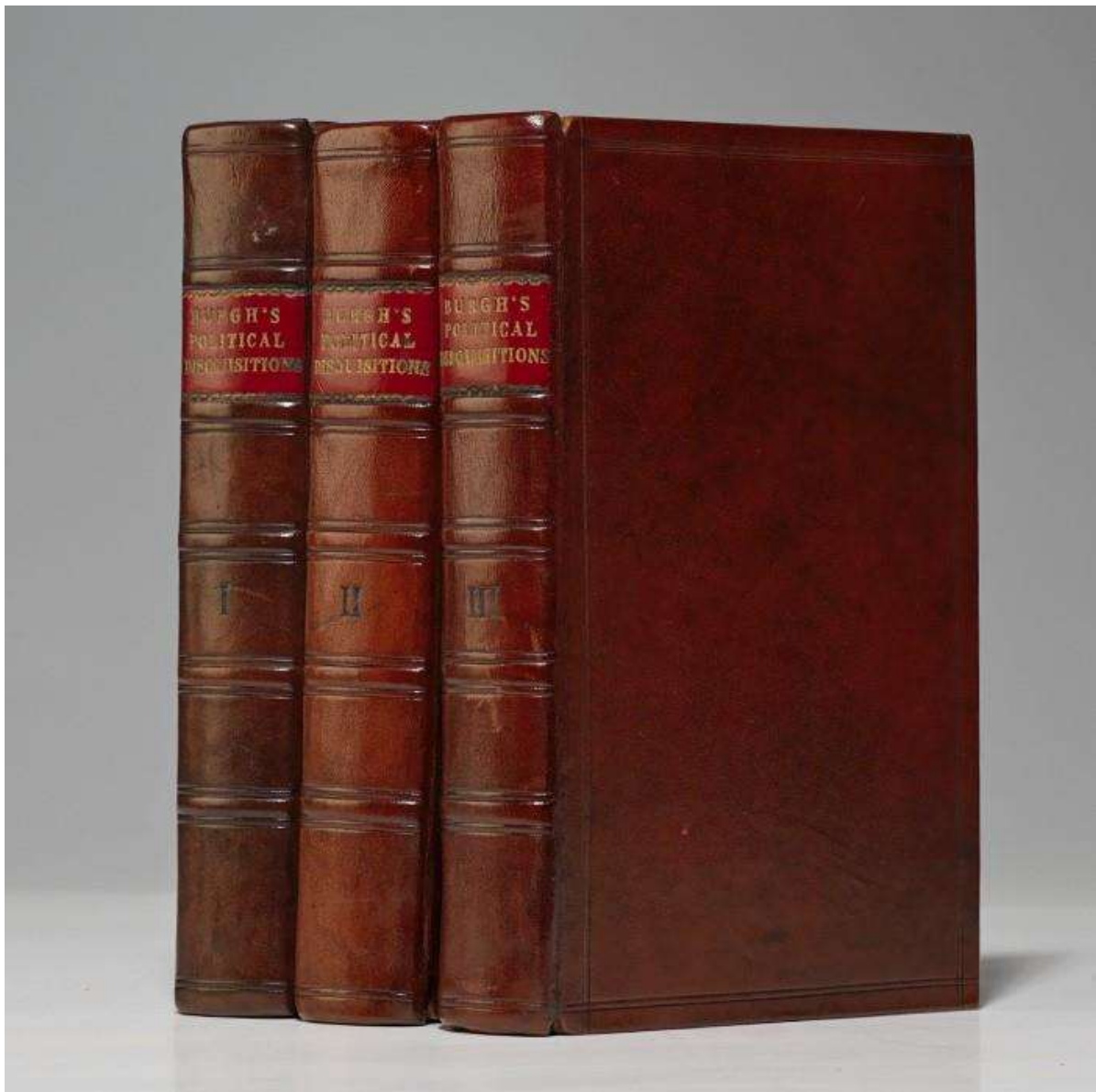


# **"Political Disquisitions" (first edition 1774) by James Burgh: A Canonical Book:**

Curated by Stephen A Batman

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## **Summary of this Particular Rare First Edition**



