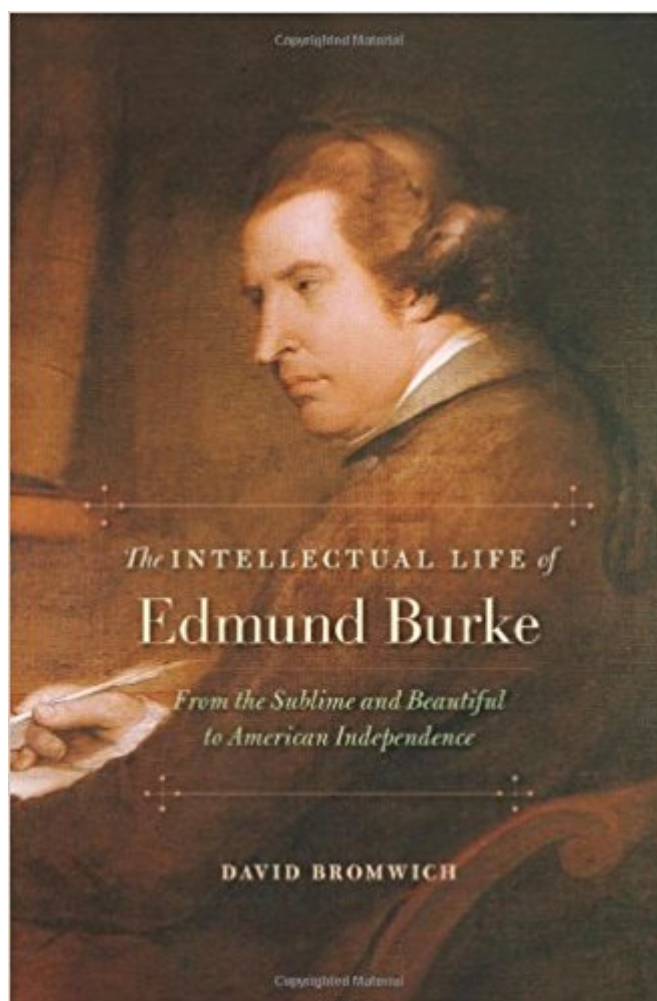


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# The Intellectual Life Of Edmund Burke: From The Sublime And Beautiful To American Independence



## Synopsis

David Bromwich's portrait of statesman Edmund Burke (1730–1797) is the first biography to attend to the complexity of Burke's thought as it emerges in both the major writings and private correspondence. The public and private writings cannot be easily dissociated, nor should they be. For Burke a thinker, writer, and politician the principles of politics were merely those of morality enlarged. Bromwich reads Burke's career as an imperfect attempt to organize an honorable life in the dense medium he knew politics to be. This intellectual biography examines the first three decades of Burke's professional life. His protest against the cruelties of English society and his criticism of all unchecked power laid the groundwork for his later attacks on abuses of government in India, Ireland, and France. Bromwich allows us to see the youthful skeptic, wary of a social contract based on "nature"; the theorist of love and fear in relation to "the sublime and beautiful"; the advocate of civil liberty, even in the face of civil disorder; the architect of economic reform; and the agitator for peace with America. However multiple and various Burke's campaigns, a single-mindedness of commitment always drove him. Burke is commonly seen as the father of modern conservatism. Bromwich reveals the matter to be far more subtle and interesting. Burke was a defender of the rights of disfranchised minorities and an opponent of militarism. His politics diverge from those of any modern party, but all parties would be wiser for acquaintance with his writing and thoughts.

## Book Information

Hardcover: 512 pages

Publisher: Belknap Press: An Imprint of Harvard University Press; 1st edition (May 6, 2014)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0674729706

ISBN-13: 978-0674729704

Product Dimensions: 6.5 x 1.7 x 9.3 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.9 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.9 out of 5 stars 10 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #985,962 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #87 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Leaders & Notable People > Presidents & Heads of State > U.K. Prime Ministers #2024 in Books > Literature & Fiction > History & Criticism > Regional & Cultural > European > British & Irish #2283 in Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > Ideologies &

