

'No meagre doctrine  
of non-interference':  
The Posthumous Career  
of Edmund Burke's  
Economic Thought in  
Nineteenth- and Early  
Twentieth-Century Britain

EMILY JONES

University of Manchester

As a historian of Edmund Burke's afterlife, and the ways in which his thought has been interpreted, adapted, and adulterated, I find the question raised by Collins's illuminating study of Burke's economic thought to be a relatively simple one—what took Burke scholars so long to treat his economic thinking in such a way? For me this is a question of not simply what Burke did, said, and wrote, but which aspects of his life and works were deemed most useful and representative for understanding both the 'essence' of his thought, as well as what aspects were prioritised in promoting Burke's original contributions to the history of thought. This essay will therefore address the ways in which Burke's economic thought was interpreted and positioned in the century following his death in Britain. These were formative years in the development and canonisation of Burke's thought and his status as an original and important political thinker, which also led to the invention of his now canonical position as the so-called 'founder of modern conservatism' prevalent around the world today. We need to look at two distinct though related aspects of discussion of Burke's economic thought in the years following his death in 1797 in Britain. The first aspect concerns representative accounts from the early nineteenth century and how these developed over time. The second considers the reasons for the relative elision of Burke's economic thought as compared to his constitutional, political or imperial thought.

In her account of the reception and interpretation of both Burke and Adam Smith's thought, Emma Rothschild has observed the trend towards merging and simplifying the economic positions of both Burke and Smith. Thus, while (for Rothschild) much of Burke's later economic thought produced in the 1790s contradicted that of Smith, by the posthumous publication of Burke's pamphlet, *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* (1795), in 1800, it was taken as little more than an exposition of Smith's 'principles'.<sup>1</sup> The editors claimed in their introduction that Burke paid 'the greatest deference' to Smith's views in the *Wealth of Nations*. It was, Rothschild argues, as though all the different Smith's constructed by his interpreters in the late eighteenth century—Whitbread's Smith, with his right to the produce of labour, or the 'quasi-French, quasi-atheistical, quasi-revolutionary 'Oeconomist'—had vanished into the simple prescription of 'economic freedom' (Rothschild 2013, p. 64).<sup>2</sup> Rothschild draws on early reviews of *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* that underscore this. The rather clipped review in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, for example, announced that Burke

proceeded ‘on the principles of Dr. Adam Smith, that all trade should be free; and that government should not interfere by compulsory acts and regulations, particularly in grain and agriculture. He was equally averse to public granaries.’ Similarly, the *Monthly Review* bundled Burke’s pamphlet with a selection from other authors who espoused ‘the principle of Dr. Adam Smith, that all trade should be free’, and one of the authors was even described as ‘Smithian’. Rothschild therefore suggests that, by the start of the nineteenth century, Burke’s interpreters conceived of the pair as ‘equivalents’.<sup>3</sup> Understanding Burke’s immediate reception history is, therefore, essential in understanding how his thought would be understood and put to use by later thinkers and political actors once again (Sack 1987, pp. 623-640).

The relevance for us is that, if Burke and Smith are seen as equivalent (whatever the reality might have been) but that Smith was nonetheless the primary progenitor, then economic principles alone could not constitute Burke’s particular ‘contribution to mankind’. Burke’s economic thought did not occupy the benchmark status that Smith’s did. Yet this did not mean that Burke’s expositions did not gather praise and admiration in the century following his death, with a number of commentators positioning Burke’s approach on the simplified issue of ‘free trade’ as indications (to his nineteenth-century admirers) of his ‘prophecy’ and deep insight, as well as part of his general desire to improve the conditions of the people.<sup>4</sup> ‘Economical reform he [Burke] laboured to effect,’ the historian of party George Wingrove Crooke declared in 1837, because ‘it was a boon to the people’ (Cooke 1836-37, pp. 377-78).

