

ONE

An Irishman Abroad, 1730–1759



IN THE YEAR 1729 THERE appeared in the city of Dublin a rather curious publication, by an anonymous author. It did not have the snappiest of titles: *A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of Poor People in Ireland from Being a Burden to Their Parents or Country, and for Making Them Beneficial to the Public*. But, its title apart, in many ways *A Modest Proposal* was the prototype of the modern policy pamphlet, of a type familiar from present-day think tanks the world over.

The pamphlet proceeded in the most measured language from diagnosis to statistical analysis to policy recommendation. Ireland was then subject to very serious poverty and malnutrition, the author noted. Careful calculation revealed that the number of new births far exceeded the level required to replenish the population. No work existed in handicrafts or agriculture for the mothers, with the result that the traveller to Dublin found:

the streets, the roads, and cabin doors crowded with beggars of the female sex, followed by three, four, or six children, all in rags and importuning every passenger for an alms. These mothers, instead

of being able to work for their honest livelihood, are forced to employ all their time in strolling to beg sustenance for their helpless infants: who as they grow up either turn thieves for want of work, or leave their dear native country.

But, the author said, there was a ready-made solution, then as often now imported from America: 'I have been assured by a very knowing American of my acquaintance in London, that a young healthy child well nursed is at a year old a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled; and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a fricassee or a ragout.' Not only were one-year-old children good food; they had other uses as well: 'Those who are more thrifty (as I must confess the times require) may flay the carcass; the skin of which artificially dressed will make admirable gloves for ladies, and summer boots for fine gentlemen.'

Jonathan Swift's pamphlet is one of the most brilliant sustained satires in the English language, a masterpiece of moral indignation which effortlessly ridiculed targets ranging from the new vogue for statistics to contemporary attitudes towards the poor. But the economic and social facts he described have never been questioned.

This was, precisely, the Ireland into which Edmund Burke was born, on Arran Quay by the River Liffey in Dublin, on New Year's Day 1730. Dublin then was a place of extremes, in which enormous wealth coexisted with desperate poverty and, frequently, starvation. Nor were these evils confined to the city. In an essay of 1748, Burke and some friends indignantly described the condition of the rural poor at that time: 'Money is a stranger to them . . . as for their food, it is notorious they seldom taste bread or meat; their diet, in summer, is potatoes and sour milk; in winter . . . they are still worse, living on the same root, made palatable by a little salt, and accompanied by water.' As for what they wore: 'their clothes so ragged . . . nay, it is no uncommon sight to see half a dozen children run quite naked out of a cabin, scarcely distinguishable from a dunghill.'

Fortunately the Burkes themselves lived somewhat more comfortably. Edmund was the third of four surviving children, a sometimes neglected position in a family. It may have been so here, for his brothers Garrett and Richard were eldest and youngest, while his elder sister Juliana was the only girl. The Burkes were likely of Anglo-Norman 'Old English' extraction, originally Catholic and not part of the New English ascendancy which took control of Ireland in the seventeenth century. Edmund's father Richard, probably born in County Cork in the south-west, had long since left the land for the city. He was an attorney, a Protestant and a self-made man who had risen in the law through hard work, described by Edmund's friend Richard Shackleton as 'of middling circumstances, fretful temper and punctual honesty'. His wife Mary Nagle was also from County Cork. But otherwise she could hardly have been more different: a Catholic countrywoman from a genteel but much reduced family of landowners. The Nagles were not merely Catholics but Jacobites, who had supported the claims to the throne of James II and his successors after the revolution of 1688, which brought the Protestant William of Orange to the throne as William III. Forty years later most of their land, and much of their dignity, had gone.

By the 1720s Ireland was in name a country, indeed a kingdom, but in reality an English dominion. The functions of state were controlled by Protestants, generally Englishmen, and directed from London. Access to education and opportunities for advancement were similarly restricted. Catholics were barred from the professions, from jury service and from exercising the vote. A host of other laws oppressed them, from owning firearms to controls on inheritance and land ownership. Much of their land had been taken over by Protestant nobility and gentry, who were not offset in influence by a class of yeoman farmers as in England. The result was huge inequalities of wealth and well-being, compounding and in turn compounded by religious hatred and political instability.

Some have suggested that Richard Burke himself was an apostate, one of many who converted in order to get on. But whether or not

it was Richard or one of his forebears who converted, it is evident that Edmund grew up as the product of a marriage mixed not merely by religion but by trajectory and class. He and his brothers Garrett and Richard were raised as Protestants, Juliana as a Catholic. Protestantism, the city and social aspiration, it seemed, belonged to the future; Catholicism and rural life to the past. Loyalties must, then, be divided. This may be one reason why Burke was to develop such an extraordinary moral imagination, able to reach out at once in all directions, to comprehend aristocrat and revolutionary, Catholic and Protestant, underclass and hierarchy alike.

Home life was not easy, for Richard Burke appears to have been a man of rigid and unyielding disposition. The will he left at his death is a mass of small-minded bequests and instructions, almost designed to split the estate and set family members against each other. He also had a foul temper. 'My dear friend Burke leads a very unhappy life from his father's temper,' Richard Shackleton reported in 1747. ' . . . He must not stir out at night by any means, and if he stays at home there is some new subject for abuse.'

