

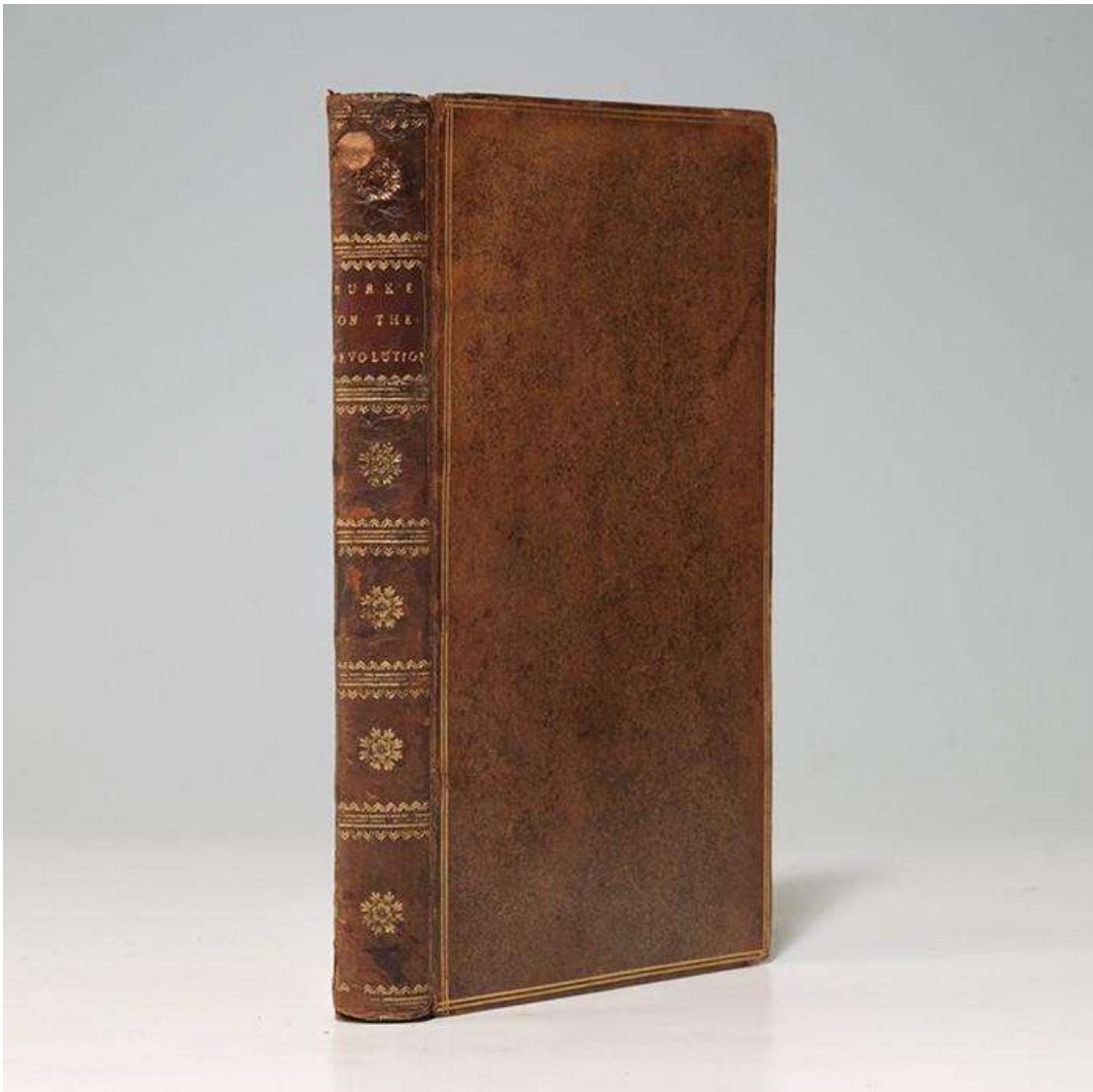
"Reflections of the Revolution in France" (first edition 1790) by Edmund Burke: A Canonical Book:

Curated by Stephen A Batman

Essay created April 5, 2025

Summary of this Particular Rare First Edition

**Edmund Burke, Reflections on the Revolution in France, And on the Proceedings in
Certain Societies in London Relative to that Event, 1790**



REFLECTIONS
ON THE
REVOLUTION IN FRANCE,
AND ON THE
PROCEEDINGS IN CERTAIN SOCIETIES
IN LONDON
RELATIVE TO THAT EVENT.