Free Trade was certainly the key idea that Burke’s principal interpreters came back to again and again, and commentators primarily drew upon the 1773 Corn Act, the speech on American Taxation, his position on trade with Ireland, and *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*. Here, Burke’s most significant champion in the nineteenth century was the Liberal man of letters and MP, John Morley (1838-1923). Morley had been an admirer of Burke from a young age and was particularly expansive in his discussions of Burke’s economic thought. Not only did he write two well-received accounts of Burke’s life and thought—*Edmund Burke: A Historical Study* (1867) and *Burke* (1879)—both of which enjoyed considerable longevity, Burke was a regular feature in many of his other books, articles, and speeches. Of particular interest is the discussion of Burke in Morley’s two-volume *Life of Richard Cobden* (1881). Cobden, Morley claimed, frequently praised *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* for its ‘luminous’ attack on the notion of treating agriculture as if it were ‘different from any other branch of commerce, and denounced tampering with the trade of provisions as of all things the most dangerous’ (Morley 1881, p. 113). The 1903 edition of the *Life of Richard Cobden*, published the year in which the then Unionist MP Joseph Chamberlain launched his protectionist Tariff Reform campaign, restated Morley’s belief that Burke was a useful weapon to evidence Morley’s argument that there was no essential bond between agricultural protection and Conservative policy. At that time Burke was firmly associated with the Conservative and Unionist cause, so the Liberal free trader Morley could present Burke as both ‘the most magnificent genius that the Conservative spirit has ever attracted’ and ‘one of the earliest assailants of legislative interference in the corn trade.’ Morley added that the ‘important Corn Act of 1773 was inspired by his maxims’ (p. 167). For Morley, Burke’s thought demonstrated the vital distinction between constitutional politics and economic policy.

Burke’s time served as Paymaster General also inspired the interpretation of Burke that positioned him as an administrative—as opposed to radical—political reformer.<sup>5</sup> Yet, in the early nineteenth century, the question of his own finances and how Burke afforded his Beaconsfield property were also a significant source of concern and gossip for commentators assessing his life and thought.<sup>6</sup> Over time, however, the ‘finance issue’ over Burke’s personal economy was settled and his reputation as an effective reformer of economic abuses became a key component in a narrative of how Burke’s vision of reform (and his fundamental rootedness to the constitutional settlement of 1688-9) worked in practice (Cooke 1836-37, p. 376). By the turn of the twentieth century the depiction of Burke as an economic or administrative, rather than radical or parliamentary, reformer was commonly repeated in popular political texts as well as general history books. For the well-known historian Goldwin Smith, writing in 1899, Burke’s *Thoughts on the Present Discontents* (1770), which denounced ‘evil court influence’ and the ‘vast patronage, parliamentary and official’ of the King’s Friends, was contrasted to his remedy of party government based on principle and the

national interest. Burke's practical solution, Smith explained, was to move for 'economical reform, abolishing sinecure offices, setting a limit to pensions, reducing the preposterous expenses of the royal household, and retrenching a civil list on which there was a debt of six hundred thousand pounds contracting partly by waste, partly ... by the administration of the king's golden pills' (Smith 1899, ii.226). It was in this way, Smith tells us, that Burke's particular ideal of constitutional government could be realised.

The presentation of Burke as an effective reformer of abuse was also evident in William Hunt's volume for the popular *Political History of England* series, published in 1905. Hunt—then President of the Royal Historical Society—explained how Burke was an ardent reformer of abuses, but 'with the constitution itself he would have no meddling'. Unlike Pitt, he saw that 'the only effectual check to corrupt influence was to be found in government by a party united for the promotion of national interests upon some common principle' (Hunt 1905, p. 70). But while Burke was opposed to changes in the constitution, 'he laboured to bring parliament into a sound state by reforms which allowed the publication of its proceedings, improved the system of deciding the lawfulness of elections, and checked the multiplication of places and pensions, as well as by other measures of a like tendency' (p. 105). The perceived success of Burke's measures was encapsulated by P.A. Brown's *The French Revolution in English History* (1918). Brown argued that political reform had become a dead issue in the mid- to late 1780s thanks to the 'seven years of Burke's economical measures' and the success of the Rockingham Whigs which had effectively 'weakened the advocates of Thorough' (Brown 1918, p. 24).