**"PRODUCED A GREAT EFFECT UPON THE MIND OF THE AMERICAN COLONISTS DURING THE REVOLUTION": RARE FIRST EDITION OF BURGH'S POWERFUL *POLITICAL DISQUISITIONS*, 1774-75, EDITED BY BENJAMIN FRANKLIN, PRECEDING THE 1775 AMERICAN EDITION, READ BY WASHINGTON, JEFFERSON, HANCOCK AND OTHER FOUNDING FATHERS**

*Rare first edition of this major revolutionary work, an important influence on America's Founding Fathers, and praised by John Adams as "a book which ought to be in the hands of every American who has learned to read." Washington, Jefferson, Hancock, and other leaders of the Continental Congress read this powerful work, and both The Federalist Papers and Common Sense refer to it.*

*Edited by Burgh's close friend, Benjamin Franklin. John Adams declared Scottish reformer James Burgh's *Political Disquisitions* "a book which ought to be in the hands of every American who has learned to read" (Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, 165). Burgh was a close friend of Benjamin Franklin, who excerpted another work by Burgh in his *Poor Richard* almanacs and further assisted Burgh by editing this highly influential work. *Political Disquisitions* is "perhaps the most important political treatise which appeared in England in the first half of the reign of George III' [and] the most famous contemporary exposé of the 'corruption' of the British Parliament" (Hay, "Benjamin Franklin, James Burgh," *William and Mary Quarterly* 32:1:112).*

The effect of *Political Disquisitions* was so consequential and widespread that "when Dr. Parr was asked whether he had read this book, he said in reply, 'Have I read my Bible, sir?'" (DNB). Here Burgh targets issues such as freedom of speech and the press, armies and militias, taxation without representation, and British oppression of the American colonies. Published in Philadelphia very soon after this rare English edition, *Political Disquisitions* "produced a great effect upon the mind of the American colonists during the Revolution" (Sabin 9246). The American edition was *owned and read by many of the Founding Fathers*, including Washington, Jefferson, John Hancock, John Dickinson, and other celebrated patriots. In addition, *Political Disquisitions* is cited in *Hamilton and Madison's Federalist Papers*, and *Thomas Paine refers to it in Common Sense*: "Those who would fully understand of what great consequence a large and equal representation is to a state, should read Burgh's *Political Disquisitions*."

Each volume issued separately in London (the first two in 1774, the final volume in 1775). With half titles in all volumes. Adams 74-13, 74-14, 75-14. Sabin 9246. Sowerby 2720. See Evans 13851.

(AMERICAN REVOLUTION) (BURGH, James). *Political Disquisitions; Or An Enquiry into public Errors, Defects, and Abuses... Calculated to draw the timely Attention of Government and People to a due Consideration of the Necessity, and the Means, of Reforming those Errors, Defects, and Abuses; of Restoring the Constitution, and Saving the State.* London: Printed for Edward and Charles Dilly, 1774-1775. Three volumes. Octavo, modern full brown calf, raised bands, burgundy spine labels. Housed together in a custom box.

Text generally fresh with light scattered foxing, Vol. III half title with minor tissue repair. A handsome about-fine set.

## Introduction

James Burgh's "Political Disquisitions" emerged during a period of growing political tension between Great Britain and its American colonies. The first two volumes "Political Disquisitions" by James Burgh was first published in 1774 in London, with the third volume following in 1775[5][7].

The work was published just before the outbreak of the American Revolution, at a time when political discourse was centered on issues of representation, taxation, and the rights of citizens. Burgh, motivated by his commitment to radical reform and democratic principles, sought to challenge the corrupt political establishment of his time and advocate for broader political rights and freedoms[1][2].

The cultural, economic, and political climate surrounding the publication was characterized by increasing colonial resistance to British policies, parliamentary corruption in England, and growing calls for reform on both sides of the Atlantic. Burgh's work was part of a broader intellectual movement that questioned traditional authority and advocated for popular sovereignty. The book quickly gained prominence among American revolutionaries, with Benjamin Franklin serving as its editor and facilitating its republication in Philadelphia in 1775[5][9].

## The Author

James Burgh (1714-1775) was a Scottish-born British schoolmaster, political theorist, and Whig politician who became one of England's foremost advocates for radical reform[1][3]. Born in Madderty, Perthshire, Scotland, he was one of eleven children in a religious family; his father Andrew served as a minister in the Church of Scotland[1].