Luckily, here too Mary Burke was quite different from her husband. Little is known about her. But, as scholars have noted, Burke's references to his mother are always warm and affectionate, to his father never so. In adult life Burke notably combined high principle and personal probity with an open, trusting and generous disposition towards others, though he also knew how to bear a grudge. Without diving too deep into psychological speculation, it is not hard to see his father on the one side, his mother on the other. As a child Burke spent some time recuperating from illness with his Nagle cousins in the Blackwater Valley in County Cork, and studied at a rural 'hedge school' in Ballyduff. The Valley was beautiful country, which made a profound impression on him; it may also have laid the foundations for his understanding of Gaelic culture, and his lifelong sympathy with the plight of the Irish Catholics under the penal laws.

In May 1741 Edmund, then aged eleven, Garrett (fifteen) and

Richard (seven) were sent away to school. Juliana (thirteen) was kept at home with her parents. Edmund had left Dublin previously, to stay with his mother's family in County Cork and get away from the damp and disease of the city. Now he went for an education. His destination was a small non-denominational boarding school in the village of Ballitore, about thirty miles south-west of Dublin. It was run by Abraham Shackleton, a Quaker and the father of Richard Shackleton, who was to become Burke's greatest early friend.

Abraham Shackleton was a remarkable man, who had taught himself Latin at the age of twenty in order to become a schoolmaster. The curriculum was a traditional one, with a strong emphasis on classical languages and literature, and work was taken seriously. Yet it is clear that Burke quickly settled in, and that Shackleton's influence was a sympathetic one, as much moral as intellectual. In 1757, when Burke had moved to London and was building an early reputation as a writer, he thanked his former schoolmaster, saying 'I received the education, that, if I am anything, has made me so.' Still more strikingly, in a poem on Ballitore, Burke paid generous tribute to the older man: 'Whose breast all virtues long have made their home / where Courtesy's stream doth without flattery flow / and the just use of Wealth without the show'. The warmth of these words vividly contrasts with the extant references to Burke's own father, and there is perhaps even a touch of reproof to his father's temper in the second line.

As a non-denominational school run by Quakers, Ballitore was itself a minor study in contrasts. Its influence on Burke was profound. Not in point of doctrine: the Quakers were dissenters, pacifists and abstainers from alcohol, which Burke never was. But he evidently appreciated the plain-spokenness and straight dealing he experienced. The egalitarian ethos of the Quakers may also have left its mark with him in later life: in his support for the underdog, in his lifelong willingness to engage intellectually with others, in his hatred of arbitrary power, in his belief that the social order should benefit all. The mature Burke admired the Quakers' commitment

to good and active citizenship. While he did not share their opposition to religious hierarchy and priesthood, his arguments for the established Church were notably based more on institutional authority than on revelation to the elect. When Burke came to consider the American revolution in the 1770s, its values and history were things to which he was already instinctively sympathetic.

In 1744 Burke left Ballitore for Trinity College Dublin. Trinity College was then the only institution of higher learning in Ireland, an avowedly Protestant establishment founded by Elizabeth I in 1592 to train clergy for the Church of Ireland. It was smaller than even the smallest universities today, with between 300 and 500 students, more of them headed into the Church than any other profession. The curriculum, based on the medieval *trivium* and *quadrivium*, was divided into 'humanity' (Latin and Greek texts) and 'science' (including mathematics, astronomy, geography and physics, and finally metaphysics and ethics). There were no facilities for social activities or sports within the college.

The average age at entry was sixteen, so that when Burke entered at age fourteen he was among the youngest students in the college. Academically, he performed well but not consistently so. Awarded a scholarship in 1746 after two days of examination on Greek and Latin authors, he was nevertheless ranked only in the top half of the class overall. For assiduity and diligence, he was ranked in the bottom quarter. The reason why is fairly evident: Burke was not happy either at home or at college. Going to Trinity meant, first of all, leaving the Shackletons and returning to the family home, to foul city air and his father's angry moods. In the classroom, he was younger than his fellows, and obviously bored by the often laborious and pedantic teaching. Matters were made worse by his reliance on his father for financial support, support tied to a legal career which held few attractions for him. Many people make the greatest friendships of their lives at university; of the forty or so of Burke's contemporaries who we know studied with him for four years, it seems that none became a good friend while there.

Burke found his outlets elsewhere, in vast amounts of reading, in friendships outside the classroom, and in writing. His sixty surviving undergraduate letters, all to Richard Shackleton, attest to the breadth of his social and literary interests, as well as to his habit of spending three hours a day in the public library. Burke at this time had been seized by what he called a poetical madness or *furor poeticus*. He wanted to become a poet, and seems to have made his literary debut with a satirical poem, probably published in 1747. But he was an omnivorous autodidact, and he used his letters to experiment with new ideas and topics and literary forms, as well as in-jokes, banter and self-analysis, with Richard as a private and supportive audience.

This instinct for self-improvement also led Burke to play a part in setting up two societies at Trinity. Each combined drinking and conviviality with a serious purpose. The first had four members, and focused on the writing of burlesques or parodies, a very popular genre of the time; the second, named absurdly the Academy of Belles Lettres, had seven members and focused on rhetoric and debate. Neither lasted more than a few months. Both evinced Burke's lifelong clubbability, as well as a restless ambition to spread his wings.

