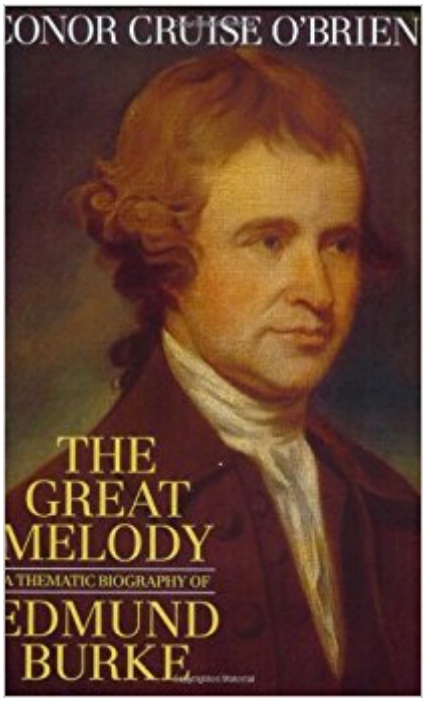
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The Great Melody: A Thematic Biography Of Edmund Burke



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Synopsis

Statesman, political thinker, orator, and ardent campaigner, Edmund Burke was one of the most brilliant figures of the eighteenth century. This unorthodox biography focuses on Burke’s thoughts, responses, and actions to the great events and debates surrounding Britain’s tumultuous relationships with her three coloniesÃ¢â ¬â •America, Ireland, and IndiaÃ¢â ¬â •and archrival France."In bringing Burke to our attention, Mr. O’Brien has brought back a lost treasure. The Great Melody is a brilliant work of narrative sweep and analytical depth. Conor Cruise O’Brien on Edmund Burke is a literary gift to political thought."Ã¢â ¬â •John Patrick Diggins, New York Times Book Review"Serious readers of history are in for a treat: a book by the greatest living Irishman on the greatest Irishman who ever lived. . . . O’Brien’s study is not merely a reconstruction of a fascinating man and period. It is also a tract for the times. . . . I cannot remember another time when I finished a book of more than 600 pages wishing it were longer."Ã¢â ¬â •Paul Johnson, The Independent"The Great Melody combines superb biography and fascinating history with a profound understanding of political philosophy."Ã¢â ¬â •Former President Richard Nixon

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Conor Cruise O’Brien (1917-2008) was a leading Irish intellectual of his generation and hadÃ Â a distinguished career in public life as a diplomat, politician, government minister, writer, newspaper editor, critic, and scholar. He published numerous books in subjects such as history, biography, politics, and religion.

When I read this book ten years ago, I had only a glancing sense of Irish history. I read it to gain some perspective on that history through the eyes of one of Ireland’s insightful men of letters. The thesis that Burke was loyal...a constitutional monarchist...in the midst of his own deeply held opposition to British treatment of his own country, was a revelation to me. I did not know this...nor did I know that he extended his loyal opposition to British imperial behavior, to the USA and India.I felt then...through O’Brien’s eyes...that Burke was heroic and extraordinarily far sighted; not to mention politically prudent. I haven’t yet changed my opinion, after reading earlier contemporary criticism of Burke’s alleged blind conservative monarchism. I think that O’Brien is correct to assert that Burke’s action and thought was not that simple and un-nuanced. O’Brien makes a convincing case for Burke’s underlying purposes.These purposes, based upon civilized respect for all parties involved, in such a heated historic dispute....in my very humble opinion....presage the non-violent movements toward independence that eventually bore fruit for India and Ireland.Conor Cruise O’Brien, himself a civilized man of insight and erudition, paints the "big picture"...a perspective that I think could very well become the definitive version of this pre-history, and of Edmund Burke.

I wasn’t crazy about it because the author gets lost in too many quotes and too much digression.

Politics, in our Anglo-American sense, begins with Burke. Not in the mechanical sense of power; that was the elder Pitt, or the American "Founding Fathers". The issues arose in the English Civil War, or with the "Glorious Revolution", but popular philosophy of government action, or restraint from it, began with Burke.This works best as annotated commentary on Burke’s beautiful rhetoric, in my view. Biographical, yes, and there have been other biographies of Burke, a complicated, conflicted, and not altogether honest man. But he is the origin of our conservative vs reforming mechanism, embodying both, a work of political art. It’s difficult for anyone other than a true scholar to understand his speeches without annotation. The illumination here by the lat CC O’Brien is an excellent entry point for anyone interested in the development of what may be the happiest political tradition in world history.Keeping Burke in mind is especially important now, as American civil society is threatened by the most violent and destructive personality ever offered up by a major party. As Burke said, "wise men aim to keep things from coming to the worst". A conservative’s dictum, but our current crisis allows it to be employed by conservatives and reformers alike.

