

**EDMUND BURKE AND ROY PORTER:
TWO VIEWS OF REVOLUTION AND THE BRITISH
ENLIGHTENMENT**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis presents an analysis of Edmund Burke's place in intellectual history by examining his commentary on the French Revolution as well as his role in the Enlightenment itself. In doing so, it brings to bear the previously unexplored ideas of the twentieth-century historian Roy Porter. The thesis proposes that Burke's indictment of French philosophy as the cause of the French Revolution created enduring historiographic connotations between radicalism and the notion of enlightenment. Consequently, British thinkers of the eighteenth-century were invariably dismissed as conservative or reactionary and therefore unworthy to be regarded as enlightened figures. Porter's reconsideration of the British Enlightenment reveals Burke to be a staunch defender of hard-won enlightened values which British society had already long enjoyed.

The source material is, for the most part, primary. For Edmund Burke, his correspondence and his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. For Roy Porter, his most relevant essays, journal articles and monographs.

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INTRODUCTION

In the 1790s many British intellectuals, political figures and common citizens presumed that the ideas underpinning the French Revolution were noble and irresistible. Revolutionary fervour, it was felt, would inevitably (and for some, rightly) cross the Channel and refashion English politics and society as it had in France.

Britain's experience with revolution and the enthusiasms which it provoked was already richly developed by the time of enlightenment. The seventeenth-century Civil Wars and Glorious Revolution had established England as a country where monarchs and governments might be ruined by religious dissension, incompatible political philosophies, and the ongoing death throes of feudalism. Yet despite the egalitarian orders newly born in America and France, by the century's end revolution had come to nothing in England.

This thesis is tripartite in structure. It first discusses Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, the earliest intellectual reaction to and critique of the French Revolution and its causes. Burke's analysis of the Revolution is presented, as is his indictment of those *philosophes* who, he believed, inspired it.

Secondly, the thesis offers a modern evaluation of Burke's appraisal of revolution and its historiographic place in the British Enlightenment by Roy Porter. A historian of ideas, Porter argued that Burke overemphasized the connection between the *philosophes* and the French Revolution. This contributed to an enduringly negative perception of the Enlightenment, and reinforced the historical view of England as a nation untouched by it.

Finally, this thesis presents Porter's explanation of how the British Enlightenment was conservative in nature on account of its defense of previously attained rights and freedoms. Britain's pragmatism insulated it from instability, but the Burkean conflation of radicalism with "true" enlightenment pigeonholed Britain's intellectual contributions as being reactionary.

This approach is novel and somewhat unusual in that it attempts to restore Britain's place at the fore of enlightenment by demonstrating how the conservatism of its thinkers (*i.e.*, Edmund Burke) was an attempt to protect an already enlightened social and political order. Ultimately, the success of this conservatism blinded historians from recognizing the important role the British Enlightenment played in creating the modern world. Porter was the first scholar to identify this historiographical

lacuna and the first who attempted to reestablish British thinkers as the legitimate parents of the Enlightenment.

Burke was born in Dublin, Ireland in 1729 to a Catholic mother and a Protestant father who was a solicitor by profession, and a member of the Church of Ireland by faith. After graduating from Trinity College in 1748, he emigrated to London with the intention of studying law, but abandoned the field, and instead occupied himself as an essayist (writing noteworthy tracts on anarchism and aesthetics) and publisher (co-founding the political journal *Annual Register* with bookseller Robert Dodsley). His resulting political connections afforded him the opportunity to serve as private secretary for Whig Member of Parliament Charles Watson-Wentworth, Marquess of Rockingham – then Prime Minister.

From 1765 onward, Burke himself sat as an M.P. in the Commons, invariably on behalf of pocket boroughs dominated by Rockingham and his allies. Throughout the 1760s and 1770s he established his reputation as a proponent of parliamentary rights, as a vigorous critic of the East India Company (he was the driving force behind the impeachment of Warren Hastings, Indian governor-general), and as an advocate for Irish – often Catholic – causes.

Interestingly, Burke was also a steadfast champion of the rebellious American colonials, on the grounds that the English Crown had abrogated its traditional obligations to its subjects in the New World. His eloquent Commons floor defenses of the 1776 revolutionaries were topics of great debate and went some ways to upending Lord North's embattled Tory administration. Burke was then appointed Paymaster of the Forces during Rockingham's brief thirteen-week return to power, holding the office until the end of North's and Charles James Fox's Tory-Whig coalition in 1783. Burke remained an opposition back-bencher until his retirement in 1794, but the controversial success and renown of his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) resulted in his near total alienation within the pro-Revolution Whig ranks. He died of stomach cancer at his Beaconsfield estate in 1797.

Burke is described habitually as a father of political conservatism, but if he was by turns an enemy and ally of revolution, we are left to wonder at the underlying nature of his political philosophy and his place within the intellectual context of his own age. What, in fact, made the French Revolution so anathema to Burke's principles that he was motivated to compose his justifiably famous analysis? What were his impressions of the "systems of

thinking", rights of man, and abstract ruminations which came to characterize the Enlightenment of which he was part?

As a historian, interpreter, and critic of the Enlightenment, Burke was its spectator, yet he was equally a coal in its fires, as representative of its nature as his contemporaries, Immanuel Kant or Voltaire. In similar fashion, his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* were at once his current report on the Revolution's dangers and a disclosure of its perpetrators but also a document revealing his own place in the history of enlightened ideas.

Burke set himself the charge of unmasking the true culprits who he believed had fomented the French Revolution: the *philosophes*. If these writers and thinkers had had the power to ignite anarchic revolt and inspire projects of strange social engineering, then there could be, he surmised, a correspondingly formidable antidote in good counsel. This he attempted to provide in his *Reflections* with all the powers of articulation he could muster.

In doing so, Burke is revealed to be a sort of *philosophe* in his own right. For his attacks on enlightened systems of thinking were rooted in an

intellectual appeal to history. To his mind, England had already run the gauntlet of "inspired" violence in the English Civil Wars, much of it salted with radical, irrational philosophy. The ancient traditions of Crown and Parliament had persevered and their validity was reaffirmed, rendering England prosperous, free, and stable. Yet within radical French philosophy he detected a pseudo-religious zeal which was finding agreement with the political sensibilities of England's liberal Dissenters. In Burke's estimation, the greatest threat to Britain's hard-earned order was therefore a man like Joseph Priestley (1730-1804) who was in equal parts a revolutionary sympathizer, an intellectual, and a clergyman – and might directly or inadvertently resurrect the civil strife which had scarred England's seventeenth-century.

Roy Porter, in contrast, was two centuries removed from these anxieties, but could claim the benefit of all the intervening scholarship on Burke and his world. Porter was, in many respects, the Enlightenment's most sublime analyst, meticulous in his research, expansive and eclectic in his subject matter and ideas.

Born in London in 1946, he was the son of a middle class jeweller. A life-long insomniac, he married five times, and between 1962 and the time of his death from

cardiac arrest in 2002, Porter authored, contributed to, or edited some 493 scholarly works, wrote over 600 reviews, and appeared in countless television presentations. His range of historical enquiry spanned the field from art to geology, medicine to literature, psychiatry to agriculture, economics to botany, chemistry to urban planning – and with each he endeavored to reveal their relationship to the history of Western thought.

In 1964 Porter entered Christ's College at Cambridge to study English, but instead pursued History. After noticing the relative paucity of work dedicated to British ideas in the Enlightenment, he composed his doctoral thesis "The Making of Geology in Britain, 1660-1815" under the noted David Hume scholar, Duncan Forbes. In 1972 Porter was appointed Fellow and Director of Studies in History at Churchill College, and then two years later assistant lecturer, eventually rising to the rank of Dean. While at Churchill, he cut a notably unconventional figure, due in large part to his scruffy denim-and-chains appearance, his manic enthusiasm for his ever-changing researches, and his uncontainable energy. At one point in the mid-seventies, Porter could lecture twenty-five hours per week, perform administrative duties and still manage to direct a campus

production of Richard Sheridan's *The Rivals* (starring future author Douglas Adams).

In 1979, two years after the publication of his first book, *The Making of Geology*, Porter joined the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine in London, where he remained until his death. Throughout the 1980s he was a fixture on the BBC and served as a policy advisor on AIDS initiatives to the British government.

Porter's work reveals his conviction that different cultures and countries had fostered different species of enlightenment, each with their own priorities, impediments, and influences. He had gone so far as to edit, with Mikulas Teich, a collection of essays on the subject, *The Enlightenment in National Context*. England, of course, was Porter's primary field of interest, and he explained what he believed to be its characteristics in the Age of Reason. Unlike the French, the English had little use for abstract sophistry. They were practical and pragmatic. The English were more interested, he contended, in preserving what they had already gained, and were obsessed with improving everything else. *The Reflections on the Revolution in France*, as explained in Porter's canon, was a prime example of this form of British conservatism defending enlightened values in spite of itself.

Porter proceeded to argue on behalf of the British intellectuals of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-centuries who, along with their achievements, had been relegated to relative obscurity by historians entranced solely by Continental thinkers. The French Revolution and its alleged prelude in Parisian salons, he mused, had come to dominate the history of the Enlightenment far too much. Was Burke in part responsible for this overemphasis on French events and philosophy? Was he correct in naming the *philosophes* as the Revolution's instigators? For Porter, the answers lay not so much in a direct response to those particular questions, but rather in considering the actual legacy of enlightened French philosophy. His conclusion, in part, was that the *philosophes'* greatest influence was not political, but rather social: they had habituated continental Europeans to secularism.

Where Burke *had* been prescient was in identifying the French Revolution as a clash of intellectual principles, between pragmatic order and the Age of Reason's obsession with systems of thinking. French intellectuals had pursued ideas for their own sake and the results had been the Revolution and the Terror. The British Enlightenment had been functional and conservative, in Porter's estimation, and had consequently saved England from revolution,

allowing it to experience the fruits of that Enlightenment into the nineteenth-century, uninterrupted.

The English (whom, Porter noted, the French had emulated) forged a social order stable enough to carry out the reforms and improvements which precipitated the prosperity and democratization of later years. It was individuals of "useful" natures such as Priestley (or in his own way, Burke) who had bequeathed to modernity whatever legacy was to be had from the Enlightenment; yet historians had not recognized it. This ignorance, Porter noted with some chagrin, had begun with Burke's link between violent revolution and radical philosophy on the Continent.

Porter's most significant contribution to the history of ideas was that the Enlightenment was in great measure British, and that it did not necessarily culminate in a blood-drenched revolution. Edmund Burke had argued otherwise in 1790, persuasively enough that his view became historiographical orthodoxy. It was an irony, Porter revealed, that in doing so, many enlightened Britons were doomed to historical obscurity as reactionaries.

PART I

"Whenever our neighbour's house is on fire, it cannot be amiss for the engines to play a little on our own. Better to be despised for too anxious apprehensions, than ruined by too confident a security."¹ So said Edmund Burke in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. In saying as much, he assumed the colossal task of defending a traditional order against what was viewed widely as a noble, progressive revolution, supremely moral in its aims. And, among polemicists, he did so largely alone. Supremely confident in his own powers of political foresight (wrought from decades of experience as a Member of Parliament), Burke interpreted the Revolution in a different light, identifying it as a menace, shot through with immaturity and inhumanity. The charge, therefore, was to reveal that malevolence, and unmask its roots and agents before they strangled the English Church and Crown.

While Burke monitored the daily political events in France – and was certainly concerned with the turmoil as it unfurled – throughout his writings he sought sedulously to identify the recondite, but no less dangerous, causes of the Revolution. For surely, if these seeds had borne such apparently bitter fruit in Paris, similar ideas could take hold in London with equally frightening consequences.

¹ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, edited by Conor Cruise O'Brien (London: Penguin Books, 1968), p. 92.

Burke perceived two sets of intellectual vandals: first, the French *philosophes* who had sown and cultivated the subversive, and therefore unreasonable, notions in Gallic minds, and second, British political radicals, seduced by the Revolution, desiring a regicidal sequel in their own land. To his great consternation, the main British suspects were Dissenters who had already attacked the Church of England on doctrinal grounds, and were forming philosophical societies to encourage democratic reform (or possibly rebellion). The connection between theological and political radicalism was clear to Burke; just as French agitators had undermined the Catholic Church's authority as a prelude to challenging the monarchy, in like fashion Dissenters had subverted Anglicanism before taking aim at the Crown.

Burke's correspondence would indicate that he was not overly concerned by the early events of France's Revolution. The Bastille's storming had been reported in London papers in late July 1789. His first comment on the happenings, dated August 9, described the tumult as "mysterious", and by November, he was as yet admitting that the complexity of the Revolution defied all manner of speculation.² By the year's end, he still did not sense that any revolutionary sympathies in Britain were serious

² Burke, "Letter to the Earl of Charlemont - August 9, 1789"; "Letter to Charles-Jean-Francois Depont - November 1789" in *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke* VI (July 1789-December 1791), edited by Alfred Cobban & Robert A. Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), pp. xii, 10, 41.

enough to merit close attention. The troubles in France remained to him "a matter of curiosity," as he wrote on December 17.³

By the end of 1789, Burke had essentially decided his opinion of the Revolution, but it was not until mid-January 1790 that he came to feel an urgent need to offer a public counterpoint to its enthusiasts. What had irked him most strongly were accounts of the November 4 proceedings of the Society for Commemorating the Revolution in Great Britain (founded 1788), in the Old Jewry, at a Dissenting meeting house. The society had been formed in honour of the Glorious Revolution of 1688. Newspapers had published excerpts from a sermon delivered there by the eminent Dissenting clergyman, Rev. Richard Price [1723-91], entitled "Discourse on the Love of Our Country". The sermon was strongly in favour of France's revolutionaries, and Burke felt impelled to contemplate its political ramifications in a deeper manner.⁴

To praise revolution in such a way, Burke believed, was little more than sedition, and required a countervailing argument of equal fervency. "The dislike I feel to revolutions, the signals for which have so often been given from pulpits", obliged him to direct Britons' attentions back to the traditional principles of good

³ Ibid., "Letter to Philip Francis - December 17, 1789", pp. xii, 55.