## Customer Reviews

[Bromwich] gives us a figure who may be unknown to readers familiar with Burke only from *Reflections on the Revolution in France* or his reputation as modern conservatism's founding father. Bromwich's Burke is one for whom ordinary feelings such as trust, though they have a Christian correlative, themselves supply a sufficient groundwork of moral conduct. Burke is moved more by a universal sympathy for human struggle than by religion or patriotism. Though his attention throughout is on Burke's moral psychology, Bromwich also highlights the literary character of his thought, including his debts to Milton and Shakespeare. In Burke's politics there was room alike for elite rule and street demonstrations of the Tea Party or Occupy Wall Street variety. This balance of familiar and strange, Burke's enlightened humanity and his intricate understanding of power, make him well deserving of the extensive treatment he has lately received and especially of the justice David Bromwich has rendered him in showing Edmund Burke in the most unexpected of lights. (Daniel McCarthy New York Times Book Review 2014-08-22) It is David Bromwich's aim in *The Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke* that people should know a good deal more about what Burke actually said and wrote. Bromwich's patient and subtle exposition is a continuing delight. After reading this first volume, several major misreadings of Burke and a more general ignorance of his arguments and actions will not be possible, or at any rate won't be legitimate. The *Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke* is both indispensable and unputdownable, and with its companion volume will surely form a lasting landmark. (Ferdinand Mount London Review of Books 2014-08-21) [A] recent biographer of Burke calls him the father of conservatism. So a reappraisal of his early works is welcome. David Bromwich, a professor at Yale University, has written a history of Burke's thought until American independence; a more liberal Burke emerges from this book. Burke continued to fight for liberty later on in life. He backed Americans in their campaign for freedom from British taxation. He supported Catholic freedoms and freer trade with Ireland, in spite of his constituents' ire. He wanted more liberal laws on the punishment of debtors. He even pushed to curb the slave trade in 1780, a quarter of a century before it was abolished. (The Economist 2014-07-05) In *The Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke*, David Bromwich sets aside the conventional views of Burke the eloquent opponent of radical ideology to track the formation of his outlook and explore his early career. The

Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke most of all reminds us that Burke's understanding of the moral psychology guiding politics sprang from his engagement with both ideas and practical questions. Certainly a better grasp of Burke's early thought and the political turmoil of his time will prepare us for a fuller understanding of his response to the dramatic events of the late 18th century— not least, the outbreak of the revolution in France and the implications Burke saw for England and for liberty itself. (William Anthony Hay Wall Street Journal 2014-06-01)

Magnificent Bromwich masters and then mines [the copious private correspondence] with a degree of skill and discrimination I haven't seen in a Burkean study since the late 1970s. The sheer, marvelous plenitude of the material Bromwich brings into his narrative quickly broadens the story to take in the full ambit of Burke's public intellectualism. Bromwich thoroughly understands how clearly the man is revealed in his writing, and one of the greatest pleasures in *The Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke* is the regularity with which we get chunks of Burke's own intensely good prose. The man was a tireless student of human nature and one of the sharpest observers of man the political animal since Tacitus. And his descriptions of political creatures are uniformly so perceptive that any 21st century [reader] will find them instantly recognizable. Bromwich might not be doing the standard finances-and-family run-through of a biography, but he nevertheless ends up painting as vivid a personal portrait as any biography-reader could want. [An] irreplaceable study, which inadvertently underscores the disquieting extent to which we are all living in a political continuum of Burke's shaping. When this volume is completed by its sequel, we'll have a benchmark of Burke studies fit to last a century. (Steve Donoghue Open Letters Monthly 2014-04-17)

All good biographies are called magisterial, but David Bromwich's *The Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke: From the Sublime and Beautiful to American Independence* actually merits the adjective. Edmund Burke was a rare figure: a working politician who was also one of the great thinkers of his, or any, time. Bromwich's book, the first in a two-part biography, does justice to both the politics and the thought, showing how Burke's principles—a hatred of violence and a love of liberty—emerged from political and historical circumstances. Meticulous in its research and elegant in style, *The Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke* is a masterpiece of intellectual history. (Anthony Domestico Christian Science Monitor 2014-05-29)

Magisterial. It is the best in-depth, comprehensive recent analysis of Burke's thought— plus it is an enjoyable read. Bromwich's work reveals a Burke who is politically principled and (more or less) philosophically consistent, but who does not conform conveniently to our present-day conceptions of right or left. (Drew Maciag