While the themes of confiscation and spoilation found in *Reflections* and the *Letter to a Noble Lord* (1796) were significant for Oxford Tractarians and William Cobbett alike in the early nineteenth century (Kirby 2016 pp. 137-8), the young John Maynard Keynes' Cambridge prize essay of 1904 was perhaps the most systematic (though unpublished) analysis of Burke's economic thought produced in Britain. Here, Keynes presented the right to property as a 'fundamental tenet of Burke's political faith'. Writing during a period of debate not only around protection and tariff reform but also the expansion of social welfare and the role of the State, 'The Political Doctrines of Edmund Burke' stated that compulsory redistribution, understood as 'State charity', was anathema to Burke. Yet according to Keynes this was 'no meagre gospel of non-interference' (Keynes 1904).<sup>7</sup> Keynes argued that Burke believed property and prescription were natural and therefore good. Burke was therefore not concerned with the unequal nature of property and saw poverty as inevitable.<sup>8</sup> Instead Burke argued in favour of the existing distribution of wealth, and of placing the vast preponderance of political power in the hands of the 'sluggish' propertied class throughout his writings.<sup>9</sup> Hence for Keynes 'Burke's economic theories, as well as those subjects already discussed, were largely dominated by laissez-faire'. It was, however, a theory admirably researched: 'In no other case has so powerful an imagination been combined with so vast a fund of information.'<sup>10</sup> Burke was thus positioned favourably in relation to his Whig contemporary, Charles James Fox, who Keynes claimed had never read the *Wealth of Nations*.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, when 'the great work appeared', Burke was 'the earliest advocate of its principles in the House of Commons, and by far the most acute and well-informed critic of the nation's finances.'<sup>12</sup> Again, however, if our task is to understand how Burke's interpreters were divining his 'original contributions' to thought, and the place his economic thought had in this (as compared to, say, his constitutional thought) we see Burke presented as an *advocate* of Smith's economic thought rather than a trail-blazer—presumably, like Smith.

In practical terms, Burke's advocacy, as presented by Keynes, encompassed the policy of Irish free trade, which was presented as not only beneficial to Ireland but to Britain and Ireland as a whole.<sup>13</sup> *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* was presented through the lens of biography, and uses Burke's farming experiences at Beaconsfield to interpret the text as an attempt to influence Pitt against fixing wages in farming, and that magistrates were not competent to fix wages because they were not experts.<sup>14</sup> Hence Keynes's Burke is as much 'the hard-headed man of finance as the impassioned defender of liberty or of chivalry', as the upholder of 'rank, and office, and title, and all the solemn plausibilities of the world' or of ecclesiasticism exalting 'her mitred front in courts and parliaments'.<sup>15</sup> For Keynes therefore:

Perhaps it was as an exponent of Queen Anne Whiggery and the glorious Constitution that he liked himself best; but it is as one of the earliest exponents of Laissez Faire, of a modified political utilitarianism, and of expediency against abstract right, that he is most important in the history of opinion.<sup>16</sup>

Yet despite Keynes's best efforts (and this was an unpublished essay, after all) it remained the case that histories of British economic thought found it easy to side-line Burke and instead centre Hume, Smith, Malthus, and Ricardo—as in the University of Pennsylvania Professor of Political Economy, Simon N. Patten's *The Development of English Thought: A Study in the Economic Interpretation of History* (1899). Similarly, while the political theorist and economist Harold Laski (1893-1950) was a great admirer of Burke who declared that there was 'hardly a greater figure in the history of political thought in England', he nonetheless criticised Burke. Laski did so on the grounds that, firstly, Burke's notion of a 'disposition to preserve and ability to improve' concealed what was to Laski a significant problem if it meant 1688 was a 'perpetual model for the future'. Secondly, and more significantly for our purposes, Laski chastised Burke for not writing more on the importance of economic matters (1920, pp. 189, 199, 214). Moreover, Laski's book, *Political Thought from Locke to Bentham* (1920), written for the popular Home University Library series, was significant both in its reach and the quantity of reprints and editions (7 between 1922 and 1942), but also in its use as a textbook for students in the interwar period.<sup>17</sup> It was a pronouncement, therefore, that had considerable reach and longevity.

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This brings us nicely to the second part of our analysis, which considers why Burke's economic thought was rarely centred in formative analyses of his political thinking in nineteenth and early twentieth-century Britain. To begin with, key questions surrounding Burke's thought centred on his consistency, but tended to focus on his relative support or denunciation of the American and French Revolutions. His thought and life were divided into spatial 'areas': Ireland, America, France, India, and Britain. For the Liberal Prime Minister and lifelong reader of Burke, W.E. Gladstone, Burke had been right on Ireland and America, but wrong on France (Morley 1903, ii. 709).<sup>18</sup> Political economy was not absent from these themes—American taxation and Irish free trade to name the most prominent in nineteenth-century commentary—but it is significant that his economic writings, including *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*, were far less likely to be included in editions of Burke's selected works (Jones 2017, p. 12). As the 'conservative' Burke that we are more familiar with today was constructed, constitutional politics remained a, if not the, central concern. As the Tory journalist and friend of Disraeli, T.E. Kebbel observed in 1864, it was an 'obvious truth that Free Trade was not a great question of Constitutional politics' (Kebbel 1864, p. 311).<sup>19</sup> This was, as we saw above with Morley, a sentiment that would be repeated across the spectrum into the twentieth century.