⁴ Ibid., "Letter to Unknown Correspondent - January 1790", p. 81; *Reflections*, pp. 91, 93.

government. He wrote to a French acquaintance:

We ought not, on either side of the water, to suffer ourselves to be imposed upon by the counterfeit wares which some persons, by a double fraud, export to you ... as raw commodities of British growth though wholly alien to our soil, in order afterward to smuggle them back again into this country manufactured after the newest Paris fashion of an improved liberty.⁵

Still, he remained somewhat baffled by English zeal for the French insurrection in the 1790s. Despite their constant association of notions of liberty with political revolt, what indeed would it mean for Englishmen to surrender their realm to rigid, philosophical systems?:

Is our Monarchy to be annihilated, with all the laws, all the tribunals, and all the antient corporations of the Kingdom? Is every land-mark of the country to be done away in favour of a geometrical and arithmetical constitution?⁶

While it was one thing for such ideas to be proffered in philosophical societies, Burke was troubled that his own political party, the Whigs, might be steadily infiltrated by radicals such as the Rev. Price or his more prominent Dissenter colleague, Dr. Joseph Priestley [1733-1804]. Already, many Whigs were inclined to adopt the Revolution Society's Jacobin principles as an unofficial creed of the Party. By mid-1791, Burke's opposition to the Society had rendered him fairly isolated and unpopular within the ranks of the Whigs, as its leader, Charles James Fox, had both

⁵ Burke, *Reflections*, p. 110.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 144, 145.

publicly and privately denounced the *Reflections* while simultaneously praising Price and the Revolution.⁷

For his own part, Burke did not consider himself an enemy of the rights of man. They were necessary, and good, and worthy of protection, but unlike his opponents, he considered them to function only as a type of higher, Platonic ideal; "... their abstract perfection is their practical defect. By having a right to every thing [men] want every thing." Insistence on absolute political rights raised the possibility that such goals would remove the mediating influence of compromise from the traditional relations between governments and kings – and those mutual obligations were the traditional form of rights which Burke was willing to defend.⁸

He traced such systems of thinking directly to the *philosophes* of the eighteenth-century, many of whom he had read at length. Though he often denounced them as a species, Burke reserved special enmity for a few select thinkers whose ideas he held to be particularly liable for the outbreak of revolt. It was not a blind indictment; he scrutinized them individually, and some, such as Charles Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu (1689-1755), he outright admired.

Indeed, it has been argued that Burke's own rhetorical

⁷ Burke, "Letter to Earl Fitzwilliam - June 5, 1791" in *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke* VI, pp. 273-274.

⁸ Burke, *Reflections*, p. 151.

style was greatly indebted to Montesquieu, primarily in his use of strongly historical explanations for great social problems. This, however, was not a method Burke pursued in questioning the Revolution. To examine France's past for causes of the present troubles might indicate justifications for them.⁹ Moreover, he felt that it was typical of *philosophes* to abuse history for tendentious purposes, exploiting selective criminal incidents in the French clergy's past to encourage reaction against the Church in the present.¹⁰

Montesquieu had not merely been an admirer of Britain's constitutional arrangements, but had recognized that a great monarch could comprehend the complexity of his society, and in accordance act politically. Later French thinkers, Burke maintained, did not grasp this, and debased politics with fixed notions of democracy, "reduc[ing] men to loose counters merely for the sake of simple telling. ... The elements of their own metaphysics might have taught them better lessons."¹¹

Despite what some alleged, Montesquieu's works conformed the least to the principles of French radicals. In January 1790 Burke noted to an unidentified correspondent,

⁹ C.P. Courtney. *Montesquieu and Burke* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell & Mott Ltd., 1963), pp. 148-149.

¹⁰ Burke, *Reflections*, p. 246.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 300.

You say, my dear sir, that they read Montesquieu - I believe not. If they do, they do not understand him. He is often obscure; sometimes misled by system; but, on the whole, a learned, and ingenious writer, and sometimes a most profound thinker. Sure it is, that they have not followed him in any one thing they have done. Had he lived at this time, he would certainly be among the fugitives from France.¹²

The insidious thinkers were Voltaire (1694-1778) and especially Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), for they were not merely political rebels but social engineers. Voltaire was essentially a mischief-maker "who had the merit of writing agreeably; and nobody has ever united blasphemy and obscenity so happily together."¹³ Nonetheless, that blasphemous tone had served to eliminate the omnipotence of God, and Burke believed it was *calculated* to shunt aside the Catholic Church, leaving no legitimate authority in its place: "Their object is, that their fellow citizens may be under the dominion of no awe, but that of their Committee of Research, and of [the *philosophes*'] lanterne."¹⁴

Rousseau was talented and perfidious in equal measure. Burke could speak somewhat authoritatively about him, as he may in fact have met him in 1766 when both visited the home of their mutual friend David Hume. Burke summarized Rousseau as "not a little deranged in his intellects, to my

¹² Burke, "Letter to Unknown Correspondent - January 1790", *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke* VI, p. 81.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

¹⁴ Edmund Burke, *Letter to a Member of the National Assembly in The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke* Vol VIII, edited by L.G. Mitchell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 319.

almost certain knowledge. But he saw things in bold and uncommon lights." His public opinion of his writings had long been dubitable. Burke had written scathing reviews of both the *Letter to d'Alembert* and *Emile* for the *Annual Register*, but while the *Social Contract* had seemingly not attracted his attention, in 1790 he saw it as culpable and dangerous:

Little did I conceive that it could ever make revolutions, and Law to nations. But so it is. I see some people here are willing that we should become their scholars too, and reform our state on the French model. They have begun and it is high time for those who wish to preserve *morem majorum* to look about them.¹⁵

Burke's most famous public denunciation of Rousseau was in the pages devoted to the Swiss philosopher's thinking in the dense jeremiad, *Letter to a Member of the National Assembly*; it had been composed upon the French assembly's announcement of erecting a statue of Rousseau. Interestingly, mere days before the *Letter* was to be published in January 1791, an anonymous pamphlet was circulated, *A Comparison of the Opinions of Mr. Burke and Monsr Rousseau*, alleging that the two had much in common regarding constitutional reform. Burke, it seems, was unmoved.¹⁶ No one but Rousseau had been such an inspiration for the Revolution, and the new government in Paris was now populated by his clones. From Burke's *Letter*:

¹⁵ Burke, "Letter to Unknown Correspondent - January 1790", *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke* VI, p. 81.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, "Letter to Unknown Correspondent - January 26, 1791", p. 214.

Him they study; him they meditate; him they turn over in all the time they can spare from the laborious mischief of the day ... Rousseau is their canon of holy writ.¹⁷

Burke, having observed him at hand, considered Rousseau a charlatan, driven and consumed by vanity rather than principle, but in practical terms his desire for attention meant social engineering. "Under this philosophic instructor in the *ethics of vanity*, they have attempted in France a regeneration of the moral constitution of man." Burke continued, "I am certain that the writings of Rousseau lead directly to this kind of shameful evil."¹⁸

If Rousseau had been successful on the continent it was due to the fact that Europeans had not paid proper heed to the classical authors of antiquity, as had Montesquieu. Instead, they hungered for – and found in him – novel ideas for their own sake.¹⁹ Burke recounted that Rousseau had told Hume that the secret to winning minds was to find a substitute for that of classical myth, which in an enlightened age, no longer entranced European minds. Fresh ideas had been called for amongst men, Burke noted ruefully, "Giving rise to new and unlooked for strokes in politics and morals."²⁰

On the page, the systems and social theories of

¹⁷ Burke, *Letter to a Member of the Nation Assembly*, in *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, p. 312.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 312.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 312.

²⁰ Burke, *Reflections*, pp. 283–284.

philosophes were mere intellectual conceit, but when their application infected the workings of a state, such ideas were both ludicrous and impractical in civic life: "I hope that handy abridgements of the excellent sermons of Voltaire, d'Alembert, Diderot, and Helvétius ... are sent down to the soldiers along with their civic oaths." That politics had become so invasive in France was painfully amusing to Burke, who had learned that her soldiers were being "supplied with the ammunition of pamphlets as of cartridges."²¹

If such novel, doctrinaire systems of thinking were being introduced, the traditional restraints of civic conduct were being lost:

It is a *revolt of innovation*, and thereby the very elements of society have been confounded and dissipated. ... But I have observed that the philosophers in order to insinuate their polluted atheism into young minds, systematically flatter all their passions natural and unnatural, they explode or render odious or contemptible that class of virtues which restrain the appetite.²²

It was, consequently, the *philosophes'* disciples who would be the generation about whom Burke counseled vigilance:

"The men who to day snatch the worst criminals from justice, will murder the most innocent persons to morrow."²³

This type of all-encompassing political philosophy was peculiarly French, Burke observed. Unlike British

²¹ Ibid., p. 335.

²² Burke, "Lette to Claude-Francois de Rivarol - June 1, 1791", *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke* VI, pp. 268-270.

²³ Ibid., p. 270.

thinkers, France's were motivated to destroy established thinking simply because it was traditional, and not because of its relative worth: "They think that government may vary like models of dress, and with as little ill effect."²⁴

English philosophers, in contrast, did not seek recourse to abstract rights and pure rationality which, Burke insisted, could paralyze men morally and politically. "Many of our men of speculation, instead of exploding general prejudices, employ their sagacity to discover the latent wisdom which prevails in them."²⁵ Thus far, in British history, Burke believed that Englishmen were not yet contaminated by French ideas:

We are not the converts of Rousseau, we are not the disciples of Voltaire, Helvétius has made no progress amongst us. ... We think that no discoveries are to be made, in morality; nor many in the great principles of government, nor in the ideas of liberty.²⁶

That said, Burke admitted that the English had had their fair share of Freethinkers and Dissenters, but their ultimate influence upon the local political culture had been negligible, and they certainly had not worked as a conspiring group in the French fashion:

Who, born within the last forty years, has read one word of Collins, and Toland, and Tindal, and Chubb, and Morgan, and that whole race who called themselves Freethinkers? Who now reads Bolingbroke? Who ever read him through? ... They

²⁴ Burke, *Reflections*, p. 184.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 181-182.

never acted in corps, nor were known as a faction in the state, nor presumed to influence ... our public concerns.²⁷

The attacks on the French Crown and Church had been led by a new sort of men anyhow, a caste of "political men of letters" he called them. Previously, during the reign of Louis XIV, they had been cultivated at court, but in the wake of the seventeenth-century, had formed an entirely different body, with their own interests, at odds with tradition. Though Burke pointed to the *Académies* as being a locus of their activity, he believed more firmly that the *Encyclopédie* was the true epitome of their aims; their goal, he thought, was attention by means of redefining the nuclei of human reference. To Burke this made them a sort of literary cabal, fanatics in proselytizing their anti-ecclesiastical dogma, and their projects, over time, had truly altered French thinking about society. They had developed, he asserted, a monopoly on literature and ideas in France, denouncing and sanctioning any who dared disagree. While he acknowledged that some amongst them had suffered persecution, Burke described it as intermittent, and for all that, hardly harsh enough to silence to them.²⁸

Throughout the eighteenth-century, the *philosophes* had endeavoured, quite blatantly, to undermine Europe's traditional monarchies and social orders. Note, Burke mused, how the philosophers had insinuated themselves into

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 185-186.

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 211-213.

relationships with princes (e.g., Frederick the Great), flattering despots, while at the same advocating public revolt against property laws and the clergy.²⁹

To the end of his life, he was quite convinced that the *philosophes* had been engaged in a genuine conspiracy, chiefly against Catholic authority. In May 1797, mere months before Burke's death from stomach cancer, the French priest, Abbé Augustin de Barruel [1741-1820], had sent him a manuscript of his new work on Jacobins, *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire du Jacobinisme*. It listed Denis Diderot and Thomas Paine, amongst others, as "principal conspirators" of the radicalism. Burke replied affirmatively, stating "So far back as the year 1773," the year of his visit to France, "they were busy in the plot you have so well described. ... To this I can speak as a witness."³⁰

The philosophers' success in achieving a revolution was borne, on one hand by undeniable literary talent, and on another, by calculating cleverly a palatable message for willing and distinct audiences. Burke brooded,

Writers, especially when they act in a body, and with one direction, have great influence on the publick mind. ... They became a sort of demagogues. They served as a link to unite, in favour of one object, obnoxious wealth to

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 211-213.

³⁰ Burke, "Letter to the Abbé Barruel - May 1, 1797", *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke IX* (May 1796-July 1797), edited by R.B. McDowell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 320.

restless and desperate poverty.³¹

Burke contended that in this connection he had ascertained why the assault on the clergy and the confiscation of their church lands had been so fervent. It was a union of interests between atheistic writers and the monied commoners whom they had inspired:

As these two kinds of men appear principal leaders in all the late transactions, their junction and politics will serve to account, not upon any principles of Law or of policy, but as a cause, for the general fury with which all the landed property of ecclesiastical corporations has been attacked.³²

Though the English had not contrived such radical notions, in the wake of France's evidently successful Revolution the *philosophes'* "multitude of writings" was being

dispersed with incredible assiduity and expence. ... and in England, we find those who stretch out their arms to them, who recommend their examples .. and who choose, in more than one periodical meeting, publicly to correspond with them, to applaud them, and to hold them up as objects for imitation.³³

As much as Edmund Burke despised the intellectual insubordination of the French, his more pressing fear was that the English, in the 1790s, would begin promoting like-minded radicalism in Britain. At no time did he feel the Revolutionaries to be great in number, and though they were hardly inconspicuous, they were not representative of the

³¹ Burke, *Reflections*, pp. 213-214.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 214.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 262-263.

country's political mood. Rather, they were "loud and troublesome insects of the hour," whose influence could not be allowed to grow.³⁴

The principal target of his remonstrance was the Revolution Society, but more so in 1790-91, the Reverend Richard Price, who was its president in those years.³⁵ Just prior to that the leader had been Charles, Earl of Stanhope (1753-1816), who had ensured the Society's place on Burke's enemies list, after sending congratulations to the French revolutionaries for seizing the Bastille, and then forwarding Price's sermon to the National Assembly as further congratulations.³⁶ This was borderline sedition to Burke, because as a public organization replete with prominent politicians and clergy, the Revolution Society had opened correspondence with the French assembly without the blessing of the Crown.³⁷ It was this body which nearly alone motivated Burke to compose his *Reflections*, and as a counterweight to any other society who gave the French Revolution a "solemn public seal of sanction."³⁸

Despite Burke's suspicion that the Society's political

³⁴ Ibid., p. 181.

³⁵ See Richard Price, *A Discourse on the Love of Our Country* (5th edn., 1790) in *Political Writings of the 1790s*, Volume III, edited by Gregory Claeys (London: William Pickering Ltd., 1995).

³⁶ Burke, *Reflections*, pp. 93, 379n; Charles-Jean-Francois Depont, "Letter to Edmund Burke - December 29, 1789", *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke* VI, p. 59n. Stanhope vacated his seat in Parliament in 1795 when the entirety of that body voted against him in favour of Britain invading France.

³⁷ Burke, *Reflections*, p. 88.

