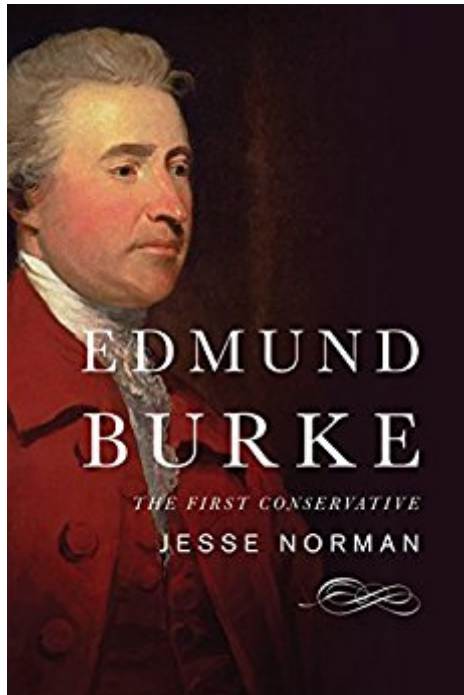




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Edmund Burke: The First Conservative



Synopsis

Edmund Burke is both the greatest and the most underrated political thinker of the past three hundred years. A brilliant 18th-century Irish philosopher and statesman, Burke was a fierce champion of human rights and the Anglo-American constitutional tradition, and a lifelong campaigner against arbitrary power. Once revered by an array of great Americans including Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, Burke has been almost forgotten in recent years. But as politician and political philosopher Jesse Norman argues in this penetrating biography, we cannot understand modern politics without him. As Norman reveals, Burke was often ahead of his time, anticipating the abolition of slavery and arguing for free markets, equality for Catholics in Ireland, responsible government in India, and more. He was not always popular in his own lifetime, but his ideas about power, community, and civic virtue have endured long past his death. Indeed, Burke engaged with many of the same issues politicians face today, including the rise of ideological extremism, the loss of social cohesion, the dangers of the corporate state, and the effects of revolution on societies. He offers us now a compelling critique of liberal individualism, and a vision of society based not on a self-interested agreement among individuals, but rather on an enduring covenant between generations. Burke won admirers in the American colonies for recognizing their fierce spirit of liberty and for speaking out against British oppression, but his greatest triumph was seeing through the utopian aura of the French Revolution. In repudiating that revolution, Burke laid the basis for much of the robust conservative ideology that remains with us to this day: one that is adaptable and forward-thinking, but also mindful of the debt we owe to past generations and our duty to preserve and uphold the institutions we have inherited. He is the first conservative. A rich, accessible, and provocative biography, Edmund Burke describes Burke's life and achievements alongside his momentous legacy, showing how Burke's analytical mind and deep capacity for empathy made him such a vital thinker—both for his own age, and for ours.

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Customer Reviews

This splendid book is as much about a way forward for conservatives on both sides of the Atlantic as it is a look backwards at the life of one of the great political philosophers. It's a thoughtful, deeply researched, and brilliantly written homage to a somewhat neglected hero of the Right, but also a meditation on what a working politician can -- and should -- be. (On a side note, by the time I reached the third chapter, I'd already ordered two additional Father's Day copies!)

If you have an interest in the War For Independence you've come across some names of British citizens who supported the colonists' demands to one degree or another; Thomas Paine of course, Lord Chatham (Pitt the elder), Charles James Fox, the Howe brothers were at least sympathetic before they invaded and perhaps for a while beyond, and the opposition in Parliament that if nothing else opposed King George's ruinous financial investment in the war. However, there was a Member of Parliament who spoke philosophically in Parliament in support of the colonists and even used the term "slavery" as the choice England was giving to Americans. That Member was Edmund Burke, and now with Jesse Norman's [Edmund Burke: The First Conservative](#), Americans can learn the rest of his story. Norman's book is concise, divided into two sections: Life and Thought. The division works well, although it is impossible to rehearse his life without much of his thought leaking in. Burke never rose to the heights of his profession, which was politics. He isn't remembered like Washington or George III. However, he left behind a large volume of written thought, and that is where Norman mines his story. Perhaps the author's countrymen are more familiar with Burke's writings, but for an American audience Norman does seem to assume more reader familiarity with his subject's bibliography than most Americans have (an Appendix/Synopsis of which would have

been helpful). Nevertheless, Norman makes the timeless impact of all Burke's writing quite clear. The author pays homage to a previous biographer's use of a W. B. Yeats reference to "Burke's Great Melody" both in his Introduction and again in the final chapters, a way of tying it all together. Yeats: "American colonies, Ireland, France, and India/ Harried, and Burke's great melody against it." What is the book about? It's about Burke's views on the social order in which men live: men now, men before, and men hereafter. Norman writes: "Thus in the eighteenth-century England the social order would include the great estates of the realm: the monarchy, the aristocracy and the commons; the 'establishments,' such as the Church of England and the universities; the City of London, the guilds and trading companies; the institutions of local government; the navy and army; the legal system and judiciary, and so on. But by extension it would also include the institutions surrounding marriage, birth and death; church attendance and prayer; the tavern and the theatre; the arts and culture; booksellers and the press; gambling, drinking and the mob; and patterns of education, self-enrichment and social mobility." Jesse Norman's book is about all these things because Burke had ideas and theories that touched each of these topics. The author lucidly lays out Burke's views and repeatedly wraps them into a single philosophy about man's place in society. Governance is important, but Burke's world ranges far beyond. Because Burke's thoughts remain so relevant and useful for steering man's way through a troubled world (while loving "the little platoon we belong to"), this book is instructive and relevant today. It's a short thoughtful read, but some pages are worth a day's contemplation, making it all the more enjoyable. Lastly, a note, not a caveat. When the book arrives it becomes obvious on the jacket it is written by an active politician with strong party affiliation. However, no axe is ground in this book. Indeed, it seems the author has taken to heart Burke's many references to modest politicians. And oh, the illustrations include hilarious political cartoons worthy of Mike Luckovich. Could political coverage of Burke have been even harsher in his day than of George Bush in ours? Burke wouldn't be surprised.

