EDMUND BURKE AND IRELAND

This pioneering study of Edmund Burke’s engagement with Irish politics and culture argues that Burke’s influential early writings on aesthetics are intimately connected to his lifelong political concerns. The concept of the sublime, which lay at the heart of his aesthetics, addressed itself primarily to the experience of terror, and it is this spectre that haunts Burke’s political imagination throughout his career. Luke Gibbons argues that this anxious aesthetics found expression in his preoccupation with political terror, whether in colonial Ireland and India, or revolutionary America and France. Burke’s preoccupation with violence, sympathy, and pain allowed him to explore the dark side of the Enlightenment, but from a position no less committed to the plight of the oppressed, and to political emancipation. This major reassessment of a key political and cultural figure will appeal to Irish studies and postcolonial specialists, political theorists and students of Romanticism.

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EDMUND BURKE AND IRELAND

Aesthetics, politics, and the colonial sublime

LUKE GIBBONS
For Dolores
To use his own words...Burke's Sublime and Beautiful had more charms for him, than all the speculations of Mr. Paine on the Rights of Man.

Thomas Russell, as reported in R. R. Madden, *The United Irishmen: Their Lives and Times*, 3rd series, ii (1846)

Edmund Burke has Gog's [John Keogh's] boys now on a visit to Beaconsfield, and writes him a letter in their praise...Flattering Gog to carry his point. Is that sublime or beautiful?

Theobald Wolfe Tone, *Journal*, 5 September 1791

[On] Ireland, America, and India, he [Burke] was at every point on the side of the future.

Harold Laski, *Political Thought in England from Locke to Bentham (1950)*
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Preface

This basic argument of this book is that Edmund Burke’s aesthetics take up where his politics ostensibly leave off, allowing him to negotiate some of the ‘deepest obligations written on the heart’ (to use his own formulation) that could not always be reconciled with his official public persona as a British statesman. The concept of the sublime, which lay at the heart of his aesthetics, addressed itself primarily to the experience of fear and terror, and it is this spectre that haunted Burke’s political imagination throughout his career. This found expression primarily in his preoccupation with political terror, whether in colonial Ireland and India, or revolutionary America and France. The complexity of Burke’s theories of violence, sympathy, and pain, as outlined in his A Philosophical Enquiry in the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful (1757), provided him with a set of diagnostic tools to probe the dark side of the Enlightenment, particularly as it was used to justify colonial expansion, religious bigotry, or political repression. This is not to turn Burke – one of the emblematic figures of conservative thought – into a revolutionary where none was intended (though Mary Wollstonecraft did remark that had he lived in France, he would most likely have been a Jacobin). It is rather to argue that he was a man deeply divided against himself, a very fusion of the opposites yoked together in his concept of the sublime.

Several critics have drawn attention to the manner in which Burke’s obsession with the depredations of Warren Hastings in India, and the reign of terror during the French Revolution, are prefigured in his aesthetic writings, but are unable to account for his early preoccupation with fear and violence. It is my contention that these can be traced in part to the formative Irish milieu of his aesthetic writings – a set of experiences that prefigured his later abiding concerns with the violence of colonialism and modernity. Conversely, those who, like Conor Cruise O’Brien, sounded the colonial notes in Burke’s ‘Great Melody’, have failed to address the relation
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between this discordant strain in his politics, and his troubled aesthetic writings. This applies with less force to a more recent attempt to retrieve Burke's political reputation from a post-colonial perspective, Uday Singh Mehta's *Liberalism and Empire*, which, unlike O'Brien, follows the logic of Burke's rage against empire to a critique of Britishness itself, and the complicity of liberalism with the despotism of colonialism. The present study can be seen as complementing Mehta's focus on India by integrating Burke's aesthetics and his Irish background more fully into these searching critiques of colonialism.