Altogether more serious was the *Reformer*. This was a periodical, which ran weekly for thirteen issues in early 1748. Produced by a circle of friends including Burke, it combined essays on diverse topics with articles about the theatre – and in particular the rather controversial local Smock Alley Theatre, which was run by Thomas Sheridan, father of Richard Brinsley Sheridan, the playwright and Burke's later parliamentary colleague and rival. The essays are unsigned except for the teasing initials B, S, U and Æ. But two contributions by Æ are sometimes thought to possess the stamp of the young Burke. One is devoted to the idea of public spirit, and includes a call for more generous patronage of poetry. The second is a vigorous analysis of rural poverty, which highlights and criticizes the extreme inequality of the age, and insists that the

landowning aristocracy must discharge the responsibilities that come with property. These were, and would remain, characteristically Burkean themes.

Burke graduated from Trinity in February 1748. After that we know little of his activities for two years or so. Still under intense pressure to pursue a legal career, he may very well have worked in his father's office, which will have done nothing to relieve his spirits. He may also have been sucked into local politics, and in particular into a fierce controversy stirred up by Charles Lucas, a radical who stood unsuccessfully in a highly contentious by-election to the Irish House of Commons. But we simply do not know for sure.

What we do know is that Burke went to London in 1750, aged twenty; and that for him, as for Samuel Johnson and so many others, this was a crucial turning point. Ireland was his birthplace. One way or another, Ireland would always be in his thoughts. But Burke had never felt the joy of a settled life there: not with his family, not at school in Ballitore, not at Trinity. He never lost his Irish accent. But he returned to Ireland only three times over the next forty-seven years. London, and England, marked a new beginning.

The London that Burke encountered was by far the largest city in the British Isles. Its population of more than 600,000 people in 1750 was roughly one-tenth that of England as a whole, and ten times that of the next-largest city, Bristol. It was a place of squalor and stench, with huge overcrowding and only the most rudimentary sanitation. Pigs and fowl often lived in urban cellars. Diseases such as smallpox, typhoid fever and dysentery were rampant, with periodic outbreaks of influenza. The results were death and deformity, which hit the urban poor the hardest but left no family untouched. Barely one child in three survived childhood.

By way of antidote, people turned to gambling, cockfighting and the like, and above all to drinking gin. The latter, mixed with fruit

cordials, was embraced on such an epic scale that the average annual consumption across the whole of England in 1743 was well over two gallons a head. When Burke arrived in London memories were still fresh of the notorious Judith Defour and, thanks to William Hogarth's print *Gin Lane* (see overleaf), would remain so. It was she who in 1734 had strangled her own two-year-old daughter and sold the new petticoat the girl had been given at the parish workhouse in order to pay for gin. Five Acts of Parliament were required to bring the craze under control.

There was no established police force, and though a widely admired new system of street lighting had been introduced two decades earlier, it was only partially effective. It is not surprising, then, that crime and petty disorder were widespread, arson and looting not unusual. Riots were sometimes seen as a means for an urban underclass to even the score, and could offer rich pickings to people in desperate poverty. Violence lay everywhere below the social surface.

And yet, and yet. Britain was then undergoing what has been called the first sexual revolution, as public and official attitudes softened towards such matters as premarital sex, adultery and prostitution, and new norms of behaviour emerged. In the 1650s barely 1 per cent of births had been outside marriage. By 1800, however, a quarter of first-born children were illegitimate. It was an age of remarkable sexual freedom, and London in 1750 was at the centre of it. In part as a result, the capital saw a burst of sustained population growth that would double its population in three generations.

People did not go to London without good reason, for the city was a place of excitement, wealth and opportunity. It was the metropolis for an early trading empire stretching from Barbados and Boston to Bengal. It was a financial centre that supplied capital and liquidity at low interest rates to Britain's fast-growing entrepreneurial, industrial and commercial classes. It was a crucible of new ideas, and political controversy fuelled by newspaper and pamphlet wars. And like the country as a whole, it was celebrated

on the continent as the home of the liberty of the individual, the land of the theatre and the pub, a place where monarchical authority had been made subject to law and freethinkers could dissent without the endless fear of reprisal. Voltaire had famously asked, ‘Why can’t the laws that guarantee British liberties be adopted elsewhere?’ Why indeed? The contrast with the absolute monarchy and social and religious hierarchies of France was manifest.

Above all, as it grew richer London was ever more a centre for the arts and culture. The British Museum was founded in 1753 as the world’s first ‘universal museum’: a national institution, owned by neither Church nor monarch, open to all at no charge, and dedicated not merely to Britain but to human culture and the world as such. Paintings too were starting to find their way out of the great houses and into the public realm. In 1746 the Foundling Hospital began to show works by contemporary artists, though it would be twenty-three more years before the new Royal Academy could emulate the Paris Salons with its first Summer Exhibition.

Handel’s late oratorios date from this period, and his *Music for the Royal Fireworks*, written to celebrate the end of the War of the Austrian Succession, had its first performance in 1749 in Green Park with 12,000 in attendance. The celebrated actor David Garrick took over the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, in 1747, and made it one of the greatest theatres in Europe. Poems and plays coursed through the city, many of them moralizing parodies and satires, which were enormously popular. The novel, then in its infancy, had recently been galvanized as a literary genre by *Pamela* and *Clarissa*, two works of Samuel Richardson, who had come to London from Derbyshire in 1736; and still more by Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones*, a tale which combined acid social commentary with a self-aware assertion of the value of fiction itself.

Nothing, then, was impossible in London. It was filled at that time with a spaciousness, a sheer energy in human ambition that is hard to imagine even today. The effect on the young Burke, far from home for the first time, must have been overwhelming and electric.