IN A
LETTER
INTENDED TO HAVE BEEN SENT TO A GENTLEMAN
IN PARIS.

BY THE RIGHT HONOURABLE
EDMUND BURKE.

LONDON:
PRINTED FOR J. DODSLEY, IN FALL-MALL.
M.DCC.XC.

"ONE OF THE MOST BRILLIANT OF ALL POLEMICS": FIRST EDITION OF BURKE'S *REFLECTIONS*, 1790, HIS LANDMARK ATTACK ON THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

First edition of Burke's important and controversial attack on the French Revolution, the work that precipitated Thomas Paine's Rights of Man, an exceptional volume in contemporary calf.

"One of the most brilliant of all polemics... It is not to be wondered at that a man who desired justice for America but rejected Jefferson's doctrines would be deeply stirred by the events of 1789. To Burke an absorption with the end and neglect of the means was the most dreadful of sins. His anger and disgust were exacerbated by the dread that the aims, principles, methods, and language which he detested in France might infect the people of England. This it was which provoked the *Reflections*" (PMM 239).

"The effect of the *Reflections* was extraordinary. It created a reaction against the revolution... Abroad the *Reflections* created no less stir than at home, and Burke received the compliments of different foreign sovereigns" (DNB).

Burke's "attack on the French Revolution... infuriated Paine, who was chagrined by these statements coming from his former friend, the great liberal. He rushed into print with his even more celebrated answer, *The Rights of Man*" (Gimbel-Yale 58-59).

Press figures and catchwords correspond with Todd "a" impression. Title page with "M" set to the right of "D" in "Dodsley" (Todd's state "b"); p. iv with ornamental flower pointing up (Todd's "b")—all acceptable variant states within the first edition, with no priority established. Todd 53a. *Grolier 100 63*.

BURKE, Edmund. *Reflections on the Revolution in France, And on the Proceedings in Certain Societies in London Relative to that Event*. London: J. Dodsley, 1790. Octavo, contemporary full speckled brown calf, elaborately gilt-decorated spine, red Morocco spine label, marbled endpapers. Housed in a custom chemise and clamshell box.

Text fresh with only light scattered foxing, small abrasion to spine head, mild rubbing to joints of handsome gilt-stamped contemporary calf. A highly desirable near-fine copy.

Introduction

Edmund Burke's "Reflections on the Revolution in France" stands as one of the most influential political treatises ever written, published in November 1790 as a direct response to the tumultuous events unfolding across the English Channel. The work emerged during a period of unprecedented political upheaval, as the French Revolution threatened to upend centuries of established order throughout Europe. Burke, alarmed by what he perceived as dangerous radicalism, penned this work as a warning not only to his fellow Britons but to all who might be seduced by revolutionary fervor[1].

The book was written as the French Revolution was still in its early stages, before the Reign of Terror had begun, but after several significant events had already transpired: the storming of the Bastille in July 1789, the formation of the Comité des Recherches with its repressive police powers, the promulgation of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, the transfer of the royal family from Versailles to Paris, the appropriation of Church property, and the stripping of titles from the hereditary nobility[2]. Burke's motivation stemmed from his deep concern that the revolutionary enthusiasm spreading through France might infect Britain, leading to similar chaos and destruction.

The cultural and political climate surrounding the publication was one of intense debate. In Britain, initial reactions to the French Revolution had been mixed, with many intellectuals and reformers viewing it favorably as a triumph of liberty over tyranny. Burke's work represented a dramatic break from this perspective, particularly surprising given his previous support for American independence and his reputation as a Whig politician who had advocated for various reforms[8]. The economic context was equally significant, as both France and Great Britain faced financial challenges, with national bankruptcy looming as a serious concern for both nations[9].

The Author

Edmund Burke was born in Dublin, Ireland in 1729 to a mixed religious family – his mother had Irish Catholic roots while his father belonged to the Anglican Church[8]. This background would later inform his nuanced understanding of religious tolerance and the importance of tradition. Burke studied law at Trinity College, Dublin, but found the subject uninspiring and soon abandoned it to pursue writing and politics[8].

