

both to naturalise himself in Whig liberal tradition and to meet the desire of popular liberals for peace, economy and Cobdenite free trade.

The problem, then, with this kind of narrative biography is that the very sharpness of its focus on a Victorian statesman's quirks causes the environments that sustained him to fade from view, making it harder to explain the political achievement that drew our attention in the first place. The shortcomings of that approach are particularly evident when it comes to Ireland. Even if Gladstone's embrace of home rule represented a last fling of religious selfishness, popular British Liberalism, as Eugenio Biagini has powerfully argued, was set to become increasingly preoccupied with the Irish problem anyway. If Gladstone's proposed solution split the party, this reflected not just his devious

tactics, but the profoundly conflicted attitudes of British and particularly English Liberals towards Ireland: itching on the one hand to meet religious grievances and extend constitutional liberties, they worried on the other about maintaining the rule of law, the integrity of the Empire and the influence of Protestantism.

Richard Shannon has, then, not so much put a stop to the proliferation of Gladstones as added yet another to the list, with which historians of Liberalism will want to take issue. It is only a pity that the book's hefty price tag is likely to deter the general reader.

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partly determined by a desire not to abridge, and all but one, the four-day 'Speech in Opening the Impeachment of Warren Hastings' (15–18 February 1788), are presented in their entirety. This compilation does not, therefore, include early works, such as *A Vindication of Natural Society* (1756), *Tract on the Popery Laws* (1765), and *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents* (1770). Instead, it begins with his first speech for the contested seat of Bristol in 1774, and is the shorter (by nearly 200 pages) and the more compact of the two selections, though it is nonetheless representative of much of Burke's political thought. Both editions provide a general introduction as well as more specific preambles to each of Burke's pieces. Both editors appear to greatly admire their subject, not least for his moral fortitude.

The Burke that emerges from Bromwich's collection is the gifted parliamentarian, principled, tenacious, and an unembarrassed apologist of high politics in a lost world, one that was suspicious of the ambitious power of a commercial elite, and which perceived a marked distinction between political and mercantile interest. As Bromwich sees it, the real subject of Burke's writings on France is the ruination of deliberative representation by plebiscitary politics and slavish reliance on the popular will, while the real subject of his writings on India is the ruination of constitutional government by the usurping power of a commercial empire.

The Burke that emerges from Stanlis's collection is the impressively erudite man of letters, the talented stylist steeped in the classics, deeply knowledgeable about the natural law tradition and continental legal philosophy, as well as English legal history. His legal training, whilst abandoned, shaped his understanding of the nature

Burke reflected

Peter J. Stanlis (ed.): *Edmund Burke: Selected Writings and Speeches* (Transaction Publishers, 2007).