The subtitle is "A Thematic Biography and Commented Anthology of Edmund Burke", and the

Preface explains this: the book is not organized chronologically, but around Burke's position with regard to four themes: Ireland, the American colonies, India and France. W.B.Yeats has described as "The Great Melody" the thread of consistent principles running through these positions, and O'Brien agrees: both men combat the view that Burke's approval of the American and disapproval of the French Revolution were inconsistent.In each section - especially in those on India and on France - we do indeed have an extensive anthology of quotations from Burke himself - some in the magnificent rhetoric which, whether it is majestic, sarcastic or intemperate, still sweeps one away today; others in complicated 18th century language, making for more difficult reading. Burke is often prolix and repetitive - and so, in 618 pages, at times is his always readable and scholarly biographer.The Introduction of 44 pages, headed "Burke and some Scholars" is a splendid essay in its own right. In its first half O'Brien describes those historians who have esteemed Burke highly and those - mainly of the Namierite school - who have denigrated him. O'Brien, who is openly a warm admirer of Burke, delivers devastating critiques of the lack of scholarship - in respect of Burke, that is - and the sly asides used by Namier and his followers. The Namierites are not the only critics of Burke whom O'Brien challenges throughout the book. On almost all occasions he is Burke's whole-hearted defender and champion, and it causes him "some distress" - p.134 - on the very few occasions when he has to admit that his hero fell short of the highest moral standards.Several times - admitting the lack of any firm evidence (for Burke did not like to say anything about his own Catholic background) - O'Brien attributes the passion, amounting to obsession, with which Burke pursued his causes to the need to expiate the guilt he is supposed to have felt for his father's conversion to Protestantism and therefore his own respectable place in British politics, which drove him to redeem himself by championing those whom the Establishment of which he was a part was oppressing - the Irish, the American colonists and the Indians. Even his opposition to the French Revolution in its earliest phases is attributed by O'Brien at least in part to its anti-clerical (i.e. anti-Catholic) character. And when occasionally Burke is silent when one might have expected him to speak, or where O'Brien detects him striking "a false note", it is the deep "Irish level" of his psyche that his Irish biographer thinks is responsible.For much of his life Burke felt threatened by being too much associated with the Catholic cause because of his origin, and that would account for the fact that his support of the Irish cause was more cautious, at least in his younger days, than would be his advocacy in the case of the American colonies, India and France. It was only in 1792 that he could unleash, in his Letter to Sir Hercules Langrishe, his true feelings about the iniquity of what the Glorious Revolution had done to Ireland. O'Brien credits Burke's influence on Pitt with the grant to Irish Catholics of voting rights in 1793; but it was not strong enough to secure the right of

Catholics to sit in Parliament and the dismissal of his friend Lord Fitzwilliam by Pitt from the Viceroyalty after less than three months in that office because he supported Roman Catholic Emancipation caused anger in Ireland which once again deeply troubled Burke's last days, this time because he had to support Pitt as leader against the French Revolution and against "Jacobinism" in Ireland.Over the American colonies, however, it was, according to O'Brien, Burke rather than Rockingham who controlled the details of both policy and tactics. He was ever the champion of the American cause, keeping largely to himself the misgivings he had about slavery and about the anti-Catholicism which appears to have been even stronger in the colonies than it was in England.Burke's attitude to India became part of the "Great Melody" only in the 1780s. In the 1760s he and the Rockingham Whigs defended the independence of the East India Company from any attempt of the government to take it over and acquire a vast new source of patronage; in 1773 he spoke against North's Regulating Act which followed on the parliamentary enquiry into the conduct of Robert Clive, even though by that time he was disturbed by the corruption and abuse of power of the East India Company. By early 1781 he had turned against the Company and the Governor-General Warren Hastings. He dominated the Select Committee on Bengal, which published its report on the corruption, extortions and oppressions of Hastings just before the introduction of Fox's (but really Burke's) East India Bill in 1783. O'Brien does not tell us what the Bill said, and there is but one sentence which explains why it was unpopular: "it was widely seen [he does not say whether rightly or wrongly!] as being aimed, not at reform, but at getting the loot of India into the same unprincipled hands as had clutched at power through coalition." Quite so: the Bill had named the seven commissioners in whom the control (including the patronage) of the East India Company was to be vested - every one of the seven were followers of Fox, and they were to be irremovable for the next four years whoever might be leading the King's government.Burke's attitude to the French Revolution is set forth in detail; but, because it is known even among those who otherwise know little about Burke, it needs no comment in this review. But the five letters he wrote in 1796 (the year before his death) when it looked for a while that Pitt might make peace with the regicide Directory surely contain some of his most vigorous passages.O'Brien is justifiably full of admiration for the depth of Burke's insights and for his uncanny prescience years before his prophesies came true. And he is excellent on the personal chemistry between Burke and Rockingham, Burke and Shelburne, Burke and Fox, Burke and the Younger Pitt, and, especially after his breach with the Old Whigs, Burke and George III.

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