Burke enrolled in the Middle Temple in May 1750. At that time the four Inns of Court were colleges-cum-professional associations, where would-be barristers received instruction in the law. They were a necessary entry-point to a career at both the Irish and the English Bar, and most Irish students opted for the Middle Temple, composing roughly a quarter of its total numbers. The demands were not onerous, and no examination was required to be called to the Bar. Instead, the students needed to eat dinners for eight terms and one vacation, and complete nine exercises, from which they could pay to buy their way out. Most did.

It was a narrow, dry and practical education, requiring scrupulous attention to precedents, and Burke seems to have hated it. A few years afterwards he wrote, 'He that lives in a college, after his mind is sufficiently stocked with learning, is like a man, who having built, rigged, and victualled, a ship, should lock her up in a dry dock.' In a later unfinished essay on the laws of England, he said, 'the study of our jurisprudence presented to liberal and well-educated minds, even in the best authors, hardly anything but barbarous terms, ill explained; a coarse but not a plain expression; an indigested method; and a species of reasoning, the very refuse of the schools'. Nothing could be further removed from his own belief in extensive learning – or from the bustle and energy of the city outside.

But there were three serious drawbacks to his hostility. For the young man with ambition the law was itself a well-trodden path to fame, fortune and social advancement. Moreover, without a legal qualification Burke had no professional direction, or practical means to provide for himself. And finally, a decision to give it up would put him on an emotional and financial collision course with his father. Whatever the tensions between them, Richard Burke had been more than good to his son. He had paid Edmund's way through four years of Trinity College, though this was not strictly necessary for the Bar, and then a further five years in London. He

was, in the most literal sense, heavily invested in his son. And what to do instead?

Little wonder, then, that Burke seems from his letters and poems to have had bouts of recurrent ill-health in 1750–2. He recuperated, avoided the big question and saved money by going on extended journeys with a new friend, William Burke. ‘Cousin Will’ had the same surname as Edmund, but may in fact have been little or no relation at all. He was perhaps a little younger, and had been educated at Westminster School and Christ Church, Oxford, before heading to the Middle Temple and the Bar. Twenty-five years later Burke described Will as someone whom he ‘tenderly loved, highly valued, and continually lived with, in an union not to be expressed, quite since our boyish years’. Will was to prove a lifelong friend to Burke, but in many ways a disastrous one: a boon companion and a route to preferment, but also an adventurer, a financial burden and a source of embarrassment and scandal.

All this lay in the future, however. For now, Edmund’s travels took him to Bath, then a highly fashionable resort whose spa waters were a magnet for the infirm and well connected, and to Dr Christopher Nugent. Nugent had been an early acquaintance, an Irish Catholic with a medical degree whom Burke may originally have consulted on medical grounds. Like Abraham Shackleton, he was both wise and sympathetic: there is a magnificent painting by James Barry of Nugent as an older man, in which he somehow comes across as at once modest, intensely reflective and yet non-judgemental. Like Shackleton, he exercised a profound and lasting influence on the young Burke, who explicitly credited him as the cause of his recovery in a poem: ‘Tis now two autumns since he chanced to find / a youth of body broke, infirm of mind / he gave him all that man can ask or give / restored his life and taught him how to live.’

‘Taught him how to live’ – best of all, Nugent had a daughter in her late teens, Jane, who quickly caught the young man’s fancy. Burke was an Irish transplant with literary ambitions, then in the

process of alienating his only source of financial support. By no stretch of the imagination could he be described as a catch, not least since Jane was herself a Catholic. He was no Adonis, either, to judge by later pictures; and had no known patrons or social advantages. What he did have was warmth, energy and talent, albeit a talent then confined to his personality, private letters and occasional writings. The beautiful thing is that this was all she needed. It was a love match, and would remain so over forty years of marriage.

Jane herself is hard to glimpse in her own right, then or later. Abraham Shackleton described her rather prosaically as ‘a genteel, well-bred woman of the Romish faith [whom Burke married] neither for her religion nor her money, but from the natural impulse of youthful affection and inclination, which guided his choice to an agreeable object, with whom he promised himself happiness in a married state’. Burke himself begins with effortless condescension, in a passage from a eulogy written while they were still courting: ‘her stature is not tall. She is not made to be the admiration of everybody, but the happiness of one.’ But he soon yields to unfettered admiration: ‘She has all the delicacy that does not exclude firmness. She has all the softness that does not imply weakness . . . her voice is a low soft music . . . To describe her body, describes her mind: one is the transcript of the other . . .’ And he ends, rather piteously, ‘Who can know her, and himself, and entertain much hope? Who can see and know such a creature, and not love her to distraction?’ Even by the ironic standards of the time, this is the language of true love.

In 1755 Burke took the momentous decision not to pursue a career at the Bar, deepening the breach with his father, who had supported him quite handsomely to that end. Richard Burke’s sense of moral and financial injury was evidently fanned by his son’s continuing lack of direction in life. Edmund wrote to his

father, ‘it grieves me deeply to think that . . . your suffering should be at all increased by anything which looks ill-judged in my conduct . . . In real truth in all my designs I shall have nothing more at heart than to show myself to you and my mother a dutiful, affectionate and obliged son.’ Instead he threw himself into writing and thinking, and into forming the social connections necessary to get on in life. He had written essays and perhaps journalism on his long retreats with Will. Now he produced four substantial works in quick succession.