In recent decades, and from diverse points of view, scholars, most notably Seamus Deane, W. J. McCormack, and Terry Eagleton, have sought to address the Irish dimension in Burke's work, drawing on both his politics and his aesthetics to explore the Gothic recesses of eighteenth-century Irish culture. It is in this spirit that I trace in Burke's theory of the sublime a fraught theoretical engagement with the political turbulence of his own upbringing, and the unresolved anxieties of a Catholic background, raised in the shadow of the Penal Laws. Burke's immediate family had direct links with some of the most traumatic state executions in early and mid-eighteenth-century Ireland, and with the outbreak of the first major wave of agrarian terror in the Whiteboy campaign of the 1760s, the aesthetics of the sublime acquired an intense personal urgency in Burke's life. Members of Burke's maternal family were directly implicated in the Whiteboy movement, and his last sustained visit to Ireland may have been to organize covertly the defence of Whiteboy suspects. But the concern with the body in pain – a central theme of the *Enquiry* – extends beyond these individual cases, for the trope of the injured body recurs as a national allegory of the plight of colonial Ireland in the eighteenth century. In terms of the new, neo-stoical concepts of civil society that evolved in the eighteenth century, the body in pain, and its attendant 'right to complain', proved an embarrassment to the Enlightenment, and came to be identified with the losers of history, and the ominous category of 'doomed' peoples. I argue that what is often construed as a counter-Enlightenment current in the writings of Swift and Burke derives from their determination to reinstate the wounds of history into the public sphere, and, by extension, 'obsolete' or 'traditional' societies into the course of history. For the Enlightenment (particularly its Scottish variant, as exemplified by Adam Smith), the injured body was incapable of looking beyond itself, and hence of attaining the universal or cosmopolitan stance required to operate in the civic sphere. By contrast, Burke's aesthetics outline an alternative, radical form of sensibility – the 'sympathetic sublime' – in which the acknowledgement of oppression
need not lead to self-absorption, but may actually enhance the capacity to identify with the plight of others.

For this reason, not the least of the ironies of Burke’s colonial sublime is that, in an Irish context, its cultural logic led ultimately to the political project of the United Irishmen, the radical movement which sought to bring the revolutionary energies of America and France to bear on the political upheavals in Ireland in the 1790s. Transplanted from the venerable oak of the ancient constitution in Britain onto the tree of liberty in late eighteenth-century Ireland, Burke’s concept of tradition – in this case, the subaltern culture of his Gaelic, Catholic background – bore fruit in a grafting of a radical strain of Romanticism onto Enlightenment thought. As such, the politics of the sublime affords the possibility of a more grounded, ethnographic Enlightenment, sensitive to cultural differences, inherited loyalties, and the contingencies of time and place. Though easily construed as a counter-Enlightenment, it offers the possibility of a alternative vision of social change which questions the logic that modernity only extends to the victors, leaving the powerless casualties of history in its wake.

In many ways, the debts incurred in writing this book seem to emanate, like Burkean antiquity, from a time out of mind. I wish to thank my commissioning editor, Ray Ryan, and the fine production team at Cambridge, Rachel deWachter, Sheila Kane, Neil de Cort and Paul Watt, for steering the book through the various stages of its publication. I also wish to express my gratitude to the Keough Institute for Irish Studies at the University of Notre Dame for financial assistance during this process. I owe a debt to Peter Mew, formerly of the Philosophy Department, Trinity College, Dublin, for enabling me to study aesthetics in the first place, and members of the English Department at Trinity College, and my former colleagues at Dublin City University, for providing an intellectual environment which facilitated interdisciplinary research. I am very grateful to Tom Bartlett, Claire Connolly, Pia Conti, Fintan Cullen, Chris Fox, Michael Griffin, Siobhán Kilfeather, Greg Kucich, Joep Leerssen, W. J. McCormack, Brendan MacSuibhne, Willa Murphy, Eamonn O’Ciardha, Kevin O’Neill, William Pressly, Ann Rigney, Jim Smyth, Fiona Stafford, Nathan Wallace, John P. Waters, and Kevin Whelan for much needed guidance, encouragement and critical debate during my long hibernation in the eighteenth century. Mary Burgess Smyth, Joe Cleary, Farrel Corcoran, Paul Christensen, Ann Bernard Kearney, Rachael Dowling, Tom Duddy, Terry Eagleton, Marjorie Howes, Richard Kearney, Declan Kiberd, David Lloyd, Catherine Morris, Emer Nolan, Niamh O’Sullivan, Clair Wills, and Robert Young have ensured that the friendship of Burke’s ‘little platoon’
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can still be a reality at the dawn of a new century. Kevin Whelan cast his meticulous eye over the entire manuscript, bringing his own knowledge of the textual underground of eighteenth-century Ireland to bear on it. More than any other scholar, Seamus Deane has helped critics to read the colonial dark of Burke and eighteenth-century Ireland, and this study would not have been possible without his sustained critical and intellectual support over many years. If I single out Tadhg Foley for special mention, it is because he often converted what seemed like the mountain gloom of eighteenth-century aesthetics into mountain glory – even if I have seldom been able to attain his scholarly heights. Such progress as I have made is due to my family, and, above all, to Dolores, Laura, and Barry, who constantly lifted my spirits when this book threatened to become Gibbons’s decline and fall.