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 85, 378n.

philosophy was forged in French ideals, they identified themselves more overtly with the British Enlightenment. Even if they might deny it through casuistry, Burke contended in the *Reflections*, the Society had an agenda which was set in defiance of the Crown. He outlined three of their main, contrarian principles: 1) that citizens had inalienable rights to choose their leaders, 2) that citizens could dismiss leaders for misconduct, 3) that citizens could frame a government for themselves. No matter what its members might argue, Burke regarded this as a Bill of Rights which did not exist in England, and indeed, something few Englishmen would desire.³⁹

While the Society had been formed in honour of the Glorious Revolution of 1688, Burke believed its members were woefully askew in their understanding of that event's true nature. They had instead conflated the ideals of Cromwell's Revolution with recent events in France. Had lawmakers in 1688 favoured an elected national assembly, they would have established one at the time. They had instead chosen a king.⁴⁰ The only reason for the Society's willful misinterpretation was that they were, to a man, pro-Jacobin, and in a democracy, would undoubtedly "erect themselves into an electoral college" with great enthusiasm.⁴¹

³⁹ Ibid., p. 99.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 100.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 98.

Burke was not an apologist for atavistic conceptions of Divine Rights of Monarchs such as "the old fanatics" had been in past times; they, he felt, were little different than "the new fanatics" who drafted panegyrics to populist democracy.⁴² Rather, what the Revolution Society had failed to understand was that King James had been deposed rightfully *by Parliament* because he had broken an historical contract between himself and his subjects. Burke commented that such egregious misconduct, however, was not to be found in France.⁴³

In addition, the Society held up a post-Revolution National Assembly as the acme of freedom. This incensed Burke, who argued that England benefited from quite enough freedom, and more, the ancient guarantees to ensure it.⁴⁴ Advocation of pure democracy was, he believed, to jettison blindly many of the good things the British Crown and its laws had established; the historical continuity of a monarchy was an assurance of the civil traditions that went with it. A violent revolution would cast it all to the wind – and what was to prevent yet another revolution following that?⁴⁵

The Society's nonchalant, easy talk of revolution annoyed Burke as well. The cashiering of kings, he retorted, "can rarely, if ever, be performed without

⁴² Ibid., p. 111.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 113.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 146.

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 107, 109.

force." Violent conflict was fit for replacing only the vilest of tyrants, and the radicals at the Old Jewry were seemingly indifferent to the potential chaos such an upheaval would entail. They were so "heated with their theories" that any calamity would be acceptable provided it altered the *status quo*; "It is with them a war or a revolution, or it is nothing."⁴⁶ Somehow, their systematic picture of Parliament's shortcomings justified usurping its role, as though revolution were morally superior to the inequalities of representation.⁴⁷

Again, Burke interpreted the backbone of the Revolution Society's thinking as akin to French sophistry. Its members rejected common sense as "the wisdom of unlettered men" in favour of the rights of man – a philosophy so strong as to be nearly a scientific law. At its best, Burke saw this "political metaphysics" as wishful abstract speculation, at worst, an inflexible obstacle; "Against these [rights of man] there can be no prescription ... these admit no temperament, and no compromise."⁴⁸ Therefore, the Society members were not so much against the monarchy's abuses, but rather the legitimacy of its rule. For Burke, rights were social, rather than political, heritable instead of purely economic. Men had rights to what was theirs by tradition (*i.e.*, justice, property):

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 116, 148, 155.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 149-150.

"In this partnership all men have equal rights; but not to equal things." A man had rights to the money in his pocket, but not control of a joint stock company, and certainly not to the management of the state. "No man," he warned, "should be judge in his own cause."⁴⁹

While the sentiments of the Revolution Society quite probably reflected its members' sensibilities, Burke was well aware that much of their radical power was tied to its most vocal exponent, the Rev. Price. It was with Price that his opinions clashed most heatedly, adding fuel to which was the fact that the clergyman was the associate of Burke's enduring nemesis, William Petty, Earl of Shelburne (1737-1805), as were numerous other radical Dissenters, such as Joseph Priestley.⁵⁰

Challenging the charismatic Price was not without hazard. Upon sending an early draft of the *Reflections* to his friend Philip Francis, M.P. (1740-1818), he was warned that the work would damage his political and social standing irreparably if he lowered himself to a sarcastic "war of pamphlets with Doctor Price." As a populist, Price was not to be given such credibility as a reply from Burke would provide. (Francis later reprimanded Burke for his

⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 149-150.

⁵⁰ Burke, "Letter to Philip Francis - February 20, 1790", *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke VI*, p. 91n. Petty had long been a foe of Burke's benefactor, Lord Rockingham. It did not help that Burke viewed Petty as an incorrigible opportunist who had undermined Whig unity; Petty in turn had little use for Burke who had played a role in the downfall of his nine-month tenure as Prime Minister in 1782-83.

embarrassingly substandard prose in the *Reflections*: "Once and for all, I wish you would let me teach you to write English.")⁵¹ For his own part, Price's only reply to the *Reflections* was the barest retort in the November 1790 preface to the fourth printing of his sermon.⁵²

Although Price was as concerned by abstract political theories of rights as any philosopher, Burke felt the true danger lay in his romanticization of the French Revolution, that it was somehow a paragon of human moral goodness fit for "effusions of sacred eloquence."⁵³ He was concerned that Price was blending non-conformist religious zeal with nebulous French radicalism. Burke adjudged Price's 1789 sermon as:

... the public declaration of a man much connected with literary caballers, and intriguing philosophers; with political theologians and theological politicians, both at home and abroad. I know they set him up as a sort of oracle; because, with the best intentions in the world, he naturally philippizes, and chaunts his prophetic song in exact unison with their designs.⁵⁴

Burke's greatest abhorrence to the sermon was, in fact, that it was a *sermon*. He accused Price of reviving an older tradition of politicizing the pulpit, which had last seen currency prior to the Civil War, "a novelty not

⁵¹ Philip Francis, "Letter to Edmund Burke - February 19, 1790", *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke* VI, p. 86; Ibid., "Letter to Edmund Burke - November 3, 1790", p. 151.

⁵² Ibid., "Letter to Edmund Burke - February 19, 1790", p. 86n.

⁵³ Burke, *Reflections*, pp. 93, 156.

⁵⁴ Ibid., pp. 93, 95, 379n. The "philippizing" here refers to the Delphic Oracle's prophecies serving the needs of Philip of Macedon.

wholly without danger," and hardly conducive to political moderation.⁵⁵ Burke brought to mind incidents in the 1640s wherein clergy such as Price had preached politics to ranks of infantry with disastrous consequences. Furthermore, Price had stated that Britain's king was legitimate *only* because he owed his crown to the "choice of his people"; thereby, implying any other reason was criminal. The Reverend's congregations, Burke warned, were being "Habituated to it, as if it were a first principle admitted without dispute"; the religious tenor of such sentiments could infuse them with an intemperate radicalism.⁵⁶

In his arguably most damning passage against Price in the *Reflections*, Burke placed him directly within the older tradition of malicious English preachers. He compared Price's self-confessed delight at the downfall of Louis XVI with Rev. Hugh Peters' commensurate exultation in the beheading of Charles I. Peters (1598-1660), an independent clergyman, was executed in the Restoration.⁵⁷

Prior to 1790, Burke had been somewhat sympathetic to Dissenters' concerns, notably their desire to repeal the Test and Corporations acts.⁵⁸ He had also hoped to make some political inroads in that constituency (by cultivating his relationship with Priestley, for instance). However,

⁵⁵ Ibid., pp. 95, 380n.

⁵⁶ Ibid., pp. 97, 98.

⁵⁷ Ibid., pp. 158, 379n.

⁵⁸ These acts, imposed between 1661 and 1678, required civil servants and members of corporations to renounce Catholic transubstantiation doctrine and receive communion from the Church of England.

his good disposition cooled as he began detecting that democratically-inclined parishioners supported the National Assembly's seizure of church land.⁵⁹ The publication of Price's sermon had sold out in a single day, and Burke became watchful of religious groups allying with radicals. When prominent Dissenter Richard Bright wrote to him soliciting support for repealing the Test Act, Burke replied:

I was much surprised to find religious assemblies turned into sort of places of exercise and discipline for politicks. ... Perhaps you have not seen these books which have gone thro' several editions and are unanimously recommended by the Eastern [Baptist] Association a very numerous body of Dissenters.⁶⁰

Burke's son, Richard Burke Jr., had noted in July 1790 that the connection between Dissenting leaders and the Revolution Society was very strong and continued to grow; in that month, some 652 persons attended a celebration at the Crown & Anchor tavern to honour the first anniversary of the Bastille's fall. Numerous Dissenters and ministers had attended, including Price, Dr. Abraham Rees (1743-99), and Dr. Joseph Towers (1737-99), pastor of the Old Jewry. Charles Stanhope had naturally been present as well, and Burke's concern was that Dissenters and the Revolution Society would combine with elements in the Whig Party. Richard Jr. surmised that Stanhope and Price were indeed

⁵⁹ Burke, "Letter to John Noble - March 14, 1790", *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke* VI, pp. xii, 103.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, "Letter to Richard Bright - February 18, 1790", pp. 83-84.

aiming to bring Charles James Fox into their fold. This ultimately did not happen, as Stanhope had a falling out with the Society over procedural issues, and resigned in November 1790.⁶¹

Burke now saw Dissenters as the cardinal threat to the crumbling sanity of the Whig Party. Previously, republican Dissenters had constituted a few individuals skulking about the fringes of the Party, lobbying for a handful of issues. By late 1791 Burke believed they were rallying to the cause of revolution:

I think, they compose a more active, a more spirited, and a more united body, than the Jacobites ever were. ... A foreign factious connexion is in the very essence of their politicks ... They wish to break down all barriers which tend to separate them from the counsels, designs, and assistance, of the republican, atheistical, faction of fanaticks in France.⁶²

He concluded that action should be taken, though politicians might be hesitant in provoking the Dissenter constituency:

"But the root of evil is *abroad*; and the way to secure us at *home* is to deprive mischievous factions of their *foreign* alliances."⁶³

⁶¹ Richard Burke Jr., "Letter to Earl Fitzwilliam - July 29, 1790" *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke* VI, pp. 125-129; Edmund Burke, "Letter to Dr. William Falconer - November 14, 1790", *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke* VI, p. 159n; Ibid., "Letter to Sir Henry Hoghton - March 6, 1793", *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke* VII (January 1792-August 1794), edited by P.J. Marshall & John A. Woods (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 357.

⁶² Burke, "Letter to Henry Dundas - September 30, 1791" *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke* VI, pp. 420-421.

⁶³ Ibid., pp. 421-422.

Indeed, in a March 4, 1793 Commons speech, Burke had denounced the Revolution Society, going so far as to list the forty members of its Committee of Correspondence, which included several noteworthy Dissenters, such as the Rev. Rees. Two days later, the M.P. for Preston, Sir Henry Hoghton (Rees's fellow Presbyterian), wrote Burke, castigating him for including Rees amongst the members. (He was informed directly that the Dissenting minister was *perpetually* being listed in Society publications, such as *A Vindication of the Revolution Society Against the Calumnies of Mr. Burke*).⁶⁴

The controversy with Price before long had become somewhat irrelevant, as the Reverend was gravely ill by late 1790, and died in March 1791. This did not mitigate Burke's disquiet about the Dissenters, and from thence he directed his ire at other suspects, markedly, Joseph Priestley. It is quite probable that Burke would not have taken Priestley quite so seriously but for the fact that the Unitarian combined in himself the natures of political radical, natural philosopher, and theologian. To Burke, this identified him with the very vanguard of what he was decrying in France.⁶⁵

Initially, Burke had been in many ways eager to court

⁶⁴ Burke, "Letter to Sir Henry Hoghton - March 6, 1793", *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke* VII, p. 357.

⁶⁵ Maurice Crosland, "The Image of Science as a Threat: Burke versus Priestley and the 'Philosophic Revolution'", *British Journal for the History of Science* 20 (July 1987), p. 282.

Priestley's political voice as he had with the Dissenters as a whole. In September 1789 letters to Charles James Fox and Cpt. John Willet Payne (a friend of the royal family), he suggested they urge Priestley to dedicate a new book to the Prince of Wales, thereby gaining the Dissenter's influence in the upcoming election.⁶⁶

Burke had first publicly turned on Priestley's radical politics on March 2, 1790 in his speech addressing the repeal of the Test Act. In it he made specific links between Dissenters such as Priestley and the revolutionary movements by quoting, from amongst others, Price's sermon, a letter discussing the intrigues of Lancashire clergy, and Priestley's *Letters to the Rev. E. Burn*. Their consolidated agenda (including Priestley's), he argued, was to subvert the Church of England, by appealing to the sort of abstract rights advocated by the French *philosophes*. He therefore would not work to repeal the Act unless those more reasonable Dissenters were willing to step forward and declare their interests without the baggage of political radicalism.⁶⁷

Burke held Priestley's scientific and literary talents in high regard, but objected to his willingness to view the calamity of revolution as a necessary sacrifice for political progress. In the *Reflections* he quoted

⁶⁶ Burke, "Letter to Charles James Fox - September 9, 1789", *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke* VI, p. 15; Ibid., "Letter to William Windham - September 27, 1789", p. 24.

⁶⁷ Ibid., "Letter to John Noble - March 14, 1790", p. 100.

Priestley's *History of the Corruptions of Christianity* to this effect, wherein Priestley had predicted that the alliance of church and state could be broken only when the "civil powers" had first fallen.⁶⁸

Priestley did not acquiesce to Burke's published criticism or public speeches, and restated his confidence in the rightness of the French Revolution and its principles in January 1791, when he published (in Birmingham, London, and Paris) *Letters to the Right Honourable Edmund Burke Occasioned by His Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Here Priestley once more put forth his disapproval of the established churches and ecclesiastical property, and encouraged the National Assembly to expand its work.⁶⁹

Eventually, Burke would come to see himself as Priestley's literary opposite number. In a June 1792 letter to a French priest, he sardonically referred to himself as "the Aristophanes to the Birmingham Socrates, and am supposed to prepare the minds of the people to persecute him by my talents for ridicule."⁷⁰

The reference to persecution was not a light one, as

⁶⁸ Burke, *Reflections*, p. 148.

⁶⁹ Francois-Louis-Thibault de Menonville, "Letter to Edmund Burke - March 11, 1791", *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke VI*, pp. 232, 232n; See also, Joseph Priestley, *A Letter to the Right Hon. Edmund Burke, Occasioned by His Reflections on the Revolution in France*, in *Political Writings of the 1790s*, Vol. II, edited by Gregory Claeys (London: William Pickering Ltd., 1995).