It is not given to us to predict the course of our own existence on Earth; we are forever groping forward. We may look back at our past lives with a clarity that is unachievable in earlier moments, and still more is this true for the biographer, who has the mixed blessing of hindsight. Nevertheless, though Burke can hardly have suspected it, these four early works start to lay out the deep framework within which his later thought takes shape. Each deserves a close examination.

The first of them was *A Vindication of Natural Society, or A View of the Miseries and Evils arising to Mankind from Every Species of Artificial Society, in a Letter to Lord ***** by a late Noble Writer*, published in May 1756. Sometimes ignored or written off as a piece of late juvenilia, the *Vindication* was in every way an extraordinary debut. It was written anonymously, with the goal of attacking the religious ideas of Lord Bolingbroke, whose posthumous collected works had recently appeared. Bolingbroke had been a Secretary of State under Queen Anne, and had negotiated the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713, ending the War of the Spanish Succession, in which the Duke of Marlborough had curbed the territorial ambitions of the French in northern Europe. Notoriously, he was a ‘deist’ who dismissed claims of religious revelation as mere superstition and regarded the clergy as charlatans. Instead, he argued in favour of ‘natural’ religion, to which all rational people could in principle have access and without the need for any Church hierarchy.

Burke profoundly disagreed with these views. But rather than

confront them openly, he does so indirectly and through irony. On its face, the *Vindication* is a staunch defence of Bolingbroke; underneath, it ridicules his views. Civilization is overrated, the argument ostensibly goes. So-called civilized society has really meant vast slaughter by humans of humans throughout history, the abuse of power, and slavery for the poor and weak. We would, then, be better off as a society in a ‘state of nature’, without a sovereign authority or civil institutions. As in politics, so in religion: better a return to a pure and natural religion than the dishonesty and exploitation induced by religious sophistication and mysticism. To these Bolingbrokian themes, Burke added a pitch-perfect impersonation of Bolingbroke’s imperious authorial voice. Coming at a time when the British constitution and British society were widely admired across Europe, it must have seemed obvious to Burke that readers would get the joke.

Except that many of them didn’t. The *Vindication* was generally well received, but some critics thought its arguments entirely sincere. Worse, some saw it as a lost work by Bolingbroke himself; this view was especially popular in America. The misunderstanding was sufficiently marked that Burke felt compelled to add a preface of explanation to the second edition the following year, which made clear that the work was meant ironically. Yet the illusion persisted: even as late as the 1790s, the work was being cast back in his teeth as evidence of inconsistency, while social criticisms that he regarded as fanciful were being taken quite seriously by radical writers.

Nevertheless, the *Vindication* is a remarkable work. It is no more than an extended essay in length. Yet it combines sweeping history with political analysis of despotism, aristocracy and democracy, and mordant satire with vigorous and heartfelt condemnation of social evils. Though it slightly misses its target, it is marked throughout by enormous stylistic flair. Its themes – distrust of abstract thought, celebration of human history and civilization, belief in established institutions – remained with Burke to the end

of his life. And as we shall see, its deepest targets were yet to be revealed. This, then, is no mere piece of juvenilia.

The *Vindication* also marked the beginning of a relationship that was to prove very important to the young Burke, with the London bookseller and publisher Robert Dodsley. Dodsley had risen through his writings from domestic service as a footman to become one of the foremost publishers of the day, with a wide circle of friends which included Alexander Pope, Thomas Gray and Samuel Johnson, whose famous *Dictionary* he had helped to finance. He gave Burke a modest fee income from writing, as well as a degree of access to literary London; in return Burke offered him all of his early literary projects, and continued the relationship with his brother James after Dodsley himself retired in 1759.

The next of these projects was to make Burke's early reputation. Again, its title did not spare the typesetter: *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. But in other ways it was a very different work from the *Vindication*. The *Enquiry* is a study in aesthetics and psychology. What is the source of our emotions, or 'passions'? Why do certain works of art or nature elicit in us the feelings that they do?

Questions of taste, indeed of what if anything 'taste' itself was, fed into and in turn were fed by the rapid spread of British commerce in the early eighteenth century, and the growing international trade in works of art. First debated in ancient times, they had been squarely placed in the public mind by a provocative set of articles by Joseph Addison in 1712 in his influential periodical, the *Spectator*. In the previous year Lord Shaftesbury had argued that taste was a kind of internal sense, which operated as naturally and immediately as the external sense of sight: it was impossible to see something beautiful and not see it, naturally and immediately, *as* beautiful. Addison took the opposite tack. For him taste was the result of judging what arises in the imagination, for example when seeing material objects such as landscapes or human bodies. The effect of these contrasting views is that Shaftesbury has difficulty

explaining how material objects can be beautiful in themselves, independently of any mind to judge them so. In contrast, Addison struggles to show why, if material objects are beautiful, the imagination is necessary for them to be seen as such.

In the following decade these questions were taken up by the great Irish-Scottish philosopher Francis Hutcheson, who defended and extended a version of Shaftesbury's theory of inner sense. Shaftesbury, Addison, Hutcheson . . . these were no inconsiderable figures. And as even these brief descriptions hint, aesthetics is a notoriously difficult and slippery subject, beset by conceptual ambiguity and by the simple fact that different people often have different tastes, and that these can change over time: in the words of the late, great S. J. Perelman, 'de gustibus . . . ain't what dey used to be'. So it was brave in the extreme for Burke at the age of twenty-seven to venture into print on this topic. Still more so when one reflects that the work had apparently been completed four years earlier, at the tender age of twenty-three. The *Enquiry* is not a deeply philosophical work. But it had great influence at the time, has been widely read ever since, and develops themes that last long in Burke's own thought.