Burgh's career was multifaceted. He ran a dissenting academy and wrote extensively on educational reform, demonstrating his commitment to intellectual development and the spread of knowledge[3]. His early works, including "Thoughts on Education" (1747), which alluded to John Locke's earlier work on the subject, established him as a thoughtful commentator on educational matters[3].

In the 1760s, Burgh became associated with the Honest Whigs, an influential club that met in London coffeehouses to discuss political and social issues. This group included notable figures such as Richard Price, Joseph Priestley, Benjamin Franklin, and James Boswell[3]. His friendship with Franklin proved particularly significant, as Franklin would later edit "Political Disquisitions" and help disseminate Burgh's ideas in America[5][9].

By the decade preceding the American Revolution, Burgh had established himself as one of England's leading propagandists for radical reform[1]. His political philosophy emphasized free speech, universal suffrage, and the principle that all lawful authority originates from the people[3]. These ideas would find fertile ground in revolutionary America.

Burgh's health deteriorated as he completed "Political Disquisitions." He had intended the work to be longer but was forced to stop after the third volume due to his declining condition[3]. He died on August 26, 1775, shortly after the publication of his magnum opus[3]. His widow later played a supportive role to early feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, helping her establish a boarding school and influencing Wollstonecraft's first book, "Thoughts on the Education of Daughters" (1787)[3].

## **Why this is a Canonical Book**

"Political Disquisitions" must be included in the canon of books containing major ideas that reflect elements of America's politics, governance, economics, and culture for several compelling reasons.

First, the work had direct and profound influence on America's Founding Fathers. John Adams declared it "a book which ought to be in the hands of every American who has learned to read"[5][9]. The American edition of the book had among its subscribers George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, John Hancock, John Dickinson, and other leaders of the Continental Congress[4][9]. Thomas Jefferson later recommended the work to Thomas Mann Randolph as essential reading for a young man studying law[4]. This widespread readership among America's revolutionary leadership demonstrates the work's central place in the intellectual foundations of American independence and governance.

Second, "Political Disquisitions" articulated key principles that would be incorporated into America's founding documents and political structure. Burgh's assertion that "All lawful authority, legislative, and executive, originates from the people"[8] echoes in the Declaration of Independence and Constitution. His advocacy for free speech, press, assembly, and petition directly influenced the First Amendment[2]. His arguments for citizens' right to bear arms prefigured the Second Amendment[7][9]. These connections make the work not merely influential but foundational to American constitutional thought.

Third, Burgh's work served as a crucial transmission vehicle for republican and opposition ideology from England to America. Scholars have identified "Political Disquisitions" as "the key book of this generation" and "the most important political treatise to appear in English in the first half of the reign of George III"[4]. It represented the "proof positive of the great influence on the revolutionary mind in America of English republicanism and opposition ideology"[4]. This transatlantic intellectual connection is essential for understanding the ideological roots of American governance.

Fourth, the work was cited in other canonical American political texts, including Hamilton and Madison's "Federalist Papers" and Thomas Paine's "Common Sense"[5]. Paine specifically directed readers to Burgh's work: "Those who would fully understand of what great consequence a large and equal representation is to a state, should read Burgh's Political Disquisitions"[5]. This intertextual relationship places Burgh's work at the center of America's founding political discourse.

Finally, Burgh's emphasis on civic engagement and the importance of an informed, participatory citizenry aligns with core American values regarding democratic participation. His vision of citizens actively engaged in political discourse, holding their representatives accountable, and participating in governance continues to shape American civic culture[6]. The "culture of argument" that Burgh advocated remains essential to American democracy[6].

## Five Timeless Quotes

1. "All lawful authority, legislative, and executive, originates from the people. Power in the people is like light in the sun: native, original, inherent, and unlimited by anything human. In governors it may be compared to the reflected light of the moon, for it is only borrowed, delegated, and limited by the intention of the people."[8]

This quote encapsulates Burgh's fundamental belief in popular sovereignty, a principle that became central to American governance. The metaphor of sunlight versus moonlight powerfully illustrates the relationship between the people and their government. In our current times, as debates about governmental authority and the role of citizens in democracy continue, this quote reminds us that legitimate governmental power derives from the consent of the governed. It challenges citizens to remain engaged and vigilant, recognizing their ultimate authority over their representatives.