⁷⁰ Burke, "Letter to the Chevalier and the Abbé de la Bintinaye - June 18, 1792", *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke VII*, pp. 152-153.

Priestley had been the victim of the Birmingham Riots the previous summer. Interestingly, Burke had already ruminated that Britons were not necessarily on the side of men such as Priestley, and a serious reaction was possible. This was somewhat fulfilled in July 14-17, 1791, when a mob, supposedly riled by a Revolution Dinner, attacked and burned Priestley's house – assuming wrongly that he had organized the event. London papers reported it to have been provoked by Presbyterians circulating anti-monarchical and anti-ecclesiastical handbills, whilst the diners had toasted the destruction of the government and the death of the King. Priestley denied any knowledge of the handbills and toasts, or even being present.⁷¹

Burke was aghast by the riots, feeling that it was now ever more urgent for cooler heads to subdue revolutionary radicals by superior arguments, lest similar mobs attempt to deal with the latent threats themselves. The entire incident had been embarrassing for Burke, as he felt the rioters had weakened his cause, instigating in its name, the very sort of French chaos he was condemning. Moreover, the press had insinuated that he himself was an agitator of sorts, whilst not reproaching radicals like Priestley for their indiscretion in promoting revolt.⁷²

⁷¹ Carl B. Cone, *Burke and the Nature of Politics* (University of Kentucky Press, 1964), pp. 358-359.

⁷² James Boswell, "Letter to Edmund Burke - July 16, 1791" *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke* VI, p. 297n; Burke, "Letter to Richard Burke, Sr. - July 24, 1791", pp. 306-307.

In the wake of the attack on Priestley's home, Burke worried that the Dissenting faction, which he already did not trust, would exploit it to gain sympathy for their revolutionary causes. On September 1, 1791, a gathering of Yorkshire Dissenters had denounced the riots, criticized the existing parliamentary franchise, and once again offered congratulations to French Revolutionaries for throwing off the yoke of a similarly despotic government. They also proposed unanimously to draft a letter to Priestley sending regrets for his loss, and lauding his civil libertarian work. Burke commented: "They publicly adopt Priestley and his Cause; they give him compliments of condolence and encouragement, and declare him a *martyr* – a martyr to what?"⁷³

This "martyrdom" annoyed Burke more than anything, along with what he believed to be Priestley's self-perception of innocence in regards to the riots. Priestley had written an open letter to the denizens of Birmingham, *Appeal to the Public on the Subject of the Riots in Birmingham*, in which he had presented himself as a gentle, reasonable Christian, chastising them for their contrasting unchristian savagery. He admonished them, saying: "We are better instructed in the mind and forbearing spirit of Christianity, than ever to think of having recourse to *violence* ..." Burke was incensed by what he deemed

⁷³ Burke, "Letter to Henry Dundas - September 30, 1791", *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke* VI, p. 420.

hypocrisy, as he observed how Priestley was himself an advocate of revolution.⁷⁴

His suspicions about the riots bringing Dissenters closer to radical causes was apparently correct. Within a year of the Birmingham commotion, Burke became convinced that Priestley's political aims were increasingly being championed within Dissenting circles:

This affair of Birmingham which frightend them at first, now fortifies them. They come forth as persecuted men. They all, as fast as they can meet, take up Priestley, and avowedly set him up as their head.⁷⁵

By 1792, this was becoming a serious problem in Burke's view. In March of that year, the Manchester Constitutional Society had sent an address to the Society of Jacobins, and congratulated Tom Paine for authoring his *Rights of Man* (which was a riposte to Burke, who declared it an "infamous" work).⁷⁶

The Manchester Society had been formed in October 1790 as a response to the conservative Church & King Society, which in March 1790 had formed in celebration of the defeat of the motion to repeal the Test Act. The Manchester group, though formed by Thomas Walker, an Anglican Whig merchant, was one of numerous radical groups assembling at the time, and whose membership brimmed with leading

⁷⁴ Ibid., "Letter to Dr. French Laurence - August 2, 1791", pp. 311-312, 312n.

⁷⁵ Burke, "Letter to Richard Burke, Jr. - March 23, 1792"; *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke* VII, p. 119.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 119.

Dissenters.⁷⁷

Burke had denounced the Manchester Society's March 1792 meeting in a Commons speech on April 30, but the prominence of the members in its ranks made a deep impression on him. For the moment, the supporters of the French Revolution had been frustrated by the British invasion of France, in concert with the Prussians and Austrians. Burke remained skeptical. In an August 18 letter to Buckinghamshire M.P., William Grenville, he explained:

I am thoroughly convinced that the faction of English Jacobins though a little under a cloud for the present, is neither destroyed nor disheartened. ... So sure as we have an existence, if [Revolutionary] things should go on in France, as go on they may, so sure it is that in the ripeness of their time, the same tragedies will be acted in England.⁷⁸

He went on to list the rogues:

Carra and Condorcet, and Santerre and Manuel, and Petion and their brethren the Priestleys, the Coopers and the Watts', the deputies of the body of the Dissenters and others at Manchester, who embraced Carra in the midst of the Jacobin Club, the Revolution Society that recieved Petion in London - the whole race of the *affiliated*, who are numerous and powerful, whose principles, dispositions and wishes, are the very same, are as closely connected as ever, and they do not fail to mark and to use every thing that shews a remissness, or any equivocal appearance in the

⁷⁷ Edward Royle, *Revolutionary Britannia? Reflections on the Threat of Revolution in Britain, 1789-1848* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 14.

⁷⁸ Burke, "Letter to Lord Grenville - August 18, 1792", *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke VII*, p. 177.

government, to their advantage.⁷⁹

In August of 1792, Burke was further repelled by what he maintained was Priestley's hypocrisy and gall, when he accepted French citizenship, but graciously declined the offer of a seat in the French National Convention. He wrote in his most supremely sarcastic of tones:

... with what audacity Priestley comes out, avows himself a Citizen of that Republick of Robbers and assassins ... publicly wishes them all success - though he does not choose from a sacred regard to his own safety, to put himself in danger of being hanged by the King of Prussia on the one hand, or by the gentlemen of his own faction on the other, who threaten to massacre their delegates if their conduct does not suit with their humours.⁸⁰

Burke mentioned Priestley in his letters only one further time before his death. In the October 4 *Morning Chronicle* of 1792, he had read of Priestley's reluctance to serve in the National Convention. He remarked in a letter to his longtime friend Lord Fitzwilliam (1748-1833), that he had read more letters of Priestley's "to other of the murderers in which he censures some excesses; or indeed rather laments them for no other reason than as tending to hurt so good a cause." The letters, however, apparently do not correspond to any Priestley is known to have written. It would seem that Burke's last thoughts on Priestley were

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 177. Jean-Louis Carra (1742-93), Antoine-Joseph Santerre (1752-1809), and Pierre-Louis Manuel (1751-93) were noted Jacobins; Jerome Petion (1756-94) was mayor of Paris from 1791-92; Thomas Cooper (1759-1839) and James Watt Jr. (1769-1848) had given the address at Manchester.

⁸⁰ Ibid., "Letter to Earl Fitzwilliam - October 5, 1792", p. 229.

spurious in source.⁸¹

Burke was nearing retirement from public life by the end of 1792, and made good on his promise to retreat into private life in 1795. While concerns about the Revolution and radical activity were not absent from his mind, the Irish Question evidently monopolized his thoughts, and he drew no obvious satisfaction from the fulfillment of his prophecy of the Terror.

Burke's status has undoubtedly benefited from the fact that on many counts history proved him correct, and not by coincidence. In some ways it is perhaps adequate to agree with the traditional assessment of him as the father of modern conservatism – if indeed its definition is the desire to moderate the pace of change with the past's circumspection. Yet ironically, the success of Revolution without, and the threat of it within, served to rescue him from the wastelands of British political fortune. In 1789, Burke's influence was at its nadir, and he was viewed (and viewed himself) as a man long past his prime.

In previous years, he had championed causes of principle, but it was the troubles in France which roused Burke's ire, stirring the might of his intellect and the eloquence of his pen. The events did not merely restore him to a place of significance in British politics, but made him an international voice with which to be reckoned.⁸²

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 232n.

⁸² Alfred Cobban & Robert A. Smith, introduction to *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke* VI, p. xi.

Even in his own day, Burke was regarded as being overwrought with suspicion, sounding tocsins of alarm over irrelevant threats. However, this was a consequence of an intellectual grappling with the ideas of other intellectuals, be they French philosophers or Dissenting clergymen. In treading this ground his notions of liberty were quite distinct, neither wholly clinging to absolute monarchies of the past, nor embracing what he held to be the unreasonableness of speculators who desired immediate reform while dismissing its consequences.

In spite of his critics, Burke remained, in his own fashion, a defender of the rights of man. The foundation of his ideals, however, were to be found in the past, not the future. In his own *Rights of Man*, Tom Paine accused him of making "tragic paintings" rooted more in a collection of nostalgic tales than in modern reality. He wrote: "But Mr. Burke should recollect that he is writing History, and not *Plays*; and that his readers will expect truth ..."⁸³ Paine was mistaken if he believed Burke was not conscious of writing an historical work, as Burke was commenting on the direct consequences of history's actors. He described the basic business of revolutionaries as:

... to spread opinions ... which can have no other effect than to root out all principle from the minds of the common people, and to put a dagger into the hands of every rustick to plunge

⁸³ Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man* (London: Penguin Books, 1984), p. 49.

into the heart of his landlord.⁸⁴

Yet Paine was also correct that Edmund Burke had exploited history in service of his own purposes, rather than yielding it up for the common man's scrutiny. Burke could not have faith in innovative reason. He said so himself:

You see, Sir, that in this enlightened age I am bold enough to confess, that we are generally men of untaught feelings; that instead of casting away all our old prejudices, we cherish them to a very considerable degree, and, to take more shame to ourselves, we cherish them because they are prejudices; and the longer they have lasted, and the more generally they have prevailed, the more we cherish them.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Burke, "Letter to Henry Dundas - October 14, 1793", *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke VI*, p. 451.

⁸⁵ Burke, *Reflections*, p. 183.

PART II

If Edmund Burke had stared into the pool of Enlightenment and seen only and unequivocally a French Revolution bubbling to the surface, Roy Porter, some two centuries later, saw no less turbulence, but far more complexity. Though Porter devoted a large measure of his work to unraveling the same issues, the *philosophes* were to him only one (rather indirect) piece of the Revolution's puzzle, and the intellectuals of Burke's England a great deal more dynamic.

Porter felt the notion and term "revolution" in its general sense to be a loaded one. As he put it:

The concept has increasingly been overworked, debased, and almost done to death. By a process of the inflation of historians' vocabulary, what formerly might have been termed a 'shift', or a 'change' becomes a 'revolution' ...⁸⁶

He nonetheless believed that certain massive events were undoubtedly worthy of the title -- the Russian, Industrial, or French Revolutions.

Though Porter frequently discussed the distinct national characteristics of Enlightenment in each state, France was for him an evident anomaly amongst eighteenth-century intellectual cultures. The country was seemingly

⁸⁶ Roy Porter & Mikulas Teich, eds., *Revolution in History* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1986), p. 2.

possessed of groups of relatively literate citizens and a body of thinking elites who were essentially independent of the Crown's patronage. Moreover, the *philosophes* were brave enough to risk censure, and articulate in defiance when disseminating their ideas to wide audiences. He mused:

It would be extravagant to imply that the French Enlightenment brought about the French Revolution. But the movement certainly helped to create a situation in which ideological loyalty to the old regime was eroded and the regime destabilized.⁸⁷

Despite this, *Reflections on the Revolution's* central preoccupation – radical intellectuals as the cause of the Revolution – often seemed irksome to Porter. He dubbed it a "weary question" and though addressing it intermittently, he was more concerned with the protean panorama of individuals, goals, and ideas which he felt constituted the era as a gestalt.⁸⁸

In Porter's eyes, Burke (one of the 1790s' "vociferous reactionary ideologues") had missed the point of the *philosophes'* movement in reducing it to political revolution:

It is by-and-large an idle business to blame or praise the *philosophes* for what happened in 1789 and beyond. In any case, almost all its leaders

⁸⁷ Roy Porter, *The Enlightenment* (Palgrave: New York, 2001), p. 55.

⁸⁸ Roy Porter, "Reading History", *History Today*, 32.2 (1982), pp. 51-52.

were by then dead, so we cannot divine their reactions.⁸⁹

Indeed, many luminaries of the era, such as Erasmus Darwin, might have initially cheered the *ancien régime's* fall, but had ultimately abjured it in the Terror's wake.⁹⁰ The true question, to which Burke did not fully attend, concerned the actual intentions of the *philosophes*, and the shift in how Europeans viewed themselves as men functioning in nature and society.

In the main, Porter regarded Burke's contribution to the historiography of Enlightenment as a dubious one. Along with the Abbé Barruel, Porter placed him at the head of the tradition denouncing *philosophes* as

immature rationalists, whose *a priori* and irresponsible sloganizing ... helped to topple the old order, only to produce first anarchy, and then a new despotism, in its place.⁹¹

It begged the question of whether this handful of French thinkers truly constituted the sum total of the Enlightened Age - and their impact upon it.

While at many points Porter also lauded Peter Gay's seminal work *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, he was notably critical of its claim that the movement was born principally from the writings of a few towering giants such

⁸⁹ Porter, *The Enlightenment*, pp. 64-65.

⁹⁰ Roy Porter, *The Creation of the Modern World* (Norton: New York, 2000), p. 438.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

as Voltaire and Rousseau. Gay had devoted pages to them "as if they had almost single-handedly engineered the French Revolution."⁹² Porter did not disagree that they were genuinely complex figures, representative of their time, but wondered about the "seedbed" from whence these "prize blooms" had grown.

Grappling with the problem of how significant the *philosophes* were in effecting radical change in the eighteenth-century, he asked if it were equally or more possible that, say, democratic ideals and republicanism were products of "the swelling ranks of articulate and cultured men and women throughout Europe?"⁹³ This might entail that the *ancien régime* had in some measure become enlightened, rather than simply being the object of intellectual terrorists hoping to explode its institutions.