More negative accounts of Burke's temperament also made positive appraisals less straightforward. Because of the propensity to chastise Burke's Irish 'temper' well into the nineteenth century, Burke's character was simultaneously positioned as 'passionate' or one-sided.<sup>20</sup> So, for example, while the *Economist* editor Walter Bagehot (1826-1877), writing in 1861, understood that 'the doctrines of free trade, were present, like all great political ideas, to the overflowing mind of Burke,' they were, 'like all his ideas, at the daily mercy of his eager passions, and his intense and vivid imagination' (Bagehot Jul. 1861, p. 204). For Burke, Bagehot argued, great ideas were 'a supernatural burden' revealed through 'great visions which had been revealed to him, with the great lessons he had to teach, and which he could but very rarely induce anyone to hear' (p. 223). To this Bagehot contrasted the mind of William Pitt who, for Bagehot, had 'the best administrative intellect' and thus a more receptive audience for his ideas (p. 228).

At the same time, a more robust defence of Burke's contribution to political economy was beginning to be made. The late 1850s and early 1860s marked the beginning of a more rigorous interrogation of Burke's economic principles, undertaken by a new generation of Liberal admirers that placed him as a *forerunner* of Smith. For some, such as a young James Fitzjames Stephen writing in the *Saturday Review* in 1858, Burke's political economy was an example of his modernity and demonstrated his legacy to contemporary Liberals:

If the policy which Burke shared with his party is obsolete [anti-prerogative], his larger and more distinctive political principles have become the rule of modern legislation and government. A sound political economist before Adam Smith, and a supporter of Catholic Emancipation when Plunket and O'Connell were in their infancy, Burke repeatedly protested against paper constitutions and abstract theories of policy long before the French Revolution inoculated the world with a spurious and morbid Liberalism. It is in his speeches and writings that foreigners may study to the best advantage the principles which, in their historical operation, bear the name of the English Constitution. (Stephen, J.F. 1858, pp. 372-3)

Burke's 'sound political economy' could therefore serve as part of a string of examples that demonstrated his relevance to political and intellectual life a century later, although the continued centrality of constitutional politics remains clear. For Fitzjames Stephen's brother, Leslie, this was equally true. So not only did Leslie Stephen write, in his *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (1876), that despite Burke's irritable temper he remained a powerful advocate of 'honour, justice, and mercy', Burke's 'views of political economy' were celebrated 'as far in advance of his time as his view of wider questions of policy'. In a reversal of Bagehot's earlier judgement, Burke's dramatic oratorical style was presented as ensuring that 'he laid the foundations of his intellectual supremacy deep in the driest and most repulsive of studies' (Stephen, L. 1876, ii 223). By the 1890s, when Stephen had replaced the late Matthew Arnold as the nation's preeminent man of letters, he repeated this argument. Here, Stephen positioned Burke in contrast to Tom Paine in a manner which subsumed Burke's political economy into a broader analysis of his distinctive 'organic', 'historic' method:

The whole pith of Burke's teaching, indeed, is his anticipation of what we should now call the historical method; and in that consists, as I should say, his superlative merit. He saw with unequalled clearness the necessity of basing all political economy upon the truths now recognised by every philosophical writer, that the state is an organism developed by slow processes, and depending for its vitality upon the evolution of corresponding instincts. He therefore argues, with more accuracy than his contemporaries, the vast importance of the crash which was taking place before his eyes. (Stephen, L. 1893, p. 273)