2. "The subjects in a free country have a right to consider themselves on the same foot with the stockholders in a trading company. If a proprietor of East India stock sees the directors pursuing measures detrimental to the interest of the company, he will not, I believe, hesitate long about his being a competent or incompetent judge of directorial politics. He will soon make ENGLAND ring with his complaints. The same every subject has a right to do, whenever the conduct of the ministry becomes justly suspicious."[4]

This quote demonstrates Burgh's innovative application of business principles to political accountability. It remains relevant in our era of corporate influence in politics and debates about governmental transparency. The comparison suggests that citizens should approach their relationship with government with the same scrutiny and demand for accountability that shareholders bring to corporate governance. This perspective empowers citizens to question authority and demand explanations when government actions appear contrary to public interest.

3. "To libel me for what I cannot affirm myself to be innocent of, is no breach of the peace, as it does not naturally tend to excite revenge, but rather ingenuous shame and reformation."[2]

This quote from Burgh's essay on liberty of speech challenges the prevailing legal doctrine of his time regarding seditious libel. It argues that truthful criticism, even when unflattering, serves a constructive social purpose. In our current media environment, where discussions of "fake news," defamation, and the limits of free speech are prevalent, Burgh's perspective offers a valuable framework for distinguishing between harmful falsehoods and necessary truths that may cause discomfort but ultimately serve the public good.

4. "It is the overbalance of the power in the hands of the landed men, that has produced the bounty on exportation of corn."[4]

This observation about the economic consequences of political imbalance remains relevant to contemporary discussions of special interests and economic policy. Burgh recognized how concentrated political power among one economic class could lead to policies that benefit that class at the expense of others. Today, as we grapple with questions of economic inequality and the influence of wealthy interests on policy, Burgh's insight reminds us to examine how the distribution of political power shapes economic outcomes.

5. "Of the Liberty of Speech and Writing in Political Subjects."[2]

While this is the title of Burgh's essay rather than a direct quote, it encapsulates his pioneering advocacy for free speech protections beyond what was recognized in British law. Burgh argued that governmental punishments for criticisms of public officials was "one of the most atrocious abuses"[2]. This commitment to protecting political speech, especially criticism of government, became a cornerstone of American constitutional law through the First Amendment. In our era of complex questions about free speech in digital spaces, hate speech, and the boundaries of protected expression, Burgh's fundamental defense of political speech remains an essential touchstone.

## **Five Major Ideas**

### **1. Popular Sovereignty and the Social Contract**

Burgh's political theory was firmly grounded in the idea that all legitimate governmental authority derives from the people. Drawing on and extending Locke's contractual theory, Burgh portrayed governors as "trustees subject to dismissal if they betray their trust"[4]. This conception of government as a trust relationship established by the people fundamentally shaped American political thought. Burgh went beyond institutional concerns about governmental structure to emphasize the theoretical basis of legitimate authority. This idea manifests in the

American system through regular elections, constitutional limits on governmental power, and the understanding that the Constitution itself derives its authority from "We the People."

## **2. Free Speech as Essential to Democratic Governance**

Burgh articulated a broader vision of free speech than was recognized under British law at the time. He specifically challenged the doctrine of seditious libel, which allowed prosecution of individuals for criticizing government officials even when their statements were true[2]. Burgh argued that private individuals criticizing public officials should be exempt from prosecution, just as parliamentary speech was protected[2]. This defense of the right to criticize government became foundational to American conceptions of free speech and press freedom. Burgh recognized that democratic accountability requires citizens to be able to openly discuss and criticize their representatives without fear of punishment.

## **3. Representation and Economic Interests**

Burgh advocated for a more inclusive conception of political representation that acknowledged the importance of commercial and financial interests alongside landed interests. He argued that "the interests of merchants is so much the interest of the nation, that there can hardly be too many merchants in Parliament"[4]. This perspective challenged the traditional country party emphasis on landed gentry and recognized the economic transformation occurring in society. Burgh's concern with ensuring that "mercantile, manufactural and monied interests" were adequately represented[4] anticipated the American system's attempts to balance diverse economic interests in governance.

## **4. Annual Elections and Legislative Accountability**

Burgh strongly advocated for annual parliamentary elections as a mechanism to ensure representatives remained accountable to their constituents. He viewed legislators as "mere agents or delegates of the people"[4], a radical position that challenged prevailing views of representatives as independent trustees. This perspective influenced American debates about representation and accountability, contributing to the constitutional provision for regular elections to the House of Representatives. The tension between representatives as delegates versus trustees continues to shape American political discourse about the proper relationship between elected officials and their constituents.