Moreover, if Gay had been correct in describing the profound influence of a few men of letters with the "power to change the very course of human affairs", where was the practical evidence? Voltaire, Porter noted, certainly had the ear of Frederick the Great for a spell, but Prussia's militarism and basic lack of liberty hardly bore any hallmarks of the Frenchman's philosophy. It was perhaps more useful to consider the end goals of the *philosophes*:

⁹² Ibid., p. 5.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 6.

was revolution an outcome they truly desired? Or were they more concerned with promoting reason and science which in the longer course of history would reform men's minds?⁹⁴

Porter did not hold to notions that the *philosophes* formulated any sort of agenda resulting in the wholesale destruction of the prevailing political (or even social) order. He stated:

It has been assumed - since Burke - that the eruption of the French Revolution in the name of liberty, equality and fraternity gives the French Enlightenment a warranted place in conservative demonology, unlike perhaps the English. But as Robert Darnton has shown, relations between the High Enlightenment and the French Revolution are anything but clear. Many *philosophes* had feathered comfortable nests within the *ancien régime* - as revolutionary pamphleteers complained.⁹⁵

In truth, it did not appear that many French philosophers were deeply dedicated to democracy, atheism, or materialism. The harsh critiques of clergymen and monarchs produced some trenchant slogans later mythologized by adherents and foes, but the links to subsequent pike-wielding revolutionaries seemed tenuous.⁹⁶

At issue, for example, was the first-hand involvement of the Voltaires and Diderots to unseating their king's regime. Porter remarked that these "noisy political

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 7.

⁹⁵ Roy Porter & Mikulas Teich, eds., *The Enlightenment in National Context* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1981), pp. 6-7.

⁹⁶ Porter, *The Creation of the Modern World*, p. 10.

lightweights" spent no serious energy organizing political resistance, and were not keen to see a full-scale revolt against the *status quo*. Outside short periods of incarceration, they were rarely in serious jeopardy whilst receiving the laudations of literary *salons*. In contrast, Porter recalled the blood-soaked fates suffered by multitudes of heretics and freethinkers in the preceding two centuries (e.g., Bruno or Campanella) - or even the political radicals persecuted in nineteenth-century Russia and Austria.⁹⁷

Another incongruity that distanced the *philosophes* from the Enlightenment's legacy was their faint support for many of the values with which it later came to be associated. Few seemed to have championed universal suffrage or elected parliaments, for instance, which Porter believed they dismissed as outmoded tools of aristocrats and Athenians. More acutely, he suggested that men such as Voltaire were elitists who had little reason to regard ignorant, superstitious, illiterate serfs as intellectually worthy of political participation. Rather, the heart of their disquisition was the competence and reasonableness of their monarchs.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Porter, *Enlightenment*, p. 23.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

Porter also identified a shift during the Enlightenment in the matters which occupied *philosophes'* minds. At the outset of the age, thinkers such as Locke and Montesquieu concerned themselves with the battle against tyranny or examining the related issue of political legitimacy. By the mid-eighteenth-century, however, their focus had turned to debating the ends and uses of power: What type of system could produce virtue in men?, What policies would foster trade or public health? This was optimistic thinking, but Porter cautioned that it set *philosophes* on a slippery slope, running "the risk of degenerating into a proliferation of wish lists or even utopian fantasies."⁹⁹

Like Burke, Porter named Montesquieu as one of the era's most thorough commentators on the subject of proper government. Unlike Burke, he viewed *The Spirit of the Laws* as a fairly bleak analysis. Though Montesquieu had admired republicanism as a form of polity, he did not believe it was a system suited for his own era, whilst the alternative – monarchy – tended to devolve into despotism without close attention. Therefore, the only bodies capable of preserving traditional liberties were the nobility and perhaps the Catholic Church, institutions whose glaring

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 28.

defects Montesquieu had already exposed in his *Persian Letters*.¹⁰⁰

Porter found Rousseau nearly as pessimistic and impotent as Montesquieu, though he certainly did not revile him, as had Burke. Rousseau had rejected the worth of constitutionalism in reforming society, and to his mind, the entire structure was rotten from within, and no piece of paper it produced could ever restore man to his natural place in the world.¹⁰¹ In general, Porter observed a disposition amongst French intellectuals advocating central organization in politics and society, provided it promoted the general good. He offered Rousseau's dream of arresting humanity's degeneration by forced moral goodness, or Helvétius's utilitarian proposals for governance, which presumed humans were by nature, identical, malleable, and capable of conditioning through education and environment.¹⁰²

What this amounted to, as Porter argued it, was that instead of ruminating upon the tremendously complex issue of *who* had legitimacy to govern, the *philosophes* typically chose to concentrate on *how* the existing figures *should* rule. For their philosophical purposes, this meant

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., pp. 24, 25.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 25.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 27.

promoting justice and economic prosperity within civil society, and in particular, the extension of rights to men; to publish, think, worship, and speak. The quintessential epigraph was the description in Voltaire's *Lettres philosophiques*: freedom of trade in London's Stock Exchange creating interaction and equality amongst multifarious religious groups.¹⁰³ This was not violent political revolt on paper, but rather a call to secularize European public life. It was this project, and not 1789, which Porter argued to be the definitive legacy of the *philosophes*, manifesting their influence most concretely.¹⁰⁴

Indeed, Porter had pondered whether the great minds of France would have in fact repudiated much of what the 1790s produced:

To what extent, and until when, would the great *philosophes* have approved the French Revolution? - a revolution which executed Lavoisier and hunted Condorcet, one rejected by latter-day *philosophes* like Raynal and Marmontel? Perhaps their reaction would have been those of Enlightened Englishmen like Erasmus Darwin, Samuel Taylor Coleridge or Bishop Richard Watson: the bubbling enthusiasm of the toast to Liberty turning to poison in the very cup.¹⁰⁵

A supreme irony for Porter was his firm conviction that those great French *philosophes* were in many ways the willing students of the Enlightened English - in light of

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 26.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 66.

¹⁰⁵ Porter & Teich, *The Enlightenment in National Context*, p. 7.

Burke's concern that the storm of ideas was crossing the Channel from the other direction. Porter remarked that it was hardly a secret that Frenchmen such as Diderot or Voltaire lionized British intellectuals and their philosophical traditions, framing England's civil liberties and political reasonableness as the very mould in which a modern France could be cast. He wrote:

... the *philosophes* themselves looked to England as the birthplace of the modern. Anglophiles in France, Italy and the Holy Roman Empire celebrated Britain's constitutional monarchy and freedom under the law, its open society, its prosperity and religious toleration.¹⁰⁶

The historiographic misfortune, however, was that few writers had ever bothered with such details as the "English Enlightenment", and historians such as Ernst Cassirer, preferred to depict "a conservative John Bull as the buttress of counter-revolution."¹⁰⁷

If anything, Porter proposed that the spirit of that much admired English Enlightenment was best captured by the political reformist culture in late eighteenth-century London, one rooted in esteem for the Glorious Revolution. Its mood, he said, was

... progressive but not incendiary, broad church and confident enough to include toasts to

¹⁰⁶ Porter, *The Creation of the Modern World*, pp. 6-8. Voltaire was an ardent pupil of Bacon, Newton, and Locke; Diderot translated Shaftesbury, Rousseau was influenced greatly by Addison and Steele.

¹⁰⁷ Porter & Teich, *The Enlightenment in National Context*, pp. 3, 4.

prelates and people alike, to embrace Anglicans and Dissenters, and to extend sympathy to unfortunates. Such relaxed, tolerant optimism did not long survive the outbreak of the French Revolution.¹⁰⁸

English intellectuals, of course, were not necessarily so far removed from their French counterparts, and here Porter did not take issue with Peter Gay in the view that they were in large part composed from the genteel classes. As, for example, some of the Lunar Society's constituents appeared to demonstrate, they

... celebrated progress, deplored slavery, and saluted the outbreak of the French Revolution ... Yet none took up the cause of the 'people'; and the mob which immolated Joseph Priestley's home in 1790 illustrated the gap vividly.¹⁰⁹

Yet if the salons of the well-to-do were the nurseries of French free thought, Porter remarked that, coevally in England, it was the educational academies and universities which had acquired (and sometimes earned) reputations for transforming young Britons into radicals and dissenters. He noted that a host of Priestleys and Godwins had graduated from such ranks, and that Burke's opinion of the schools as "the new arsenal in which subversive doctrines and arguments were forged" was not far off.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ Porter, *The Creation the Modern World*, pp. 446-447.

¹⁰⁹ Porter, *The Enlightenment*, p. 44.

¹¹⁰ Roy Porter, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century* (Penguin Books: London, 1982), p. 179.

Despite the relatively robust industrial and economic growth in Britain at the eighteenth-century's end, Porter observed that the period was subject equally to social pressures which were swelling to boiling point. Disparities between rich and poor, shifts in population distribution, riots, soaring crime, and perceived inequities in political representation were breeding increasingly extreme political ideas. "And yet," Porter opined, "until the dawn of the French Revolution, these portents were but straws in the wind." The fall of the Bastille and its consequences only added lightning to the thunder and heightened the ideological polarization:

From 1793 war against revolutionary France – with crippling taxes, inflation, press-gangs, trade disruption, anti-war protests, and (in 1797) naval mutinies and the counteracting waves of loyalist bullying – created unparalleled antagonisms within English society.¹¹¹

Though the threat of full-on revolt in England appeared increasingly ominous amidst the French turmoil, Porter did not feel that any of the decade's commotion was genuinely new, save for the semiotics of the liberal ideologies. The Tom Paines, for example, were building on the republican foundations established in the seventeenth-century. The nineties radicals, though, were

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 366.

in his estimation rather more advanced, what with the upsurge in debating societies, the ubiquity of politicized Methodist and Dissenting preachers, the scores upon scores of cut-rate pamphleteers and publishers, and the spread of newspapers into the counties.¹¹²

Indeed, if political reformers had initially looked back upon the Glorious Revolution as confirming traditional rights in English society, Porter argued that a more radical turn came about in the wake of the French Revolution when agitators such as the Rev. Richard Price reinterpreted 1688 as the primordial volley for the rights of man – and claimed events in France as the logical progression:

[Price] challenged his compatriots: if they supported the real principles of 1688 and were true believers in liberty, they *must* embrace the French Revolution.¹¹³

And yet, though many of the anxious ingredients which had brought about the French cataclysm were palpable in England, it came effectively to nil. Porter reasoned,

... such tensions as existed did not reach breaking-point, because the state had already conceded liberty of expression and plenty of scope for the development of civil society and economy. The activities of independent writers, propagandists, critics, industrialists and so forth were no real threat to the state. English intellectuals and artists, while often vocally

¹¹² Ibid., p. 367.

¹¹³ Porter, *The Creation of the Modern World*, pp. 447-448.

anti-king or anti-ministry, profoundly identified themselves with the cause of the nation at large ...¹¹⁴

Porter specified two reasons in particular why the revolutionary fervor in England (though not necessarily Scotland or Ireland) had "fizzled out", as he put it. Firstly, there had been no coherent solidarity amongst the radicals as a group; "there was not yet a mass proletarian consciousness ... and the ideology of English jacobinism remained individualistic."¹¹⁵

More importantly, there was the Terror, which further splintered political blocs, especially amongst Whigs who were already fractured into pro- and anti-Revolution factions, and therefore reduced as potential threats to government or *status quo*. At heart, Porter reflected, English radicals like Paine or Thomas Spence were more truly children of Enlightenment ideals, and adhered optimistically to the conviction that change

... would not come about by force of arms but by spontaneous rational enlightenment. Radical intellectuals speechified and scribbled, but it was all sound and fury, for few had the stomach for killing and all feared mob extremism.¹¹⁶

Liberty, he argued, was for such writers not necessarily a direct political goal, nor was violent revolution.

¹¹⁴ Porter, *The Enlightenment*, p. 54.

¹¹⁵ Porter, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century*, pp. 368, 369.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 369, 370.

In any case, most English working men typically viewed the William Godwins and William Frennds as counterfeit insurrectionists or eloquent fantasists. As gory as the French Revolution was, Porter noted that Britain itself had already suffered a substantial glimpse of violent revolt in the decades preceding, and it may well have lingered in the memories of politically-minded Londoners. The Gordon Riots of 1780 had caused £100,000 in property damage, a cost which he cited as tenfold greater than that incurred from the entire French Revolution.¹¹⁷

The Terror's bitter tang repelled numerous liberal and radical English thinkers; many abandoned their enlightened ideals and progressive visions of a rationally structured world fostering a fraternal, egalitarian order. Porter pondered the retreat, writing:

The Dissenter-scientist Joseph Priestley might gravely warn that 'the English hierarchy ... has equal reason to tremble at an air pump or an electrical machine.' Yet he was wrong, for science (like Romanticism and religion) could equally serve reaction. It was fashionable society that flocked to the Royal Institution ... Its wizard experimentalist, Humphry Davy, a poor Cornish boy made good, assured his glamorous audience that science proved 'society was necessarily and rightly grounded on property and inequality.'¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 116. The riots, inflamed by Lord George Gordon's Protestant Association, were in reaction to a 1778 act easing property and inheritance restrictions for Catholics, as well as ending a ban on their military enlistment.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 370-372.

It was not the radicals' ostensibly bellicose prescriptions which were the Enlightenment's detritus. Where Burke had been far more perspicacious, Porter remarked, was in identifying another, more fundamental facet of his age: the (perhaps self-obsessed) fascination with new systems of thinking.

Such blether epitomized the modern infatuation with singularity, one blithely eager, in the name of the New Science, to reduce human beings to machines or puppets. Humanists like Johnson and Burke abhorred any apparent relinquishing of the lofty, if daunting, human obligation to exercise free will and moral choice.¹¹⁹

Burke's argument, according to Porter, was at base a philosophical one, and represented a significant change in thinking from the Enlightenment. It was

... a reassertion of the frailty and depravity of human nature. Reaction became philosophized on 1 November 1790, with Burke's *Reflections*. ... Burke pulled the rug out from under enlightened faith in permanent progress ... Moreover, the seasoned Whig bared the dark secret of revolutionary fervor: new enlightenment was but old illumination writ large, the Revolution enthusiasm resurrected — but, this time, enthusiasm without religion.¹²⁰

Burke was not, of course, the only conservative commentator to sense such creeping religious atavism in the eighteenth-century. Porter recounted that while Edward Gibbon had loathed tyrannic absolutist monarchs, he feared the

¹¹⁹ Porter, *The Creation of the Modern World*, pp. 158-159.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 464-465.

anarchic zealotry of mob rule even more, and consequently denounced both revolutionaries and despots in the same breath. But the latter crowd (including French radicals) was, in the arch-secularist's eyes, cut from the same cloth as fanatical Cromwellian Puritans. Gibbon spoke of "Jacobin missionaries" as ideological brothers of the anti-Catholic Gordon rioters.¹²¹

Burke, though, was the far more influential and pointed critic. Porter interpreted his attack on radicalism as a fight against a revived form of levelling, and thereafter, liberalism's enlightened origins would be historiographically stained:

The radical cause was thereby tarred by Burke with the brush of cranky cults as mesmerism. Prophets like Price who proclaimed the millennium, and rationalist metaphysicians who touted a do-it-yourself State — all provided sitting targets: there was nothing to choose, Burke implied, between sophisters and the mindless mob.¹²²

Still, Porter did not feel that *Reflections on the Revolution* had had much success in quelling revolutionary sentiment in Britain, or at least in quashing sympathy for the *sans-culottes*:

Not even Burke could stem the tide. Political societies sprang up, comprising radical craftsmen and the petty bourgeoisie, headed by journalists,

¹²¹ Roy Porter, *Gibbon: Making History* (St. Martin's Press: New York, 1988), pp. 109, 133.