Yet once again this quotation is also representative of the tendency to privilege other aspects of Burke's work in analysing and assessing the 'essence' of his thought. A similar sentiment informed the entry on Burke's economic thought in the neoclassical economist, F.Y. Edgeworth's, *Dictionary of Political Economy* (1890 and later editions). Here, Edgeworth argued that, 'A rich vein of economic wisdom, mixed with other precious materials, runs through the whole vast tract of Burke's political writings', stating that *Thoughts on Scarcity* was most representative of Burke's economic thought. He noted admiringly how 'The fallacies of the mercantile theory did not snare Burke. ... [But] He is no bigoted preacher of *laissez-faire*.' Again, it was stated that for Burke wealth was only one 'element of wellbeing', 'not to be separated from "the great contexture of the mysterious whole"' (Edgeworth 1891-9, i. 194-5).<sup>21</sup> Unlike the Stephens, however, Edgeworth maintained the unreconstructed opinion that *Thoughts on Scarcity*—to Edgeworth the most typical example of Burke's political economy—simply 'enunciates general principles worthy of the *Wealth of Nations*' (i.195) The singularity of Burke's economic thought remained under question. Meanwhile, the Conservative Edwardian publications increasingly distilling Burke's thought to a neat, six-point, 'political philosophy of conservatism' in this period, divided over the issue of protective tariffs, placed particular emphasis on the broad principle of 'the sanctity of property' only.<sup>22</sup> A stress on the organic conception of society, and thus hatred of revolutionary change, as well as the value (or necessity) of precedent, tradition, religion and rank retained their centrality in analyses of Burke's thought in a world increasingly conscious of, and threatened

by, Communist revolution. A selective reading, and centring, of *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) lay at its heart.

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In his introduction, Collins outlines the ways in which scholars and polemicists writing in the decades after Keynes, Edgeworth, Morley and the Stephens picked up on these themes in attempts to place Burke in increasingly anachronistic modern political labels, such as ‘classical liberalism’ and ‘capitalism’ (Collins 2020, pp. 10-11). But as significant scholarship on Burke increasingly takes his connections to enlightenment thought, political economy, and constitutional and imperial politics more seriously, we have a growing number of significant volumes effectively contextualising Burke’s principles (Bourke 2015; Bromwich 2014). However, the association of Burke with ‘conservatism’ centred on a particular reading of opposition to revolution that privileges particular passages from the *Reflections* remains mainstream—the ‘Disneyland Burke’ outlined by Dwan and Insole, and constructed in part by his nineteenth and early twentieth-century interpreters (Dwan and Insole 2012, p. 13). For intellectual historians interested in reception, circulation and that much contested term, ‘influence’ (Arcenas 2020, pp. 495-505), the question remains of the extent to which ‘Disneyland Burke’ will be challenged in more popular, less academic settings.

## NOTES

- 1 Though for an alternative assessment of Rothschild’s broader claims for Burke’s inconsistency in the 1790s with his previous economic thought, see Collins (2020, pp. 466-67).
- 2 Collins (pp. 501-502) notes the similarities but also the ‘gulf’ between Burke and the Scottish Enlightenment thinkers, Smith included.
- 3 Gentleman’s Magazine 70 (1800, p. 1270); Monthly Review 33 (1800, pp. 392-3); É. Halévy, *La formation du radicalisme philisophique: L’Évolution de la doctrine utilitaire de 1789 à 1815* (1901, p. 98), all cited in Rothschild (2013, p. 276).
- 4 Anon., (1823); Stephen (1876), 2.226; Anon., (1890), pp. 423-437 at p. 428.
- 5 For Burke’s position see Collins 2020, Chapter 5.
- 6 The clearest and most significant refutation was Napier (1862, pp. 59-64).
- 7 John Maynard Keynes Papers, JMK/UA/20/2/27; JMK/UA/20/2/28. My thanks go to the Librarian at King’s College, Cambridge, for permission to cite material from the J. M. Keynes papers.
- 8 JMK/UA/20/2/29; JMK/UA/20/2/33.
- 9 JMK/UA/20/2/30.
- 10 JMK/UA/20/2/36.
- 11 JMK/UA/20/2/37.
- 12 JMK/UA/20/2/39.
- 13 JMK/UA/20/2/40.
- 14 JMK/UA/20/2/41.
- 15 JMK/UA/20/2/42; JMK/UA/20/2/43.
- 16 JMK/UA/20/3/21.
- 17 Laski’s text was reprinted in 1922, 1925, 1927, 1930, 1932, 1937, and 1942.
- 18 Morley retorted that surely India and ‘home affairs’ needed to be added.
- 19 There are similarities here with Collins’ collapsing of the Smith-Burke problem see Collins (2020, p. 533).
- 20 A classic example is Arnold (1965, pp. 13-14).
- 21 This was repeated in other publications: ‘Morley, Character Sketch’, p. 428.
- 22 See, for example, Cecil (1912, p. 48).

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