In tone, the work is quite unlike the *Vindication*. Gone is the mock-ironic, the hint of sneer. Instead we have Burke speaking directly to us, in a measured, engaging and sometimes intimate way. He proceeds from common experience, offering conclusions in a semi-scientific spirit, diffidently or confidently as evidence and intuition demand. He offers, not a rehash of previous work, but a positive theory of his own. And there is the occasional moment of (possibly inadvertent) humour: one of the book's many sections is magnificently entitled 'Proportion not the Cause of Beauty in Vegetables'.

Overall, the tone is quietly assured. It is evident to Burke that humans have a certain nature of their own, for they are commonly struck in the same circumstances by the same pains or pleasures, the same 'passions', feelings and emotions. They take pleasure alike

in the smell of a rose, or feel pain from a violent blow, for example. Central to aesthetic judgements and the feelings that accompany them, for Burke as for Addison, is the recreative imagination: the imagination that allows its owner to re-experience all the feelings of a moment, or to extend experience into an understanding of new things and places and people. But Burke does not restrict the imagination to visible objects, and so sidesteps the earlier objection to Addison's account: on the contrary, he is keenly aware of the functioning of the different senses, of touch and smell and taste as well as sight and hearing, and deliberately goes beyond the visual arts to discuss poetry and music, for example.

Burke also improves on Addison by focusing on just two great types of passion: the sublime and the beautiful. These are grounded respectively for him in two basic human instincts, given by God through the workings of providence: the instinct for self-preservation, and the instinct for love. The sublime is what elicits awe or terror or fear. Its marks include enormity, infinity and indistinctness, but also power and the capacity to inflict pain. When humans encounter the sublime directly, be it in an earthquake or a snake, they naturally turn away and seek refuge. But when they encounter it indirectly or at a distance, as in a work of art or in imagination, they can be amazed and delighted. They can be astonished, or aroused to action, by language, poetry and rhetoric.

If the sublime intimidates, the beautiful attracts. Beauty is described by Burke as 'a social quality'; it is not simply what elicits lust between the sexes, but the expression of a social preference for a relationship with a particular mate. More widely, it includes the emotions and instincts that bring people together in general society: these are sympathy, imitation and ambition, again implanted by providence in order to bring human capacities to their fullest expression.

Much of this is speculative and tendentious, to say the least. But through it we can clearly glimpse the writer himself. It would be hard to miss a young man's yearning in passages like this: 'Observe

that part of a beautiful woman where she is perhaps the most beautiful, about the neck and breasts; the smoothness; the softness . . . the deceitful maze through which the eye slides giddily, without knowing where to fix, or whither it is carried.' Or later, in considering how the body is physically affected by love:

The head reclines something on one side; the eyelids are more closed than usual, and the eyes roll gently with an inclination to the object, the mouth is a little opened, and the breath drawn slowly, with now and then a little sigh: the whole body is composed, and the hands fall idly to the sides. All this is accompanied with an inward sense of melting and languor.

This reads more like an erotic novel than a work of philosophy. It is little surprise that the book was later attacked by Mary Wollstonecraft, the great eighteenth-century feminist, for perpetuating a weak and feeble stereotype of women.

The *Enquiry* was published anonymously in 1757, and sold well enough in the right circles for Burke to become quickly and widely known as its author. It became something of a text on the sublime, in succession to the ancient critic Longinus. As a work of aesthetics it impressed one of the great intellectuals and critics of the eighteenth-century, Gotthold Lessing, and two of the greatest thinkers of all time, Immanuel Kant and Adam Smith. It may also have partly provoked William Gilpin into developing his own notion of the picturesque, which combined the sublime and the beautiful in art and nature, an idea which became wildly fashionable later in the century.

But what is perhaps still more striking is that even at this very early stage the *Enquiry* again lays out in embryo an array of themes always later to be identified with Burke. Humans have a distinctive nature, which is not purely subjective but governed by certain general laws; indeed, they are social animals heavily driven by instinct and emotion. The testimony of ordinary people is often

of greater value than that of experts. Human passions are guided by empathy and imagination. Human well-being is grounded in a social order whose values are given by divine providence. Human reason is limited in scope, and insufficient as a basis for public morality. There may also be a hint here that, in the words of the American thinker Leo Strauss, ‘good order or the rational is the result of forces which do not lend themselves to good order or the rational’. People cannot reason themselves into a good society, for a good society is rooted not merely in reason but in the sentiments and the emotions; this was to prove a crucial precursor to Burke’s critique of the French revolution in the 1790s. Overall, then, a coherent, persuasive and strikingly modern set of ideas is already taking shape.

The years 1756–9 were a time in which Burke poured forth a profusion of different writings, mostly unfinished, under his developing relationship with Robert Dodsley. Despite some missed deadlines, these mark his transition from a writer from inspiration to a writer from demand, from something of an intellectual dilettante to a seasoned professional able to master a body of knowledge and set down his views quickly and cogently. They also required prodigious amounts of reading and reflection, deepening an already capacious personal reservoir of knowledge which was to serve Burke well in future years. It has been rightly said that political parties are elected when they are full of ideas, and turned out of office when those ideas run out. In Burke’s case, though he was only twice briefly in office, the ideas never did run out.