¹²² Porter, *The Creation of the Modern World*, p. 465.

intellectuals and disaffected gentlemen. ... Many returned Burke's fire – the *Reflections* drew at least thirty-eight replies ...¹²³

Those replies, Porter estimated, were certainly successful, as Burke's sedulous arch-nemesis, Tom Paine, demonstrated with his "radical bible" *Rights of Man*. By 1793, "a staggering 200,000 copies were allegedly in circulation – Burke's *Reflections* sold only a seventh of that number."¹²⁴ The philosophical clash was a substantial one, with both men prodding at the heart of England's intellectual traditions:

Paine's quarrel with Burke concerned the stranglehold of history. Burke had contended that the revolutionary settlement bound posterity, thus denying the people's right to choose or cashier their own governors. But the Parliament of 1688 had actually done precisely that, asserted Paine, and "every age and generation must be as free to act for itself, in all cases, as the ages and generations which preceded it."¹²⁵

The dust storm stirred in Britain by the French Revolution enveloped far more than Burke or Paine, and the larger shift in the intellectual mood of Englishmen also intrigued Porter. The Terror's wrath cemented whatever cynicism had been hibernating inside enlightened British minds. The death of Louis XVI and France's declaration of war on England "turned reaction into style" as he described

¹²³ Ibid., p. 449.

¹²⁴ Ibid., p. 452.

¹²⁵ Ibid., pp. 452-454.

it; ideas of certain progress and equality acquired trite connotations.¹²⁶ For many, the alternative was a darker realism:

The Enlightenment dream that there was indeed a hidden hand, which without human effort, united 'self love and social' ... faded with the new century's dismal Malthusian and Ricardian visions of ineradicable class antagonism, population explosion, the iron-law of starvation wages, and crises of over-production.¹²⁷

Nonetheless, it was equally likely, in Porter's mind, that a post-Revolution Englishman might in disillusionment succumb to a very different type of reaction. To a great extent, events in France had fostered Romantic, anti-rationalist sentiment in Britain, bringing about an intense revival of religious belief on the wings of evangelicalism.¹²⁸ Church attendance flourished in the immediate period following 1789, and as the decade unfolded, radical politics associated with Dissenters became tainted as religious life shifted towards less-established, yet more conservative evangelical denominations. On this, Porter plucked a quote from Georgian pundit Arthur Young: 'The true Christian will never listen to French politics or to French philosophy.'¹²⁹

¹²⁶ Porter, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century*, p. 372.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 374.

¹²⁸ Porter & Teich, *The Enlightenment in National Context*, p. 17.

¹²⁹ Porter, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century*, pp. 375-376.

Concomitant with the decade's burgeoning Christianity was a move on the part of many philanthropists to promote moral uplift within British society. Porter commented that Paineite dissertations on revolutions and rights often truly did bear a levelling tone, and its stated goals of smashing ancient social orders served to reinforce the backlash. In point of fact, moral tract societies had already been "snowing down throughout the century" and ultimately "became a blizzard raised by the chilling gusts of the French Revolution."¹³⁰

In spite of this, not all British intellectuals of the late eighteenth-century executed an about face on enlightened values after the Terror's tempest. Porter offered Thomas Beddoes as an unrepentant (and somewhat Tom Paine-like) example:

In 1789, he welcomed the cause of *liberté, égalité, and fraternité*, and, unlike such friends as Coleridge, he never backslid from his commitments, though he was not so blinkered as not to notice that the heady ideals of 1789 had become stained by blood, extremism, and events.¹³¹

In the tremulous atmosphere which had produced the Birmingham riots, this was a stance which made academic and political life exceedingly difficult for such nonconformists; indeed, as Porter noted, Beddoes was under

¹³⁰ Ibid., pp. 311, 314.

¹³¹ Roy Porter, *Doctor of Society* (Routledge: London, 1992), pp. 6, 14, 15.

Home Office surveillance throughout 1792.¹³² As much as radicals like Beddoes (or his frequent correspondent the M.P. Davies Giddy) might have deplored the distasteful metamorphosis of French republicanism, they were more sensitive to the apparent degradation of freedom close to home:

... Beddoes bewailed the counter-revolutionary backlash in England. For, in his view, the wily William Pitt seized the chance afforded first by fear, and then by the outbreak of Anglo-French hostilities, to wage diabolical war on English liberties ... arresting Painite leaders, and introducing gagging bills.¹³³

The chill cut a broad swath through British intellectual life. Erasmus Darwin, for instance, who had been a devout booster for revolution in France, found his notions of human developmental progress as decidedly unwelcome as much for their philosophical implications as for their religious ramifications. The legacy of political contentiousness was undoubtedly inherited by his grandson in the Victorian era:

Erasmus Darwin's evolutionary theories were not accepted in his own day. Evolutionary thinking long lay under a cloud, being condemned as materialistic and atheistic and associated with that great abomination, the French Revolution. Therein lay one of the reasons why his grandson, Charles, was so hesitant about publishing his own evolutionary theory.¹³⁴

¹³² Ibid., p. 15.

¹³³ Ibid., p. 168.

¹³⁴ Roy Porter, "Gresham Lecture: Matrix of Modernity", *History Today*, 51 (2001), p. 31.

Beyond this, the general mood of the times was abject disillusionment. Enlightened Englishmen across the spectrum, from fervent radicals to idealistic armchair philosophers, felt the Revolution's implosion as parishioners caught within a collapsing cathedral of glass. The Enlightenment, it was assumed, had failed, and escape into Romanticism or reaction was the coming order of the day. Porter held up writer William Hazlitt as typical of the disenchanting generation:

A prose Byron, Hazlitt characterized his times as the age of betrayal: England had betrayed itself, and France the Revolution; the lake poets betrayed their Jacobinism; the English politicians betrayed the constitution and the spirit of liberty; Burke betrayed his liberal principles, Bentham betrayed humanity and Malthus and Godwin betrayed experience.¹³⁵

Well into the nineteenth-century, that adverse reaction to the "climactic" French Revolution mottled the whole notion of an Enlightened Age with disrepute. Victorians adduced its once-vaunted humanitarian ambitions as the soil from which so many crimes against man had been harvested in the 1790s and thereafter. Porter pointed to nineteenth-century conservatives who had seen it as far too extremist, whilst their radical foils found no antecedent inspiration in men like Voltaire, whom they disowned as

¹³⁵ Porter, *The Creation of the Modern World*, p. 474.

salon-bound chatterers rather than active revolutionaries.¹³⁶

Though this marked aversion was self-conscious in Victorian Britain, Porter did not adjudge the Enlightenment and its values to have vanished indelibly from the intellectual or social life of Europe – especially in Britain. "In the long term," he declared, "the Enlightenment ideology had got very deeply under the skin," citing the growth of British capitalism, liberalism, secularism, and even Owenite communitarianism as evidence of its internal effect. "Might it have been," he continued, "the Enlightenment which rendered England proof against the French – and all subsequent – revolutions?"¹³⁷

Porter would lament the inescapable fact that scholars such as Peter Gay or R.R. Palmer (or even Robert Darnton) had in his estimation missed, ignored, or excluded the profound British impact on Enlightenment – invariably in favour of France. However, it was an historiographic tradition with deep roots:

Such readings owe much to the assumption current ever since Edmund Burke and the Abbé Barruel that the Enlightenment's climax – or nadir – lay in what Palmer styled 'democratic revolution', enshrined first in the American and then in the French Revolutions. The fact that there was no English revolt to match, indeed that John Bull

¹³⁶ Porter, *The Enlightenment*, p. 2.

¹³⁷ Porter & Teich, *The Enlightenment in National Context*, pp. 17, 18.

proved the bulwark of counter-revolution, seems to lend support to the idea that there can have been no English Enlightenment worthy of the name.¹³⁸

Ultimately, from the very beginning with Burke's account in 1790, the mistakes had been those of historians. To define both the ideals and the movement of Enlightenment merely by notoriety – as a simple, showy cocktail of atheism, materialism, and republicanism, and as a three-act thriller whose climactic chapter was blood-spattered revolution – was poor history. It was a premise against which Roy Porter set himself for decades, not to simply deconstruct, but rather to draw a nuanced, life-like portrait inking myriad details of Enlightenment in all their eighteenth-century intricacy.

¹³⁸ Porter, *The Creation of the Modern World*, p. 9.

PART III

Roy Porter's signal grievance with historians was their protracted ignorance and misrepresentation of the English Enlightenment. The primary question springing from this was, then, from whence did such an historiographic black hole ever form, given that in its own day, reverence for British achievements had been widespread. As it came to pass, his answers were ironic: they lay within the nature of England's own intellectual circumstance. It was a strange combination of misguided mythologization and a surprising conservatism set amidst the quirks of English history that had put its own Enlightenment at odds with later notions of what enlightenment meant, or at any rate, should have meant. In the evolution of Porter's body of thought, those quirks entailed a peculiar set of characteristics, by turns moulding and distinguishing Britain's Age of Reason. Practicality, individualism and amenability were its properties which came to the fore in his eclectic researches.

To Porter's mind, nearly all intellectual histories had consistently omitted the teeming ranks and contributions of justifiably renowned Britons of the eighteenth-century. He protested:

Abundant contemporary evidence thus proves the English parentage of so many of the continental children of light. And yet modern scholarship reads like a paternity-denying alibi, proving that England's kinship with the family of *philosophes* was no closer than a maiden aunt's. This negative genealogy grew from the English Romantics' impatience with their predecessors' 'single vision and Newton's sleep.'¹³⁹

If there had been a direct predecessor to Britain's Enlightened Age, Porter believed it was to have been found in the Dutch republic of the seventeenth-century. But whereas he saw the Dutch movement as a somewhat evanescent product of oddball figures like Baruch Spinoza and refugees such as Pierre Bayle, England's rays of light had shone farther and longer. Its perpetually vibrant society ensured that "unlike the Dutch, English thinkers remained a continuing influence on Europe."¹⁴⁰

At its zenith, the idea of an Enlightened Britain was hardly unknown, and indeed was a veritable fixation for European intellectuals. There was also a remarkable unanimity in the approbation afforded it:

Anglomania swept the continent, fired by Voltaire's *Lettres philosophiques* (1733), which positively glowed about Britain's political liberty, religious toleration, economic success, cultural modernity and scientific glories - Newton above all. English cultural innovations, notably periodicals, like the *Spectator*, and

¹³⁹ Roy Porter, "The Enlightenment in England" in *The Enlightenment in National Context*, Roy Porter & Mikulas Teich, eds. (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1981), p. 3.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

novels, from Defoe's best-selling *Robinson Crusoe*, onwards, were widely imitated. In exile in England, Voltaire had seen the future and it worked.¹⁴¹

The *philosophes'* "idolatry" appeared ubiquitous in the eighteenth-century, and while France evidently felt England's shadow most strongly, Porter catalogued anglophiliac proclivities in Italy, Austria, and Germany (by way of Leibniz, conspicuously) as well.¹⁴²

The consequence of this adulation was, Porter maintained, that the watermarks of English thinking found themselves stamped on the pages of European *Aufklärung*.

Moral benevolism also flowed to the Continent from English sources, Locke and Shaftesbury, Addison and Steele. Diderot's lifelong affair with *virtù* found tongue when he began to translate Shaftesbury. ... Nor was exporting less brisk in the natural sciences, where Newton's void space flooded into France through many channels in addition to Voltaire's enthusiastic evangelism.¹⁴³

Yet this also fated England's scientific contributions to be mischaracterized in myth, ultimately warped from their true state of historical development. The premise of a scientific revolution exploding across the Channel in eighteenth-century Europe was somewhat disingenuous. To be sure, tremendous advances had taken place in England by way of her Boyles and Newtons, but the conception of a sudden,

¹⁴¹ *The Enlightenment*, p. 51.

¹⁴² "The Enlightenment in England", p. 2.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

supernoval leap was originally the product of continental wish-fulfillment. Britain's scientific and biological discoveries had been steady, not volcanic. The *philosophes*, Porter believed, had been keen to present European science as a cataclysmic break from an older, ecclesiastically centered order.

... it was Enlightenment propagandists for science from Fontenelle and the *Encyclopédistes* to Condorcet who first began to depict the transformations in astronomy and physics wrought by Copernicus, Newton and others as revolutionary breaks with the past, creating new eras in thought.¹⁴⁴

At base, "true" enlightenment was increasingly associated with radical, bellicose shifts from archaic regimes - revolutions without the rubric. ("Nuance," Porter wrote ruefully, implicitly and repeatedly, "is the key to Enlightenment in England.")¹⁴⁵ Though continuous assault upon the keep of religious thinking was central to the age, he was bothered by many historians' neglect in identifying this as being yet another system of thinking.

"The *philosophes* claimed that they had dynamited obsolete myths about man, and his place, under God, in nature, replacing them with true scientific knowledge, objectively grounded upon facts. Many historians ... praise them for thus breaking with 'mythopoeic' thinking, and advancing 'from myth to reason'. But it might be

¹⁴⁴ Roy Porter, "The Scientific Revolution: A Spoke in the Wheel?" in *Revolution in History*, Roy Porter & Mikulas Teich, eds., (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1986), p. 290.

¹⁴⁵ "The Enlightenment in England", p. 7.

better to say that what the *philosophes* essentially did was to replace a *Christian* myth with a *scientific* myth - one more appropriate for an age of technology and industrialization.¹⁴⁶

The British Enlightenment had in part fallen victim to the same failure of scholarship. Like its constituent scientific progress, the movement's evolution and imprint had been arithmetic rather than logarithmic. Porter noted,

Admittedly, eighteenth-century England did not produce that galaxy of daring intellectuals, radiating all that was radical in politics, freethinking, and moral and sexual speculations, which flourished in France. Yet this was not because England was benighted. ... It was because England was already undergoing, before the eighteenth-century opened, those transformations in politics, religion, and personal freedom for which French and other radicals had to clamour, unsuccessfully, all the century.¹⁴⁷

Still, it was not lost on Porter that those same historical transformations had also conspired to cloud the country's legacy of Enlightenment. England's basic religious toleration was an evident case. Too many historians, as he saw it, had macerated the idea of enlightenment down to a strictly secularist - and therefore French - agenda. English thinkers, on the other hand, had commonly attempted to articulate a type of "reasonable" Christianity within rationalist idioms:

The simple fact is that Enlightenment goals - like criticism, sensibility or faith in progress

¹⁴⁶ *The Enlightenment*, p. 19.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 49-50.