Chronicle of Higher Education 2014-05-05) Probing and subtle — Helps us glimpse the sources of Burke's surprising longevity — Bromwich — Burke is not the evasive pragmatist who has been conscripted as the founding father of conservatism — Bromwich's biography promises to be the fullest and most responsibly sensitive account of both Burke's consistency and his ductility that we will ever have. (David Womersley Standpoint 2014-07-01) Drawing on Burke's correspondence, as well as his public writings and speeches, Bromwich presents the portrait of a serious thinker who cannot be easily categorized as either conservative or liberal — Burke spoke out about abuse of power, even supporting the American colonies, yet at times seemed to distrust democracy — Bromwich has brought his considerable research and writing skills together to present a readable, thorough picture of Burke's earlier years. (Nancy R. Ives Library Journal 2014-04-15) Edmund Burke was famed for weaving into arguments like a serpent; David Bromwich displays equal finesse, skill, and relentlessness in moving through the complexities and sheer volume of Burke's writings. The drive, fluency, and intelligence of Bromwich's analysis allow the reader to see Burke as that rare animal, a prime thinker who was also a practicing politician, a man caught up in a time when both varieties of democracy and new forms of empire were violently and contentiously on the rise. (Linda Colley, author of *The Ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh: A Woman in World History*) The Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke shows, in a very enlightening way, how Burke returns over and over to the theme of the relations between a politician and 'the people' and the gradual hardening of his insistence that while popular views must be taken account of, they must not determine how a conscientious politician acts. Bromwich reads Burke with care and depth and displays a range of learning and insights. His approach to Burke as a moralist in public life is original. (Peter Marshall, editor of *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, Vols. V — VII) In *The Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke: From the Sublime and Beautiful to American Independence*, a searching and profoundly meditated account of the earlier part of Burke's career, David Bromwich is not much interested in finding a [political] label: he does something much more valuable, which is to evoke with tremendous accomplishment the complexities of Burke that are always bound to resist any such attempt — The concluding volume of his outstanding intellectual life of his subject will be eagerly awaited by many. (Seamus Perry Times Literary Supplement 2014-10-24) Magnificent, beautifully written — [and] the most notable addition to a recent crop of books about Burke — [This] is an intellectual biography of the best kind. Bromwich seeks to convey — what it meant to think like Edmund Burke — and to demonstrate the coherence and relevance of Burke's moral and political vision. With a remarkable level of detail and

sensitivity, Bromwich makes a virtue out of what others lament as problematic: the relationship between Burke's political activity and his written works. Bromwich is convinced that people today can still learn from Burke, not as political partisans but as thoughtful readers. In Bromwich's hands, Burke offers better lessons about how to think than about what to think. It offers a revealing portrait of Burke's mind. (Iain Hampsher-Monk Foreign Affairs 2015-01-01) Brilliant Bromwich's intellectual acuity provides key insights into how aesthetics and politics fused [in Burke]. Bromwich's first volume brings the reader up to the eve of Burke's speech on Fox's India Bill (1783), and we will have to wait for volume two to deal with the impeachment of Warren Hastings, Burke's recoil from the momentous events of the French Revolution, and his near despair at impending crisis in Ireland. On this showing that volume will be eagerly awaited. (Luke Gibbons Irish Times 2014-12-03) The Burke David Bromwich presents in his new book *The Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke* is certainly a formidable figure, but one who resists recruitment for twenty-first-century causes. It is his elusiveness that makes him a live presence; he was a traditionalist and a progressive, an enlightened critic of Enlightenment run amok, a secular thinker who insisted on the indispensability of religious faith. He thought it pointless to insist on rights whose enforcement would bring disaster, as when British governments asserted their right to tax the colonies and brought on a revolutionary war; and yet he had no doubt about the reality of rights. Burke was an eighteenth-century Whig, not a twenty-first-century liberal or conservative, but both of the latter can engage with him with advantage. David Bromwich has been thinking about him for more than a quarter of a century, and by now has an unrivaled sensitivity to the workings of his mind; like Burke, Bromwich is a formidable critic, ranging over politics, literature, higher education, and much else, and on every page of *Edmund Burke*, one can feel him responding to Burke across the whole range of Burke's interests as if he was in the room with him. [Bromwich's] focus on the first three decades of Burke's life as a thinker, writer, and political actor yields riches. We shall have to wait for the second volume of this engrossing account to see how David Bromwich handles the Burke who responded so differently to the second great revolution of the late eighteenth century. His penetrating first volume makes us impatient to see what he will say. (Alan Ryan New York Review of Books 2015-03-05) Bromwich restores to view the complexity of Burke's thinking about politics in the decades culminating with the American war. Cascades with insights into Burke's antipathy toward the conflict with America, his limited sympathy for reform but tolerance for popular resistance, and his neglected engagement in such issues as protesting the slave

trade—|Identifying Burke—,s —œpolitics—,ç with the totality of his public and private writings, Bromwich displays a formidable grasp of Burke—,çs public —œperformances,—,ç his correspondence, as well as myriad scattered writings and speeches—|Among its considerable merits, *The Intellectual Biography of Edmund Burke* does not lapse into the potted generalizations of some intellectual history, nor appeals to Burke as bedrock Tory (or for that matter, radical Irishman)—|*The Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke* instead constitutes a steely polemic for the possibility of sustained thought amidst heated controversy and the minutiae of events, posing searching questions about the role of intellectual life in shaping political action. (John Owen Havard *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 2015-05-01)

David Bromwich is Sterling Professor of English at Yale University.

