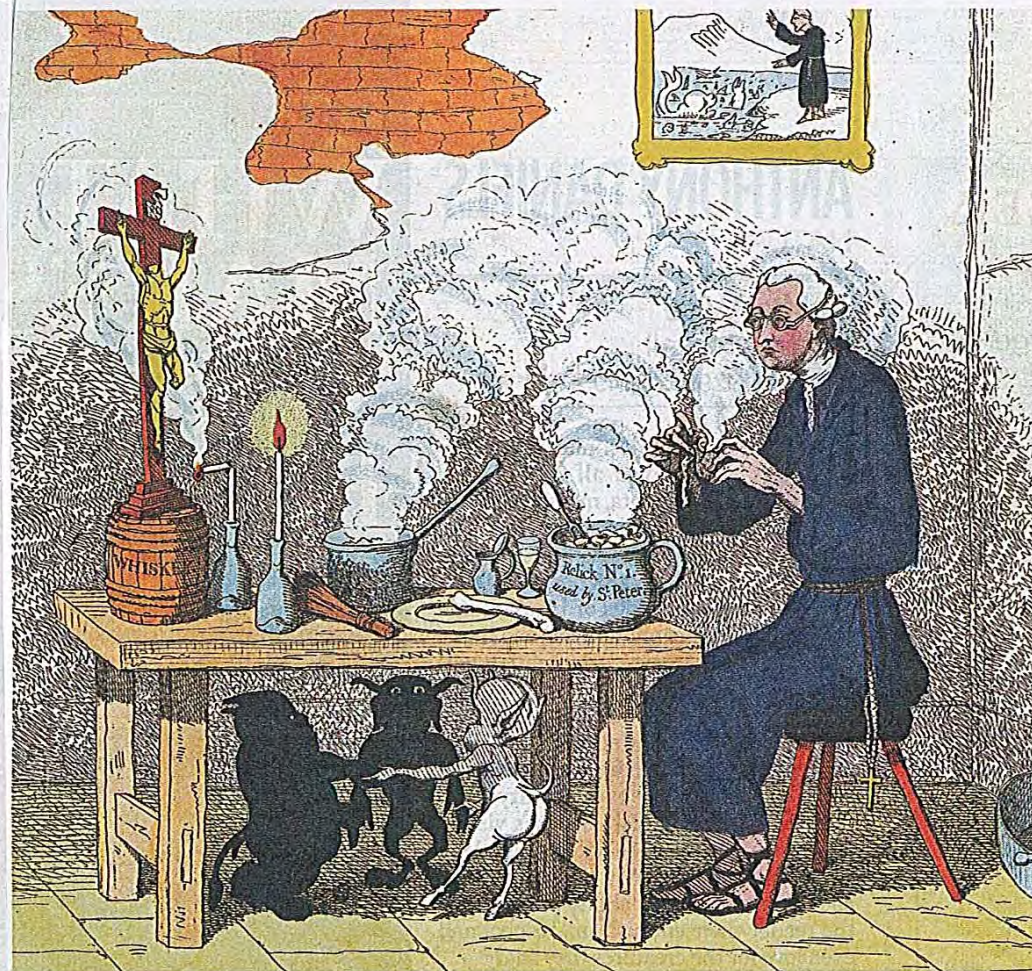
Of all the lines from Burke's *Reflections On The Revolution In France*, most of us can remember best that bit about Marie Antoinette. Burke caught a glimpse of her once, about 13 years previously, and she looked so enchanting that 'I thought ten thousand swords must have leapt from their scabbards to avenge even a

IT'S A FACT

In a 1792 Commons speech Burke drew a dagger from his coat and said of the French: 'Beware of these execrable philosophers, whose object is to destroy everything that is good.'

look that threatened her with insult'. I'd always thought that sentence so snobbish – about a featherbrained silken pseudo-shepherdess – as to be positively emetic. But Norman has helped me revise my opinion.

It wasn't just devotion to Marie Antoinette that made



Redemption of a Bastille prophet

Burke oppose the Revolution; and he was generally no toady to monarchy.

He thought George III was wrong to impose new taxes on the American colonies, and he was constantly fighting extensions of Royal patronage and

power. His greatest parliamentary performance was a 3½-hour tirade against administrative corruption and waste, much of it associated with the court.

He disliked slavery and anti-Catholicism. He stuck up for

the Irish and he ranted about British imperialist mistreatment of the native Indian population. Indeed, he spent seven years in an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to impeach Warren Hastings of the East India Company. Burke is vener-

THE SIMPLE LIFE:
A satirical cartoon from 1754 of pro-Catholic politician Edmund Burke, mockingly dressed as a priest

ated by Tories today, but for Heaven's sake he wasn't even a Tory. He was a Whig. He backed Fox – not Pitt – over India. He backed Fox – not Pitt – when the King went mad and started talking to trees.

But when it came to the French Revolution, he thought Fox was naive and deluded, and the two men broke publicly in the Commons, in a scene that reduced Fox to tears.

To understand his opposition, you must grasp the subtlety of his political thought; and here Norman's analysis is masterful.

Burke hated the French Revolution because it destroyed the hidden bonds that help knit society together. He thought it madness casually to break up the loyalties that we form from our earliest childhoods, to our families, our countries, and all the other institutions of which we form a part.

These institutions have grown up over time. They offer wisdom and protection and a sense of community. All that was wrecked by the Revolution, with its arrogant dismissal of tradition and

its exaltation of individual rights.

The message of Burke, says Norman, is clearly relevant today. We live in a culture of liberal individualism and narcissistic hedonism.

We are in danger of forgetting that the pleasure and point of our existence is to be found in the company of others. In that sense, Burke is the intellectual forefather of the political scientist Robert Putnam, whose 2000 book *Bowling Alone* lamented the atomised society, and he is clearly the inspiration for the excellent but still half-understood concept of the 'Big Society'.

Within two years of his *Reflections On The Revolution In France*, Burke's most grisly prophecies were coming true. The blood of thousands of innocent people ran from the guillotine to the gutters of Paris, and on September 5, 1793, a body called the Committee for Public Safety specifically adopted 'Terror' as an instrument of policy. French armies began to cause mayhem across the Continent.

Karl Marx wrote that Burke was a 'sycophant' and an 'out-and-out bourgeois'. Was he right? Or was Burke right to be suspicious of revolutions?

I suggest we consult the ghosts of the millions who have died under the communist tyrannies of the 20th Century. Jesse Norman has brought Burke back in triumph, and not before time.