- throve in England *within* piety. There was no need to overthrow religion itself, because there was no pope, no inquisition, no Jesuits, no monopolistic priesthood with a stranglehold on children through education and on families through confession.¹⁴⁸

The Enlightenment had been portrayed ceaselessly by critics and enthusiasts alike as a monolith, and one essentially French in practice, with Voltaire as its reigning bull-god. The cumulative effect left England's contributions lingering in the historiographic umbra:

Obviously, if one's yardstick is France in mid century the English experience goes by default. But this hallucination need not detain us. For most of the thinkers and benchmarks celebrated by the *philosophes* themselves long antedated the 1740s: the Declaration of Rights, the Toleration Act, the Act of Union, Locke, Newton, Defoe, Shaftesbury, Toland and the freethinkers.¹⁴⁹

Indeed, it was seventeenth-century England where the enlightenment first germinated and blossomed, due in great part to the Glorious Revolution and its guarantees of parliamentary government, religious toleration, and civil liberties. It had also spawned a generation of philosophical luminaries of the calibre of John Locke who

had in effect produced blueprints for the enlightened society: a liberal regime based upon individual rights and natural law, the priority of society over government; a rational Christianity; the sanctity of property, to be deployed by owners within a liberal economic policy; a faith in education; and, not least, a

¹⁴⁸ "The Enlightenment in England", p. 6.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

bold empiricist attitude towards the advancement of knowledge, which championed the human capacity to progress through experience.¹⁵⁰

By Porter's reckoning, it was Locke, not Voltaire, who was the genuine sentinel of the Age of Reason; ("If Enlightenment had a father," his "paternity claim is better than any other").¹⁵¹ His philosophical bequest was also an English one. Locke, Porter stressed, had managed to divorce man from Christian spirituality and moralism, recasting him as a child of his environment, whose ideas, aims, and works were the product of sensory experience. He was now a protean creature, fit to master and modify the world.¹⁵²

Yet for as bright a star as Locke had been in the intellectual firmament, his logical rigour was hardly representative of subsequent English thinkers. They presented another historiographical obstacle in that they often avoided the path of formal systematic reasoning which frequently epitomized continental sages. Porter held that this was a further reason for the short shrift historians' gave to English intellectuals: "Under this prejudice, seminal English influences, such as the brittle and allusive Shaftesbury, or Steele, have received little

¹⁵⁰ *The Enlightenment*, p. 50.

¹⁵¹ *The Creation of the Modern World*, p. 481.

¹⁵² *The Enlightenment*, p. 18.

scholarly attention."¹⁵³ Indeed, he was inclined to think that the British were, after a fashion, intellectually averse to abstract pretense.

Certainly, England produced no *Critique of Pure Reason*. But why should systematic theorizing be the touchstone of enlightenment? ... In any case, the world of writer and audience in Georgian England had little stomach for synthetic philosophy. No professoriate won kudos by scaling Andes of ideas. The real intelligentsia was not chairbound but worked in the market place. Ideas were a trade, produced for a wide popular readership.¹⁵⁴

This then, was a nucleus of the English Enlightenment around which so much else orbited. The practicality of the nation's philosophy held true as much for its political and intellectual life during the eighteenth-century. In Porter's estimation, the primary concern of British thinkers was not revolutionary or radical, but *conservative* in nature. At the same time, it was strongly libertarian in bent, and was engrossed accordingly in the issue of how societies could function without the rigid discipline of an *ancien régime*.

The grand problem facing English intellectuals in the Georgian century lay not in the need to criticize an old regime, or to design a new one at the drawing-board, but rather in defending their reformed polity and making it work. It was a bold experiment. Could a large measure of

¹⁵³ "The Enlightenment in England", p. 5.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

individual liberty prove compatible with socio-political stability?¹⁵⁵

Such a milieu did not satisfy historians' criteria for Enlightenment values. Though England had had its share of radicals, little or none of their philosophy came to actual fruition, in contrast to France. With revolution as the byword, most English thinkers were eclipsed. The Age of Reason was preferred to be "torch-bearer in the great relay of human progress," the task of which was to "smash the *ancien régime* and build the free world." Porter observed sardonically:

Hence, finding that English thinkers were not materialists, democrats, or anarchists we infer that eighteenth-century England was not enlightened.¹⁵⁶

To wave the flag for a political order of reasonableness put England in an unusual position as the eighteenth-century unfolded. The country's intellectuals were faced with protecting an experiment which had been largely successful - hardly a task for radical ideologues and hard-bitten Jacobins.

Enlightenment came early to the British Isles, and so its champions were exercised not only with having to *create* it but also then to *defend* it once achieved - theirs became a labour not just of criticizing and demolishing but of explaining, vindicating and extending ... The 'mission accomplished' mentality, however, certainly did

¹⁵⁵ *The Enlightenment*, p. 50.

¹⁵⁶ "The Enlightenment in England", p. 6.

not preclude ongoing criticism and subversion, the problematizing of the progressive.¹⁵⁷

If in England, as Porter put it, "the Enlightenment became established and the established became enlightened," many of the state's intellectual footsoldiers (with Whigs Burke and Gibbon at the vanguard) often taxed their cerebral brawn in defending the *status quo* against newfangled schemes for political "improvement". The ideological order established in the wake of the Glorious Revolution had made England "both the most modern and (eventually) the most counter-revolutionary state in Europe."¹⁵⁸ In like manner, conservatively-inclined thinkers were not hesitant to appropriate Newtonian cosmology in augmenting their case for the existing order, as it "afforded the perfect paradigm for a modern, stable, harmonious Christian polity ruled by law, not caprice."¹⁵⁹

Unlike the intervallically antagonistic relationship between rulers and philosophers in France or Germany, Britain's Enlightenment was somewhat freer to blossom unmolested by higher powers. Far less English ink was consequently dedicated to razor-edged screeds prescribing wholesale action against authorities. Porter contended that this all had the egalitarian side-effect of convincing

¹⁵⁷ *The Creation of the Modern World*, p. 482.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

many Englishmen that their system was not merely worth defending, but was integral to the quality of their lives.

He stated,

... in England, and England almost alone, the realization of Enlightenment hopes was not thwarted at every turn by the existing order of state and society. Quite the reverse. In England after 1688 the constitution itself incorporated central Enlightenment demands such as personal freedom under *habeas corpus*, representative government, religious toleration and the sanctity of property. ... the educated and propertied who espoused Enlightenment rationality did not need to storm barricades. For by application of intellect they could succeed within the rules of the game.¹⁶⁰

This was a defining characteristic that set England apart from France or other European cultures wading in the waters of enlightenment. The British experience was borne along not merely by acerbic philosophers in salons, but by the upper professional classes: entrepreneurs, administrators, clergy, jurists, and men of practical disciplines (exemplified by members of the Lunar Society). These were the men Porter identified as the Enlightened who purchased, read, and digested the seminal works of the day, such as the *Encyclopédie*:

Paradoxically, it was upon the patronage and purses of these pillars of the establishment - people at bottom socio-politically quite conservative, though often with an eager appetite

¹⁶⁰ "The Enlightenment in England", p. 8.

for intellectual novelty and fashionable culture - that the Enlightenment itself was sustained.¹⁶¹

It intrigued Porter that such figures - Josiah Wedgwood, Matthew Boulton, James Watt, Joseph Priestly, Erasmus Darwin - could be at once assiduous students of all the Enlightenment's innovative creeds of egalitarianism and progress, yet neither abstract intellectuals nor, necessarily, men of the people. As manufacturers, doctors, or inventors, Britain's brightest lights had an interest in the practical things of the world, often standing at a distance from the salt of the earth.¹⁶² Porter's quintessential man of English reason was a case in point, Dr. Thomas Beddoes:

Beddoes was not a systematic thinker. ... Though barely mentioned in standard histories of *Aufklärung*, he is, was, in every important respect, a central late-Enlightenment figure, an inveterate battler against ignorance, obscurantism, priestcraft, and oppression, both autocratic and aristocratic; lifelong he vested his faith in the powers of reason, science, and education to improve the human condition.¹⁶³

Despite Beddoes's eagerness to improve the common man's health, spirit and station, as Porter's biography of him adjudged, he remained frustrated by what he saw as plebian boorishness. His medical practice and research bore him

¹⁶¹ *The Enlightenment*, p. 43.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 44.

¹⁶³ *Doctor of Society*, pp. 3-6.

out as a man of two minds, epitomizing much of the British Enlightenment's ambiguities.

Beddoes had no doubts as to medicine's benign potential. But an essential tension also clave his thought. ... For the fundamental relations of clinical medicine, Beddoes insisted, must hinge upon a hierarchy of expert authority (active physician, passive patient) based, not, of course, as then, on wealth, rank, patronage or pull, but on science and skill. Two incommensurable images thus clashed in Beddoes's projections of a good society. On the one hand, a heartfelt *liberté* and *égalité*. On the other hand, the protocols of the technocrat.¹⁶⁴

So inasmuch as Beddoes's intellectual practicality was affixed on improving humanity's physical and social lot, Porter had identified him as being equally typical of many eighteenth-century thinkers (e.g., Burke or Voltaire) who did not entirely trust the rationality or good judgement of commoners in a truly democratic society. He wrote:

Classically, the tension implicit between 'for the people' and 'by the people' was to be resolved through the medium of education: the wise pedagogue would help the people effect the transition from passive and grateful recipients of good to agencies of good in themselves. ... Yet, when [Beddoes] looked at the educated classes, could he really maintain his faith?¹⁶⁵

Nevertheless, the middle class vigour as personified by individuals like Beddoes made England tremendously industrious in the eighteenth-century, manifest in an explosion of commercial and financial activity.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 191.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., pp. 191-192.

Simultaneously, Britain's Enlightenment was fostered by the same men who were forming, with great alacrity, groups and societies of every sort for the express purpose of improving the world. As the Church of England waned in Britain, Porter remarked that English intellectuals' practicality led to "joining", be it the Royal Society, the Society of Gardeners, the Spitalfields Mathematical Society, or any number of informal coffee house talking ensembles.¹⁶⁶

Even so, the middle class movement was bursting with individualist fervour, and the nation's tumescent economy and corresponding increase in personal wealth raised some disquiet over the possible disintegration of England's civic cohesion. Could the money, education, and growing power of the enlightened middle class generate side-effects both politically corrupting and socially divisive? But in Porter's picture of eighteenth-century Britain, doom-laden soothsaying and rumours of inescapable revolution were hardly omnipresent. Instead, he asserted, the central figure of the day was Adam Smith, whose response to the foreboding matter was ultimately optimistic and supported Britain's reigning economic philosophy. Smith's systems of thinking

¹⁶⁶ Roy Porter, *London: A Social History* (Hamish Hamilton Ltd.: London, 1994), pp. 146, 148, 150, 166.

contended that the wealth of individuals would successfully enhance the wealth of nations, and that prosperity inevitably wove webs of interpersonal connections which strengthened, rather than divided, society.¹⁶⁷

Moralists might have been bothered by the "possessive individualism" being wrought purportedly from the escalation of selfish financial pursuits, but Smith and his brethren retorted that British capitalism cultivated forces far more benevolent. As Porter explained the proposition,

Economic progress would produce a consumer society which would, in turn, serve to refine manners, promote peace, soften sensibilities, and bind men to their fellows by the invisible chains of commerce. ... Leading British intellectuals were thus more preoccupied with practicalities than with abstract programmes.¹⁶⁸

Porter was inclined to think that British pragmatism lent itself to conflating economic freedom with personal liberties. That said, he cautioned that Smith's counsel of fetterless economics did not express itself merely as prosperity's headlong rush into a self-indulgent consumerism. "The Art of Living Well," as Porter termed it, was part of an Englishman's natural right, bound tightly to his sense of personal liberty in the pursuit of happiness. Yet this too required amelioration by common sense:

¹⁶⁷ *The Enlightenment*, pp. 50-51.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

A key dilemma faced articulate Englishmen. How could one produce a society where individuals could pursue life, liberty, wealth and happiness, but which nevertheless possessed the stable solidarity needed to preclude self-destructive anarchy? The English Enlightenment had certainly come riding in on the wavecrest of rampant assertions of rights. Liberty and England become virtually synonymous. Lockean liberal individualist prescriptions assumed Biblical status for enlightened minds in all walks of life.¹⁶⁹

It was not self-destruction though that occupied the highest column on the list of eighteenth-century English intellectual anxieties. It was the possible effect it could have on the minds of commoners who might absorb that philosophy of self. For if all men were to be equal in pursuit of wealth and recognition, what of the consequences of such social competition? Or as Porter put it,

The special quality of English Enlightenment social ethics lay in divining how to make the world safe for egoism: how order could be sustained within an individualistic society.¹⁷⁰

The issue was dealing with "the boisterous and assertive plebian voice," whose pitch grew as the prosperity of middle class wealth trickled down, stoking the desire for a commensurate say in the country's institutions. This quandary was met on two fronts. The first remedy was to extend education and station as widely as possible:

¹⁶⁹ "The Enlightenment in England", p. 9.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., pp. 10-12.

The best bid for harmony was to assimilate as many people as possible within enlightened values - all who qualified themselves for admission by their industry, achieved rationality, civility or wealth. Stability, not to be asserted through brute force, might be won through hegemony: the universality of the law, mobility through merit and patronage ...¹⁷¹

The other social tonic was (unlike in the *ancien régime*) a type of noble *glasnost*, whereby elites crossed paths with the rabble. It might take the form of philanthropy, or business, or indeed literal contact:

Foreigners observing the manners of the Quality were struck by their choosing to mingle with, rather than to segregate themselves from, the mob. The hustings, sporting spectacles, theatres, resorts - all provided arenas of social mixing.¹⁷²

The fact that "money became the Esperanto of social commerce" was to Porter a sign that burgeoning individualist capitalism essentially meant, for *hoi polloi*, bettering oneself. Moreover, as the same desires appeared uniform regardless of who one was, it instilled a commonality which transversed social strata. As with Beddoes the Enlightened Doctor, the whole of British society could accommodate a legion of sensibilities:

Whereas militant French *philosophes* represented the world in contending opposites - light versus dark, body versus soul, humanity versus priestcraft ... English thought went for comprehension: individual *and* society, trade *and*

¹⁷¹ Ibid., pp. 10-12.