Summary: This book is divided into two parts. The first part concerns Burke's life, and the last part discusses his ideas. The author begins with a brief description of Burke's ancestors and the Ireland in which he was born. Burke's father was distant yet one who invested much of his resources for his son's benefit. The elder Burke was a lawyer and wanted his son to enter the profession, but Edmund had no passion for legal study or practice. However, he did have a passion for ideas, writing, and the rule of law. Among his early publications was a pamphlet on the nature of beauty. Rather than enter the legal profession, Edmund went in to politics and was elected to the House of Commons. From the beginning, he displayed his independent nature by giving many speeches on

controversial topics, such as advocating for the rights of the American colonists. Once elected to represent Bristol, right out of the gate he broke with convention by stating in his inaugural speech that he would not be beholden to the wishes of his constituents; rather, he would vote based on his own reasoning. These were not mere words either, as proven by his refusal to follow his constituents' wishes with regard to liberalizing trade with Ireland--a steadfastness that cost him his job. Edmund set himself apart from others in Parliament by writing and speaking of ideas and principles rather than engaging in base partisan bickering. In fact, he was one of the first to distinguish between a political faction and a political party, advocating the party over the faction as it was the party that was united by principle, whereas the faction was kept together by nothing more than political interest. Burke's character was also marked by bravery, as shown when in Bristol he stood his ground against the mob that threatened him with physical harm. The last part of the book, which talks about Burke's ideas, begins by refuting the argument that Burke was nothing more than a lackey for the aristocrats and powerful. In the objective and reasoned manner found throughout the book's first part, the author acknowledges that Burke did receive patronage from those whom he lauded and from people in positions he promoted. However, the author proves that Burke's ideas flowed from his heart rather than mean self-interest, by showing that Burke held them years before he'd received patronage. Having established Burke's independence of mind, the book then contrasts his vision of society with those of Rousseau, Locke, Hobbes, and Bentham. Burke's liberalism was not of the individualistic sort; rather, he considered tradition and social institutions essential to man's well being. Though Burke supported a handful of rebellions, such as that of the American colonists against the British, he only supported them when the goal of the rebellion was not annihilation of tradition and culture, but rather the restoration and furtherance of what was good in that culture. This explains why Burke was against the French revolution--the French revolutionaries wanted to completely replace their culture and traditions with new principles based on vague slogans untethered to reality.

Pros: This book presents a balanced view of Burke. It depicts him as a man of integrity, intellect, and honor, but it is no panegyric. For instance, it is candid about Burke's long-winded and sometimes too-emotional speeches, his permitting of politics to destroy friendship (as between him and Mr. Fox), and his debts. By so clearly articulating Burke's thought, the book shows the perennial clash between "conservatives" (i.e., Old Whigs) who understand the value of tradition as a collection of human wisdom accumulated through the ages, and "progressives" (i.e., Jacobins) who, as Burke said, "rashly meddl[e] with what they do not understand." (See also "A Conflict of Visions," by Thomas Sowell.) The author shows keen perception toward the end in describing how Burke's thought is relevant today, especially regarding

Burke's belief in slow government reluctant to make drastic change; a government populated by leaders who try to understand the culture of the people and form policies according to that culture rather than according to abstract ideology. Cons: The book seems to assume that the reader is knowledgeable about the procedures of British government. A reader who isn't so knowledgeable may find some passages regarding this subject difficult to understand. The paragraph on the events leading up to and the cause of the French Revolution is so cursory as to be almost superfluous. Also, the author's analysis of the highly debatable causes of some of our modern-day crises tends to be conclusory. For example, he blames the financial crisis of last decade on deregulation of markets, though there are strong arguments supporting the conclusion that the crisis was actually caused by government regulation. The word "conservative" as a description of Burke is questionable. Burke might be better described as a classical liberal. The author addresses this toward the end, but conflates "classical liberal" with "libertarian." Many consider the definitions of these terms to be quite distinct. (See, e.g., "The Classical Liberal Constitution," by Richard Epstein.) Further, in that same section, the author fails to contrast "liberalism" as it was meant in decades and centuries past with the modern western notion of liberalism, which is decidedly statist and unsupporting of liberty for the individual.

All people who claim the mantle of conservatism should read this book. Jesse Norman, a current MP and Conservative, has written a cogent and neat understanding of the life and important works of Burke. An American conservative can learn a lot from Burke, and his ideals. Norman's distillation of Burke's points on the American and French Revolution is important. The American Revolution is primarily a political revolution revolving around basic liberties granted to all Englishmen. The French Revolution basically traded the rule of one despotism for another. And trying to change society is so much more difficult than merely dealing with political differences. Which is why Burke is the first exponent of the Conservative ideals of community and government restraint. I think this book is a good ideological primer for all people, and I hope that Burkean principles are forwarded by it.

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