Burke's political career was distinguished and extensive. He served in the British Parliament as a Whig politician from 1765 to 1794, where he developed a reputation as an eloquent orator and principled statesman[2]. Throughout his career, Burke demonstrated a consistent concern for practical governance and a deep skepticism of abstract political theories divorced from historical experience. His political philosophy was shaped by his belief that governments must respond to the practical needs of the people they govern, and that political crises require tailored solutions rather than universal prescriptions[2].

Prior to writing "Reflections," Burke had established himself as a significant intellectual figure through works such as "A Vindication of Natural Society" and "A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful." His political career included notable advocacy for causes that might seem at odds with his later conservative reputation, including support for American colonists during their struggle for independence, opposition to the abuse of power in British India, and defense of Irish Catholics against discriminatory laws[10].

Burke's intellectual development reveals a thinker of remarkable consistency despite the apparent contradictions in his political positions. As David Bromwich notes in his intellectual biography

of Burke, he was "a defender of the rights of disfranchised minorities and an opponent of militarism," whose politics "diverge from those of any modern party"[10]. This complexity helps explain why Burke could support the American Revolution while vehemently opposing the French one – he saw the former as a defense of established rights and traditions, and the latter as a dangerous experiment in abstract political theory.

Why this is a Canonical Book

"Reflections on the Revolution in France" must be included in the canon of essential political works for several compelling reasons. First and foremost, it represents the foundational text of modern conservatism, articulating principles that continue to shape political thought and discourse in America and throughout the Western world[1]. Burke's emphasis on the wisdom embedded in tradition, his skepticism toward radical change, and his defense of established institutions have provided the intellectual framework for conservative political philosophy for over two centuries.

The book's significance extends beyond its role in defining conservatism. It offers a profound critique of political rationalism that transcends partisan boundaries, warning against the dangers of applying abstract principles without regard for historical context or practical consequences. This critique remains relevant to American governance, which has historically balanced idealism with pragmatism, revolutionary principles with institutional stability[7].

Burke's work also provides a counterpoint to the Enlightenment rationalism that influenced America's founding documents. While the Declaration of Independence and Constitution draw heavily on Enlightenment ideals of natural rights and rational governance, the American system also incorporates Burkean elements: checks and balances, gradual constitutional evolution, and respect for precedent and tradition. This tension between revolutionary principles and institutional conservatism has defined American political culture since its inception[3].

Furthermore, "Reflections" offers valuable insights into the nature of social contracts and political legitimacy that remain central to American political discourse. Burke's conception of society as a partnership "not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born" challenges Americans to consider their obligations to both past and future generations when making political decisions[6].

Finally, the book's prescient warnings about the potential consequences of revolutionary excess – warnings that were tragically validated by the subsequent Reign of Terror and rise of Napoleon – serve as a powerful reminder of the fragility of political institutions and the dangers of unbridled idealism. In an era of increasing political polarization and calls for fundamental transformation, Burke's cautionary message deserves renewed attention from civic-minded Americans across the political spectrum[1].

Five Timeless Quotes

1. "People will not look forward to posterity who never look backward to their ancestors."[6]

This profound observation encapsulates Burke's understanding of society as an intergenerational compact. In our current era of rapid technological change and cultural transformation, this quote reminds us that sustainable progress requires a foundation in historical understanding. For American governance, this principle manifests in constitutional originalism, precedent-based jurisprudence, and the ongoing dialogue between tradition and innovation. Burke challenges us to recognize that disconnection from our historical roots leads not to liberation but to disorientation, undermining our ability to build meaningfully for future generations.

2. "To make us love our country, our country ought to be lovely."[6]

This deceptively simple statement contains profound wisdom about patriotism and civic virtue. Unlike blind nationalism, Burke suggests that genuine love of country must be earned through the cultivation of admirable national qualities. In contemporary America, this quote speaks to ongoing debates about patriotism, suggesting that the most authentic form of national loyalty involves working to make the nation worthy of devotion. It reminds us that criticism of national failings can represent the highest form of patriotism when motivated by a desire to perfect the union.

3. "What is liberty without wisdom and without virtue? It is the greatest of all possible evils; for it is folly, vice, and madness, without tuition or restraint."[6]

Burke's insight that freedom divorced from moral foundations becomes destructive remains strikingly relevant today. In an age that often celebrates liberty as an absolute good, this quote reminds us that freedom functions best within a framework of virtue and wisdom. For American society, which places such high value on individual liberty, Burke's warning highlights the importance of civic education, moral development, and cultural institutions that nurture the virtues necessary for self-governance.