The next of his early works was *An Account of the European Settlements in America* (1757), in collaboration with his friend Will Burke. This was history and polemic, with a highly topical purpose. British foreign policy since time immemorial could be summarized as the desire to inhibit the emergence and restrain the actions of successive superpowers in mainland Europe, in particular Spain and latterly France under Louis XIV and his successors. Throughout the century the French and British had repeatedly clashed in their

colonial expansions, from India to the West Indies to North America. In 1755 the uneasy peace of Aix-la-Chapelle broke down entirely, with the disastrous failure of an expedition by the British commander-in-chief General Braddock to capture Fort Duquesne, in modern-day Pittsburgh. In May of the following year war was formally declared between France and Britain. It would shortly spread across the globe, in what became known as the Seven Years War.

The *Account* summarized the prevailing state of knowledge about the European colonies in North America, covering their history, ethnography, geography, differing cultures and economic conditions. Inevitably, it was a compendium. But it also made an argument: well-regulated colonies mattered to Britain, and by implication were worth fighting for. Not only that: the fading Spanish Empire was less to be feared than French ambition and expansionism. Indeed the fate of the Dutch and Spanish empires gave, the authors held, an object lesson in what not to do. Having taken control of vast swathes of South America, the Dutch and Spanish had largely milked their territories for cash, extracting their immediate mineral resources rather than building sustainable colonies with proper infrastructure and orderly relations with local people. Their leaders had grossly abused their powers through self-enrichment. The result was colossal short-term wealth, followed by odium, failure and decline. Overall, the policy was trenchantly dismissed: 'In government, tyranny; in religion, bigotry; in trade, monopoly.'

The Burkes' own position combined free trade with a belief in the social order and an emphasis on institution-building. Monopolies were to be avoided and oligopoly discouraged. Regulation and economic incentives should be set to enhance the public good over the long term. Promising infant industries could properly be supported by public subsidy while they were being established. The colonies should be encouraged to specialize, and develop competitive advantage where they could; and they should be allowed to export in their own right to foreign markets. But they should

continue to be prevented from importing, in order to protect Britain's status as the source of higher-value finished goods.

We do not know the exact division of labour of the *Account*. It has been suggested that most of the hard work, and in particular that of compilation and summary, was done by Will, while its intellectual thrust, shape and power of generalization came from Edmund. But this may well be unfair, since Will was evidently no intellectual slouch. What we can say is that it too contributes to the body of Burkean ideas so far advanced in the *Vindication* and *Enquiry*. We have a common human nature, the *Account* avers; peoples differ crucially in their history, character and manners; what institutions and culture they develop make a huge difference to their well-being and success; the Christian religion is generally a civilizing force; great leaders are marked by their capacity for hard work and unselfish public service; divine providence creates opportunity, and the chance for failure to redeem itself.

The *Account* was a success. It ran through several editions and was translated into Italian, French and German. It also gave William a start in life, and he was appointed in 1759 to the British administration in the recently captured island of Guadeloupe, where he began an ill-starred and occasionally illegal career as a fortune-hunter. Edmund, meanwhile, had moved on to the last of his early literary projects for the Dodsleys. Having demonstrated a talent for historical writing in the *Vindication* and the *Account*, he now aspired to write nothing less than a short history of England – in under two years.

The first half of the century had seen at least five multi-volume narrative histories of England. Yet the feeling persisted that genius was somewhat lacking in this area, especially compared to the French and Italian masters, and that what was needed was a shorter treatment combining depth and accuracy. The philosopher David Hume – later well known to Burke – had started to meet the first requirement in 1754, and would soon be acclaimed for it. But his *History* was a massive affair in six volumes. Burke now proposed

something radically different: just one-quarter as long, balancing narrative with analysis, and eschewing vast reams of scholarly research on the one hand and Bolingbrokian speculation on the other.

In this, as in much else, he was heavily influenced by the French thinker Montesquieu, in his words ‘the greatest genius, which has enlightened this age’. Montesquieu argued that history was governed by general causes, constrained by ‘the nature of things’, be that physical geography or human custom and law. The result was an approach which emphasized key themes working themselves out through time, illuminated by carefully chosen examples. The experimental nature of Burke’s work may be hinted at in its title, *An Essay towards an Abridgement of English History*. But the book was never completed. It extends only as far as 1216, the passage of Magna Carta and the death of King John; and it was not published until 1812, some time after Burke’s death.

Even so, the *History* is of great interest and value in understanding Burke. Its shape is broadly chronological, surveying in turn the ancient Britons, the Romans, Saxons and Normans. Each of them is treated in terms of their distinctive institutions and character or ‘genius’. This gives the work an occasional touch of *1066 and All That*, of post-hoc-propter-hoc-ism in which historical contingency and luck are downplayed in favour of predestination and ‘the English story’.

But the *History* is kept from this, or, worse, from the trite or pedestrian, by its many saving graces. One grace lies in its stylistic brio, starting from the opening chapter, which sweeps the reader majestically across the main facts of Europe’s geography and their relation to its history. Another lies in Burke’s flair for journalistic colour and the telling detail. A third lies in its deep engagement and sympathy with the cultures under examination, including those underplayed by others; thus Burke discusses at length the customs and institutions of the ancient Britons, paying particular attention to the Druids, ‘the priests, lawgivers, and physicians of their nation’. Infusing the whole is a dynamic, emergent Whiggish sense of liberty.