This is the first of a two volume study of Burke—,çs intellectual life covering the period up through the Gordon Riots, the end of the American Revolution and Burke—,çs loss of his seat in Parliament representing Bristol. As someone who is less than familiar with Burke than I should be and who objects to much of what I did know (his belief in government by the aristocracy, his hostility to the French Revolution, the perception of Burke as the father of conservatism) I was pleasantly shocked by how much Bromwich has given me to think about as well as to respect and admire. Bromwich presents Burke—,çs life, not as a conventional biography but rather as a chronological, historically based review of Burke—,çs thought as recorded in his writings. (While much of Bromwich—,çs book is analysis of Burke—,çs speeches, as Bromwich notes, these have been recorded in written form and published after the fact.) The title correctly says exactly what this is: a book on Edmund Burke—,çs INTELLECTUAL life. There is almost nothing in here about his private life, friends, family, or what he did in his spare time. Rather, it is a review of his ideas as presented in his writings beginning with Burke—,çs first book on the Sublime and Beautiful through his speech to his Bristol constituents shortly before he was essentially voted out of office for being unwilling to follow their mandates against his own moral judgment. What makes Bromwich—,çs presentation so brilliant is that the vast majority of the book is in Burke—,çs own words, not Bromwich—,çs. Nevertheless it is Bromwich who has restructured Burke—,çs words and explicated them in a way that both makes Burkes ideas and thoughts much clearer and, to this 21st century reader, much more readable and interesting than the originals at least to me. Bromwich is simply a brilliant writer and while, as I said, much of the

book is direct quotation, it is less the subject matter of the book that makes this book great than it is Bromwich's organization and how he uses Burke's words. I highly recommend this to any thinking reader and particularly to anyone interested in political philosophy and the organization of government, regardless of your own personal views. You may find you disagree with much of Burke's thought; certainly I still do. But you will nevertheless experience a very fine enjoyable conversation with one of history's great thinkers and writers. I for one very much look forward to the concluding volume of Bromwich's study.

Reading Professor Bromwich on Edmund Burke is like reading Bates on Keats. Although different in focus and approach, in each case we are treated to a magnificent scholar's masterful engagement with a magnificent, heroic thinker. Anyone interested in deep and critical thinking on the myriad issues of our day will think more deeply and critically after reading this work. Michael H.

Friedman Philadelphia, PA

Abosolutely brilliant. The best analysis of Burke's ideas ever written. Shows that he was a liberal as much as a conservative in modern terms. Clear links with James Madison's id, not set out before.eas

I have not completed reading it yet but I have found it quite engaging.. Burke has become one of my projects this year.

Very interesting and informative

Bromwich is a very astute and judicious reader of Burke. The reader would be advised to have a copy of Burke's speeches/works near to hand as Bromwich works through pretty well all of the famous, and some of the not so famous, works. I should say that though I admire Burke, I found the book occasionally tiresome, because Burke can be tiresome -- he painted himself into a variety of rhetorical corners, and seems, over time, to have come to believe his own rhetoric, in spite of the evidence. Bromwich tries very hard to defend Burke's defence of the "ancient constitution" which was in fact a weird concoction less than a hundred years old, and Parliament was ridiculously unrepresentative. Burke believed in a kind of mystic Platonic organic Parliament and people, and from time to time it borders on the absurd. One good thing about the book is that it details Burke's



anti-slavery and pro-Ireland work in great detail.

David Bromwich is always interesting to read, but he is so erudite that his style often becomes a barrier to accessibility. In other words, he is not always easy to read, but what he says is always illuminating. His is not a religious voice, and he makes no bones about this; but he is a profoundly moral writer and he is drawn to topics in which moral issues are invariably involved. He spends a great deal of time as well, gnawing at the bone of tension between an individual's responsibility to his conscience and to his community. This, I think, is why he has been drawn to Edmund Burke.

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