4. "Those who attempt to level, never equalize."[6]

This succinct observation speaks directly to contemporary debates about equality and equity. Burke recognized that attempts to impose absolute equality often produce new forms of inequality and injustice. In today's discussions about economic inequality, educational opportunity, and social justice, Burke's insight reminds us to consider the complexity of human societies and the potential unintended consequences of well-intentioned reforms. It challenges Americans to pursue justice in ways that respect social complexity rather than imposing simplistic solutions.

5. "A state without the means of some change is without the means of its own conservation."[6]

Despite his reputation as a defender of tradition, Burke recognized the necessity of prudent reform. This quote reveals his understanding that preservation requires adaptation, that traditions remain vital only when they evolve to meet changing circumstances. For American governance, this principle supports the constitutional amendment process, judicial interpretation, and the ongoing refinement of institutions. It reminds us that genuine conservatism is not about rigid opposition to all change, but about ensuring that change strengthens rather than undermines essential values and institutions.

Five Major Ideas

1. The Danger of Abstract Political Theories

Burke's fundamental critique of the French Revolution centered on its foundation in abstract political theories divorced from historical experience. He argued that governance should be based on practical wisdom accumulated over generations rather than on metaphysical principles like the "Rights of Man"[2]. For Burke, the French revolutionaries' attempt to rebuild society from first principles represented dangerous hubris, ignoring the complexity of human nature and social institutions. He contrasted this approach with the British tradition of gradual, pragmatic reform, arguing that "a state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation"[6]. This critique of political rationalism remains relevant in contemporary debates about constitutional interpretation, public policy, and institutional reform.

2. The Value of Tradition and Prejudice

Burke defended what he called "prejudice" – not as bigotry, but as the accumulated wisdom of generations embodied in customs and institutions. He argued that traditions contain implicit knowledge that may not be immediately apparent to rational analysis but has proven its value through historical experience[3]. In Burke's view, established institutions should be approached with reverence and altered only with great caution. This does not mean blind adherence to the past, but rather a presumption in favor of existing arrangements until clear evidence demonstrates the necessity of change. This perspective continues to influence debates about constitutional originalism, cultural continuity, and the pace of social change.

3. Society as an Intergenerational Contract

One of Burke's most profound insights was his conception of society as a partnership "not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born"[6]. This view challenges purely contractarian theories of government by emphasizing our obligations to both ancestors and descendants. Burke argued that we are trustees of an inheritance that we must preserve and enhance for future generations, not sovereign

individuals free to remake society according to our momentary desires. This perspective informs contemporary discussions about environmental stewardship, national debt, cultural preservation, and intergenerational justice.

4. The Importance of Gradual Reform

While Burke opposed revolutionary upheaval, he recognized the necessity of reform to address genuine grievances and adapt to changing circumstances. He advocated for gradual, organic change that builds upon existing foundations rather than destroying them[7]. Burke's approach to reform was pragmatic rather than ideological, focused on specific problems rather than comprehensive transformation. This perspective continues to influence debates about the pace and scope of political, economic, and social reforms, offering a middle path between rigid conservatism and revolutionary radicalism.

5. The Moral Foundations of Political Order

Burke insisted that stable political orders must be grounded in moral principles and virtues that transcend mere self-interest or utility. He warned that the French Revolution's attack on religion and traditional morality would undermine the ethical foundations necessary for ordered liberty[1]. For Burke, liberty without virtue becomes "the greatest of all possible evils; for it is folly, vice, and madness, without tuition or restraint"[6]. This emphasis on the moral prerequisites of free government remains relevant to contemporary debates about civic education, cultural values, and the relationship between freedom and responsibility.

Three Major Controversies

1. Burke's Apparent Political Inconsistency

One of the most significant controversies surrounding "Reflections" concerned Burke's apparent political inconsistency. Many of his contemporaries, particularly fellow Whigs who had expected him to support the French Revolution as he had supported American independence, were shocked by his vehement opposition[8]. This controversy sparked immediate responses, including Mary Wollstonecraft's "A Vindication of the Rights of Men" and Thomas Paine's "Rights of Man," both of which accused Burke of betraying liberal principles[8]. The debate centered on whether Burke had abandoned his earlier commitments to liberty and reform, or whether his position reflected a deeper consistency in his political philosophy.