And it is extraordinary to record that, even at this early stage, Burke is already exploring ideas about political parties in the *History* that he does not publish until 1770, as we shall see.

The *History* is also marked by Burke's insistence once again on the importance of providence, allowing him to avoid the intellectual trap of treating Montesquieu's historical laws as deterministic certainties. And then there is the sheer persuasiveness of the book's deeper argument. English history, English culture and English law did not begin with the Normans, the rest being dark ages; nor indeed with the Romans; the English are thus a heterogeneous and mixed people; in general, institutions matter more than individuals; custom, habit and manners are distinct from law, and often superior to reason; the present and future are conditioned, though not determined, by the past. These are, already, familiar and distinctively Burkean themes.

In the *Enquiry*, Burke had written, 'Those which engage our hearts, which impress us with a sense of loveliness, are the softer virtues; easiness of temper, compassion, kindness and liberality; though certainly these are of less immediate and momentous concern to society, and of less dignity. But it is for that reason that they are so amiable.' This is Jane Nugent to the life, as one might expect in an essay on beauty and the emotions, written in early courtship. Edmund and Jane had married in March 1757. Jane's Catholicism cannot have pleased Edmund's father, but the couple adopted the Anglican rites for the marriage ceremony.

In the following year, the Burkes had two children, Richard in February and Christopher in December. Christopher's namesake Dr Nugent had decided to move to London, and this probably helped them to establish a home together – first in Battersea, in those days a village on the southern outskirts of London, and then on Wimpole Street. Wimpole Street now lies in the centre of London. At that time it was on the northern edge, with open

fields beyond. Burke always loved the countryside, and may have deemed it healthier for his young children. The household waxed and waned. As well as immediate family, for several years it included Dr Nugent and his son Jack. Edmund's brother Richard also lived for long periods with him and Jane, as did Will Burke between his travels. There was, in addition, a never-ending stream of visitors and house guests.

Burke now had a wife, a family, a home, and a burgeoning literary reputation. What he did not have was an income. The *Vindication* and the *Enquiry* attracted modest fees; he and Will shared £50 for the copyright of the *Account*; and the *History* would have earned £300 if it had been completed (though in fact the project petered out in 1762). But these were small sums, at a time when a gentleman aspired to live on not less than £300 a year. More was needed, and rapidly.

Accordingly, he turned in two directions: to journalism and, less directly, to public life. In April 1758 Burke contracted with the Dodsleys to edit, write for and produce the *Annual Register*. Over the previous decades there had been an explosion in newspapers and print journalism, first dailies and more recently monthlies with the launch of the *Gentleman's Magazine* and the *London Magazine* in the 1730s. Various annuals had also been published, epitomizing each year's events. The *Annual Register* attempted something new: not merely to be an authoritative and highly readable account of the year, but to add to that documentary record a wide range of other material of general interest. Its first part thus comprised a long piece of instant history, describing the main events of the year and placing them in a wider context, and a diary containing factual material culled from the newspapers, including births and deaths, speeches by the King, summaries of Acts of Parliament, and human-interest stories.

The distinctive second part was more lively. It included scientific reports, reviews, essays, poetry, history, health and how-to tips, recent discoveries, archaeology and 'Characters' – character sketches

of contemporary and historical figures, short biographies and anecdotes. Controversy was not sought out, but there was no attempt at balance for the sake of it. Some of the new material may not have been by Burke himself, but as editor he controlled the whole. The *Register* was, and was intended to be, thought-provoking, eclectic, lively and extremely wide-ranging – an extension of Burke's own mind. It was a success from the first. Despite some gaps, and even a period with two competing versions, it is still published today.

For Burke himself, however, the *Register* was a mixed blessing. It paid a salary of £100 a year, which was badly needed, but not enough for any real security. It gave him editorial experience, and a position, but not one of any great public dignity or status. And it immersed him in current events, though it proved to be hard work over the seven years in which he was operationally in charge. Yet it had other clear virtues. It allowed him to build up a small team of friends and supporters, including in later years Walker King and French Laurence, who became his editors and literary executors. It enabled him to spread his ever-expanding moral and intellectual sensibility over a vast range of British and European thought, including Samuel Johnson, Adam Smith, the Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid, Rousseau, Voltaire and his beloved Montesquieu, as well as a host of lesser names. And finally it gave him further modest currency within literary, and in time polite, society.

It was at about this time, probably in 1759, that Burke took his first tentative steps towards the world of politics. His entrée was via an introduction to William Gerard Hamilton. Hamilton was just a year older than Burke. Educated at Harrow, Oriel College Oxford and Lincoln's Inn, he had inherited a large fortune and been elected to Parliament for Petersfield in 1754. He has gone down in parliamentary lore as 'single-speech' Hamilton, after his maiden speech in 1755 on the Address, the speech from the throne which always opens a new session of Parliament. But this epithet does

Hamilton an injustice: he in fact made a second speech, his last, the following year.

In an age where the parliamentary gene pool was small and social position much admired, Hamilton had successfully attached himself to Henry Fox, who had hugely enriched himself as Paymaster of the Forces. Through Fox, Hamilton was quickly appointed to serve under Lord Halifax at the Board of Trade. An ambitious man, he was looking for a secretary and personal assistant, and engaged Burke to that end, probably on a salary of £300 or so a year. That was three times Burke's salary from the *Register*.

At a stroke, then, the arrangement provided a good income and insight into the heart of government. All was set fair; the storms were to follow.