## **5. Citizen Armament and Resistance to Tyranny**

Burgh advocated for "the right of citizens to bear arms, to refuse to be taxed without representation, and to refuse the heavy load of taxes imposed by Great Britain"[7][9]. This position directly influenced the development of the Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Burgh saw an armed citizenry as a check against governmental tyranny, a perspective that aligned with American revolutionary experience and continues to inform debates about gun rights and the relationship between citizens and government power in the United States.

# Three Major Controversies

## 1. Radical Democratic Vision versus Traditional Authority

Burgh's radical democratic vision, which emphasized popular sovereignty and the right of citizens to hold their representatives strictly accountable, generated significant controversy in the hierarchical society of 18th-century Britain. His assertion that "All lawful authority, legislative, and executive, originates from the people"[3][8] challenged traditional conceptions of authority derived from monarchy, aristocracy, or established institutions. Critics saw in Burgh's ideas the dangerous potential for mob rule and the undermining of necessary social hierarchies. This controversy continues to resonate in modern debates about populism, elite governance, and the proper balance between democratic participation and institutional stability. The tension between Burgh's vision of active citizen oversight and more conservative views of governance through established institutions remains unresolved in American political culture.

## 2. Free Speech versus Social Order

Burgh's expansive view of free speech rights, particularly his defense of criticism directed at government officials, contradicted prevailing legal doctrines that prioritized social order and respect for authority. British judges like William Blackstone and Lord Mansfield maintained that while prior licensing of publications should not be required, individuals could still be prosecuted for seditious libel if they made statements intended to criticize or provoke dissatisfaction with the government[2]. Burgh's position that such prosecutions constituted "one of the most atrocious abuses"[2] represented a radical challenge to established legal thinking. This controversy continues in contemporary debates about the limits of free speech, hate speech legislation, and the balance between expressive freedom and social harmony.

## 3. Economic Interests and Political Representation

Burgh's advocacy for greater representation of "mercantile, manufactural and monied interests"[4] in Parliament challenged the traditional country party emphasis on landed interests. This position generated controversy among those who saw commerce and finance as potentially corrupting influences on governance. While Burgh employed rhetoric similar to earlier opposition writers like Bolingbroke, his substantive position on economic interests represented a significant departure that some traditionalists found troubling. This controversy anticipated later American debates about the proper relationship between economic power and political representation, including concerns about the influence of "monied interests" that animated Jeffersonian democracy and continue to shape discussions about campaign finance and economic inequality in American politics.



## In Closing

Civic-minded Americans should read James Burgh's "Political Disquisitions" because it provides crucial insight into the intellectual foundations of American governance and the revolutionary principles that shaped our nation. This work, which John Adams insisted "ought to be in the hands of every American who has learned to read"[5][9], offers a direct connection to the political thought that inspired the Founding Fathers and influenced the creation of our constitutional system.

By engaging with Burgh's arguments for popular sovereignty, free speech, representative government, and civic participation, readers gain a deeper understanding of the theoretical underpinnings of American democracy. The book illuminates how these principles were articulated and debated before they were enshrined in our founding documents, providing valuable historical context for contemporary political discussions.

In an era when democratic norms and institutions face significant challenges, Burgh's emphasis on the responsibility of citizens to remain vigilant and hold their representatives accountable is particularly relevant. His vision of an engaged citizenry actively participating in political discourse offers an inspiring model for civic engagement that transcends partisan divisions.

Furthermore, "Political Disquisitions" demonstrates the transatlantic exchange of ideas that characterized the revolutionary period, reminding us that American political thought emerged from a broader intellectual tradition while developing its own distinctive character. This perspective encourages readers to consider American governance within its historical and international context.

Finally, by reading Burgh's work, civic-minded Americans participate in the ongoing conversation about democracy and liberty that has defined our nation since its founding. They connect with the intellectual tradition that shaped our constitutional system and gain valuable perspective on contemporary debates about representation, free speech, and the proper relationship between citizens and their government. In doing so, they fulfill their responsibility as citizens in a democracy founded on the very principles that Burgh so powerfully articulated.

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