This controversy continues to resonate in scholarly interpretations of Burke's work and in broader discussions about the relationship between liberalism and conservatism. Some see Burke as having fundamentally changed his political views, while others argue that his support for American independence and opposition to the French Revolution reflected consistent principles applied to different circumstances. This debate highlights the complexity of political philosophy and the challenge of maintaining principled consistency across diverse historical contexts.

2. Burke's Defense of Aristocracy and Established Privilege

Burke's defense of aristocracy, established privilege, and social hierarchy provoked intense controversy both in his time and in subsequent centuries. Critics accused him of defending unjust inequalities and opposing democratic progress[7]. His eloquent lament for Marie Antoinette and the passing of the "age of chivalry" struck many as sentimental nostalgia for an oppressive social order. Burke's argument that social distinctions, while not perfect, served important functions in maintaining social stability and cultural refinement seemed to many an apology for entrenched privilege.

This controversy touches on fundamental questions about equality, democracy, and social justice that remain central to American political discourse. Burke's critics argue that his defense of hierarchy contradicts America's egalitarian principles, while his defenders suggest that his concerns about leveling impulses and his recognition of the importance of cultural and moral leadership remain relevant even in democratic societies. This debate reflects ongoing tensions between formal equality and functional hierarchy in American institutions and culture.

3. Burke's Critique of Abstract Rights

Burke's critique of the "rights of man" and other abstract principles of the French Revolution sparked controversy about the nature and foundation of rights. Critics like Thomas Paine argued that Burke's position undermined the very concept of natural rights that underpinned both the American and French Revolutions[8]. They saw his emphasis on historically evolved rights as a rejection of universal human dignity and freedom. Burke's insistence that rights must be understood in specific historical and cultural contexts seemed to many to open the door to relativism and the denial of universal moral principles.

This controversy remains relevant to contemporary debates about human rights, constitutional interpretation, and cultural diversity. Burke's position raises important questions about whether rights are best understood as abstract universal principles or as concrete historical achievements embedded in particular traditions and institutions. American jurisprudence continues to navigate between these perspectives, balancing universal principles with historical precedent and cultural context. The tension between abstract rights and concrete traditions reflects a fundamental challenge in reconciling America's universalist aspirations with its particular historical development.

In Closing

Civic-minded Americans should read "Reflections on the Revolution in France" not as a partisan political tract but as a profound meditation on the nature of political society and the conditions of ordered liberty. In an age of increasing polarization and calls for fundamental transformation, Burke's warnings about the dangers of abstract idealism and revolutionary excess provide a valuable counterbalance to utopian thinking across the political spectrum. His insistence that

genuine progress must build upon rather than destroy existing foundations offers wisdom for conservatives and progressives alike[7].

Burke's emphasis on the intergenerational nature of society challenges Americans to consider their responsibilities to both past and future generations, encouraging a longer view of political decisions than electoral cycles typically permit. His defense of tradition and prejudice, properly understood, reminds us that not all wisdom is explicit or immediately accessible to rational analysis – some is embedded in customs and institutions that have evolved over centuries of human experience[3].

For those concerned with preserving American constitutional democracy, Burke offers insights into the delicate balance between stability and change, between respect for established institutions and openness to necessary reforms. His recognition that "a state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation" speaks directly to ongoing debates about constitutional interpretation, institutional reform, and cultural evolution[6].

Perhaps most importantly, Burke's insistence on the moral foundations of political order reminds Americans that free government requires virtuous citizens and healthy cultural institutions. His warning that liberty without wisdom and virtue becomes "folly, vice, and madness, without tuition or restraint" highlights the importance of civic education and moral formation in sustaining democratic self-government[6].

In reading Burke, Americans of all political persuasions will encounter a thinker who defies simple categorization – a defender of tradition who recognized the necessity of reform, a critic of abstract rights who championed concrete liberties, a supporter of established institutions who opposed abuses of power. This complexity makes "Reflections" not just a founding document of modern conservatism but a work of enduring relevance to anyone concerned with the delicate art of governance in a free society. In Burke's nuanced understanding of the relationship between tradition and progress, Americans can find resources for navigating the challenges of their own time with wisdom and prudence.

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