¹⁷² Ibid., pp. 10-12.

gentility, conscience *and* self-love, science *and* religion, Locke's mental sensation *and* reflection, or even Priestley's monistic fusion of matter *and* spirit.¹⁷³

While Porter argued that England's fresh and democratic avarice oiled the peaceful intercourse between most every sort of citizen (again, Voltaire's laudation of the Royal Stock Exchange comes to mind), the evolving social order also spawned a search for a new rational and moral accounting of oneself *for* oneself. He suggested:

Money [became] the new cult. But in showing men content, and content to be content, it reveals a revolution in *summum bonum*, a shift from an ethic of righteousness which was transcendental and religious, to a selfhood which is psychological and personal. ... the Enlightenment translated the cosmic question, 'How can I be good?' into the pragmatic, 'How can I be happy?' and opened the gates for a new psychology of personal and social achievement.¹⁷⁴

This too, in practice, frequently meant 'joining' for the English, be it a Masonic lodge or scientific society; philosophically Porter summarized it as

A rational art of ease, good humour, sympathy, restraint, moderation, sobriety and culture, based upon a knowledge of human nature - this was the key felicific technology pioneered by the English Enlightenment.¹⁷⁵

Of course, England's obsession with self-perception and commerce preordained some bizarre social consequences as

¹⁷³ Ibid., p. 13.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., pp. 14-15.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., pp. 14-15.

well. The 'sick-trade' phenomenon of self-help therapies and a mania for personal well-being erupted across England amidst the Age of Reason – to the astonishment, incomprehension, and derision of many enlightened thinkers. It predicted a mad growth of self-love almost imperial in fortitude, and one that only metastasized as the century waned. Porter mused,

This 'coming-out' of the hypochondriac and hysteric constitutes an important symptom, the pathological downside of Enlightenment individualism. Polite society encouraged cultural narcissism ...¹⁷⁶

Regardless, was this not, Porter wondered, yet another example of the utility of reason's fruit being extended ever so Britishly? Indeed, there were no objects or disciplines sequestered from exploitation, or more acutely, from being rendered useful. Proprietary rights to medical knowledge, holistic diets, or even the study of History all bowed inexorably in the court of practicality.

In scrutinizing the latter field, Porter dedicated another biography, proffering Edward Gibbon, like Beddoes, as an archetype of the enlightened Englishman. History, as it obtained from reason's application, had to be useful to the citizen, decreed Gibbon. It was the finest tool which could ratchet loose the political questions bedeviling

¹⁷⁶ Roy Porter, *Flesh in Age of Reason* (Penguin Books: London, 2003), p. 402.

eighteenth-century Britain; Were governments above the law? Were laws and constitutions forever begotten from kings? "For Gibbon," Porter wrote, "history was worthless unless it constituted a school of virtue; it must be instructive."¹⁷⁷

This English sense of all-encompassing utility was not lost on foreigners, particularly in Britons' application by deed rather than high-sounding notion. This could manifest itself by a citizen's charitable works, agricultural advancements in the fields, science in service of industry, or, to Porter's palpable glee, the novel invention of roasting buttered bread to create toast. He opined,

... the Enlightenment in England is marked by pragmatism. The proof of the pudding time lay in the eating. 'No vain utopia' seated somewhere over the rainbow, the acid test of the Enlightenment lay in the skill with which the garden was actually cultivated, or rather the fields enclosed, the buttons burnished and hopes realized. Foreign visitors marvelled at the business, practicality, and resourcefulness of England's thriving hive. ... Obversely, Enlightened Englishmen felt contempt for continental incompetence.¹⁷⁸

Much of Porter's purpose in his histories of Britain's Age of Reason (and not the least in his biographies of Beddoes and Gibbon) was to highlight this practicality in the most vivid, yet no-nonsense form. Philosophical men

¹⁷⁷ *Gibbon: Making History*, pp. 10-11, 18.

¹⁷⁸ "The Enlightenment in England", p. 8.

who were more than mere philosophers, the picture he sketched of them was intended to mirror the heterogeneous facets of the eighteenth-century. His canon of works was therefore a necessary pestle in History's mortar; the English, he revealed innovatively, were indeed enlightened, enlightened *first*, and enlightened *longest*. But as a consequence, surprisingly conservative in nature.

Porter had knowingly drawn an intellectual genealogy placing Georgian Englishmen as children of their Lockean and Baconian forefathers, each toiling away in separate corners of the same room, setting themselves distinct tasks, but manipulating a uniform heritage in their execution. Some furthered the cause of reform and innovation in economics or science or political restructuring, others sought to export the benefits of Britain's enlightened system beyond her borders as a type of ethical cross to be borne, whilst others (Edmund Burke most dramatically) laboured to prevent recidivism imperiling the foundations of political order.

It was also remarkable that Porter painted such an unpredictably optimistic picture of England's eighteenth-century. He uncovered an era in which enlightenment led not to unrelenting radicalism or violence or subcutaneous self-loathing, but rather to an honest and circumspect

desire on the part of Englishmen to understand and improve themselves, nature, and society. He may well have been right. For the Enlightenment – and especially in England – he maintained, remained a bloom half-unfolded, still awaiting the full light of scholarship:

... the history of the English intelligentsia, in the transition from Enlightenment to Romanticism, still remains to be written. Historians of political thought have given us meticulous accounts of Burke and Paine, of Bentham and the rise of Utilitarianism ... But we are still far from fully understanding the place and self-perception of intellectuals, such as Beddoes, in respect to the opportunities and threats posed by industrialization, by the growth of a commercial, consumer society, by wealth, luxury and its discontents.¹⁷⁹

At turns, Porter himself seemed astonished by the extraordinary success of British reasonableness, and exulted in the telling. There was more sanguinity to be found in the even-handed advance of England's Age of Reason than there was dystopian chaos or failure. Little wonder then, at his regret and delight in having being its first advocate.

¹⁷⁹ *Doctor of Society*, p. 9.

CONCLUSION

There is, admittedly, a somewhat recursive nature to the propositions set forth in the preceding chapters, inasmuch as Edmund Burke convincingly denounced radical philosophy on behalf of the British Enlightenment, while historians, following in his wake, pronounced radical philosophy to be Enlightenment, and marginalized his place within it. Roy Porter was the first to reveal this, and in doing so, argued that the British Enlightenment was the overlooked Northern Star in the Age of Reason's sky.

According to Porter, Burke and his line of reckoning were thoroughly representative of Britain's own idiosyncratic Enlightenment. It was conservative in its aims, and self-defensive on account of its previous success. Ideas which had once been radical had, in Burke's mind, long since served a superior and effective socio-political order. Moreover, he maintained, tradition had been their sustaining buttress.

The Continental systems of thinking, with their emphasis on absolute rights, anti-ecclesiasticism, and republicanism, were generally eschewed by many of the pragmatically-minded British intellectuals. More to the point, such French philosophy was inevitably tarnished when

Burke claimed it had been guilty of forging the 1789 Revolution's futile bloodshed. In acknowledging this, Porter identified Burke as the progenitor of all vituperation which connoted anything perceived as radical French sophistry as having a capacity to incite disorder. Yet if violent revolution and French prescriptions for social engineering came to be historians' stock reference for the Enlightenment, the ironic consequence was that Burke and his utility-minded contemporaries fell into shadows as counter-revolutionaries marching the ramparts on watch against *Aufklärung*. In short, men like Burke (or Gibbon or Adam Smith) were barely worthy of inclusion amongst the Enlightenment's key thinkers. Porter was the first to take serious issue with this state of historical affairs and dedicate his scholarly energies to remedying the intellectual record.

The heart of Burke's case was not that revolution in itself was absolutely wrong, but rather that it required legitimacy and grounds for action. The French, as he saw it, were entranced by a set of intrinsic and rigid economic, human, and political rights, and proclaimed violent upheaval as a universally scouring bromide. England's previous revolutions, however, were of a different species, legitimate because they were conceived

and executed under the auspices of a long-established parliament, and because monarchs had deviated from their own long-established obligations to their subjects. For that reason, those Britons who lauded the anarchic French revolutionaries, and who encouraged their ideas in London, were unquestionably dangerous. It was the duty of Englishmen to protect their tried and refined freedoms and order against such radicalism.

Porter, though, came to believe Burke and his successors had misplaced their focus on the *philosophes*, whose true bequest to the European mind was not the French or any other revolution but in fact the acclimatization of secularism to private and public life. Just as importantly, he suggested that Burke had initiated the historical tradition of viewing the French Revolution as the self-fulfilling climax of eighteenth-century enlightened philosophy. Directly, a generation of English intellectuals had turned on the Enlightenment, framing it for their Victorian descendants as quizzical at best, malevolent at its vilest.

In truth, Porter had noted that in its homeland English radicalism had little fertile soil in which it could germinate. Moreover, Burke's steely articulation had godfathered a virtual bonfire of reactionary style, and the

bathetic accounts of the Terror provided substantial fuel for the flames of a Romantic backlash. The ideas from the Age of Reason were, Porter lamented, then set to be tarnished historiographically on account of these factors. Paradoxically, along with it went any notions of a British Enlightenment, for only truly radical thinkers were enlightened.

In the face of this, Porter decreed that it was the English who were the strongest parents (and most envied scions) of the Culture of Light. John Locke, he contended, had been its first great torch-bearer in the seventeenth-century, and following after, Britain had become the freest, most liberal, and most vigorous of European societies, established as the template for Continental aspirants.

This benevolent inheritance thus nurtured generations of intellectuals who found themselves in an ostensibly atavistic position. Porter described them as attempting consequently to protect the *status quo* from radical challenges which were imported from dissenters living under rather more illiberal regimes.

He also maintained that from the beginning it was in the cultural baggage of English thinkers to favour practical enterprises – as evinced by Edmund Burke – rather

than more speculative pursuits. As the major work of reforming the state's governing institutions had been dealt with by their antecedents, British sages could tend to other – more functional – matters, such as assimilating the lower classes into greater spheres of public and intellectual life, or making better toast.

For Porter, these individuals were as worthy as (or indeed worthier than) the Voltaires and d'Alemberts to take center stage in eighteenth-century histories. To dismiss their conservatism as counter-revolutionary was to ignore that they were simply a different type of thinker, more likely to be a middle-class professional than a denizen of a salon. In point of fact, Porter reasoned, the Continentals had failed because they focused on revolution or wholesale social transformation, whilst England's enlightened succeeded because their interests lay in commerce, reform, and the improvement of all things useful.

Indeed, a defining characteristic of Porter's British Enlightenment was to deny that intellectual life was strictly the cerebral legerdemain of some scholarly elite. The accounting and mastering of the natural world by reason's tools provided an *entreé* into the sphere of ideas for down-to-earth men, no less intellectual, be they inventors, entrepreneurs, economists, or engineers. Like

the *philosophes*, they may have postulated how nature fit into a newly-ordered relationship with humanity, but in Britain it was typically men of property who transformed society by putting that knowledge to use.

Despite this, Porter remained at heart an historian of ideas, and was less interested in agrarians' views on English pastoralism than in how they eventually altered a larger ideological conception of the world. As fellow historian of ideas Simon Schaffer opined, "On this showing, Roy's work surely seems more fascinated by coffee houses than by country estates and by pamphleteers than ploughmen."¹⁸⁰

If anything, one of Porter's most vehement goals was to in some measure rehabilitate the Enlightenment from two centuries' naysayers. He reproached nineteenth-century scholarship which cavalierly dismissed the Age of Reason in such a manner:

Sometimes silly, often seductive, but always shallow, Enlightenment teachings had proved appallingly dangerous. Its much-vaunted humanitarianism had led (so many Victorians accused) to the crimes against humanity committed in the French Revolution and thereafter. Unsympathetic critics, nowadays postmodernist as well as conservative, still make similar insinuations.¹⁸¹

¹⁸⁰ Simon Schaffer, "Enlightenment Brought Down to Earth", *History of Science*, 41 (2003), p. 259.

¹⁸¹ Porter, *The Enlightenment*, p. 2.

Porter was sedulous in assembling an affirmative case for the era and many of its figures, though this aspect of his scholarship was occasionally criticized as much as it was lauded. Friend and erstwhile collaborator Jan Golinski confirmed Porter's status as a headstrong proponent of the Enlightenment's positive legacy. He wrote:

Though he recognized some of the less welcome consequences of the Enlightenment, he tended to downplay them, mentioning them in passing without allowing them to modify his basically optimistic view.¹⁸²

Golinski furthermore took Porter to task for sometimes, despite his eclectic researches, failing to discuss the myriad mutations of religious life in seventeenth-century Britain. It was certainly strange, he noted, and perhaps unforgivable, for an historian of such scope to not attend figures like John Wesley or David Hartley, or to give Joseph Priestley's theology due time (despite having authored a biography on him).

Nevertheless, Golinski remarked that as a rule Porter was singled out from amongst his peers by his cosmically vast bibliographies, wherein are to be found "doggerel verse and pamphlet prose" side by side with the traditional intellectual giants. Indeed, he suggested that Porter held many noted historians (Peter Gay and Ernst Cassirer not the

¹⁸² Jan Golinski, "A Legacy of Enlightenment", *British Journal for the History of Science*, 41 (2003), p. 347.

least) as wanting, due to their fixations on the small tesserae of the Enlightenment.¹⁸³ Finally, Golinski has noted that for all Porter's span of ideas, his umbilical ties to London meant he was rarely conscious of Britain's regional and provincial sensibilities – something Dublin born and raised Burke would have undoubtedly grasped: "The way in which being Irish or Scottish can be central to the self-awareness of thinkers from those nations was something Roy never felt."¹⁸⁴

Even so, Burke and Porter were consilient at points, being types of *philosophes* in their own respective idioms. Their thoughts bear out an assessment of and an affection for an England laudable for its eminent *utility*. To Burke, the general reasonableness of his country's intellectual attitudes was a preservative and safeguard. But to Porter it was a tool wielded in service of political, physical, and social benefit; the world was infinitely better, he believed, for the stability and curiosity of the British.

Yet the fact that Porter identified such profundity (often justifiably so) in practical men and their works is ironic, for he and his histories luxuriate in the jumbled incongruities in which the Enlightenment and the

¹⁸³ Ibid., p. 346.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 350.

Enlightened commonly entangled themselves. *In memoriam*

Simon Schaffer mused:

At the heart of enlightened attitudes towards nature lay a nest of paradoxes, [Porter] declared, tensions between improvement and primitivism, between exploitation and conservation.¹⁸⁵

Edmund Burke wrote his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* anxiously, lest he next deliver a threnody for his society. Roy Porter, in full confidence, could declare such works to be the true acts of the modern world's creation.

¹⁸⁵ Schaffer, p. 258.

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