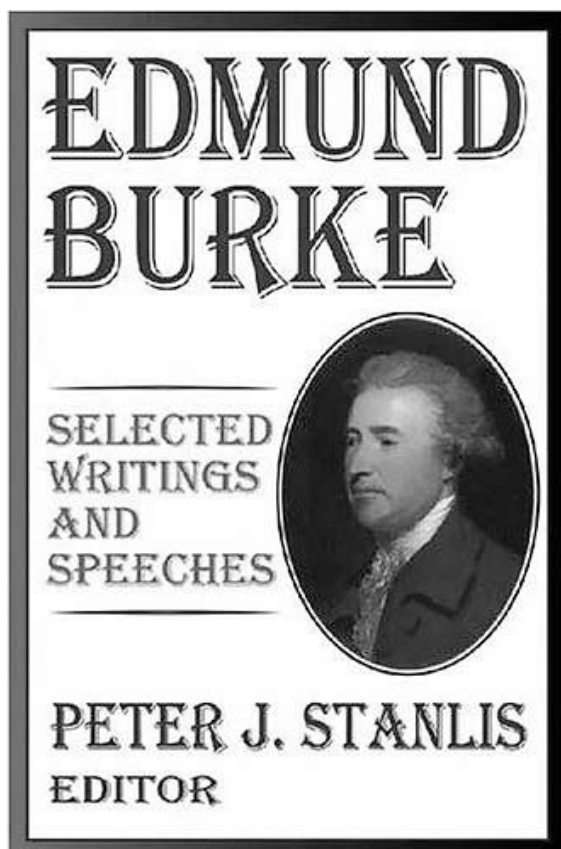
Reviewed by **Sylvana Tomaselli**

IT IS a testimony to Edmund Burke's enduring popularity as a political writer that *Edmund Burke: Selected Writings and Speeches* is the fourth edition of this collection of speeches and letters, first published in 1963. Furthermore, Peter J. Stanlis's is the only available volume of its kind. 1984 saw the publication of Harvey C. Mansfield Jr.'s *Selected Letters of Edmund Burke*, followed in 1993 by Ian Harris's edition of Burke's *Pre-Revolutionary Writings*, while Yale University Press published David Bromwich's *Empire, Liberty, and Reform: Speeches and Letters, Edmund*

Burke in 2000, which is closest in aim and content to Stanlis's volume. All are indebted to Thomas Copeland's *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, 10 vols. (Chicago, 1958–78) and Paul Langford's *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke* (Oxford, 1981–).

Both Stanlis's and Bromwich's selections seek to make more easily accessible Burke's writings and utterances other than the work with which he is most readily, and, regrettably, often almost solely, identified, namely his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). Bromwich's choice of texts was

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of society and government. Stanlis's Burke is the author of *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757) (although regrettably no part of that work is reproduced in this selection; it is in Harris's), the anonymous general editor of the very successful *Annual Register* to which he contributed historical articles as well as book reviews, and the experienced and long-serving politician. Above all, this is a Burke who consistently applied and developed ideas and principles he acquired at the beginning of his intellectual life, and remained true to himself.

Stanlis's anthology affirms that the common perception of Burke has changed dramatically since 1948. 'Far from being an empiricist, utilitarian, and pragmatist, and therefore an enemy of Natural Law', he argues, '[Burke] was in principle and practice one of the most eloquent and profound defenders of Natural Law morality and politics in Western Civilisation'.

Writing in 1963, Stanlis thought this the accepted interpretation of the political philosopher. It may well have been, but it is no longer. This is not because Stanlis's view is now rejected out of hand, nor because commentators have returned unreflectively to the pre-war understandings of Burke, but because however much one recognises the continuity in his thought, there is no denying that events in France made him particularly aware of what could be done, or one might say, undone, in the name of nature, natural law, and natural rights. Burke was too artful an orator not to be profoundly aware of the power of moral and political languages and the terrifyingly destructive uses to which the language of nature was being put in France. This was particularly disquieting for England, a country that had slowly but surely perfected a constitution and a system of law that were equal to none.

Burke's world was complicated and difficult to rationalise, even for Burke himself. The language of natural law was insufficient for the task. Persuading as well as understanding, which was what Burke spent his entire life trying to do, required more than one idiom. Following J. G. A. Pocock's lead in 'Burke and the Ancient Constitution: A Problem in the History of Ideas' in his *Politics, Language, and Time: Essays on Political*

Thought and History (1971), the received view of Burke now is that he brought together a number of political discourses and that amongst those common law was one of the more significant ones. The political labelling that was once *de rigueur* in studies of Burke is now also a defunct endeavour. Today's Burke is a sophisticated and subtle thinker who tackled highly complex issues of continued relevance. He can be seen as such, for instance, in Richard Bourke's 'Edmund Burke and the Politics of Conquest' (*Modern Intellectual History* 4, 3 (2007)), which examines how Burke's intervention in the debate on the Quebec Bill in 1774 led him to develop his thought on conquest, and in particular, how he dealt with the difficulties raised by the desire to respect the native culture and religion of a conquered people, while giving them the benefits of what Burke thought a superior legal system.

The scholarly world has changed since the 1960s, and in this case for the better, but if Stanlis's introduction is of its time, Burke's works remain timeless for anyone interested in the nature of politics.

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If you did not, then you are not on the list. To join the list, send a blank email to liberalhistory-subscribe@lists.libdems.org.uk. You will be asked to confirm your email address, to avoid spam. Our apologies for any inconvenience.