

THE HEDGE SCHOOL CICERO

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Ireland

For centuries the underdog
Some grass for grazing, mostly bog
Days cold and wet with misty fog
The soul kept warm imbibing grog

Crushed, oppressed, in virtual slav'ry
Ireland fought with utmost brav'ry
'Gainst power and perfidious knav'ry
England's hist'ry's not all sav'ry

Cruellest blow, closed Irish schools
Deprived of basic learning tools
Could not learn the simplest rules
Let the Irish grow up fools.

Control of Ireland was exercised through a set of Penal Laws, draconian measures drawn up during the 17th and 18th centuries by the British Parliament and enforced by an occupying army. The Laws were meant to keep the Irish under control and to punish them for their frequent uprisings. Encouraged by the success of the American and French Revolutions, the Irish rebelled once again in 1798. Armed only with pike and pitchfork, they were no match for King George's Redcoats, led by an ageing General Cornwallis thirsting for a victory after his failure in America. Against musket and cannon, 30,000 Irish were mown down. The Penal Laws included many severe restrictions. Catholics were not permitted to practice their religion, marry a Protestant, unless they converted, or buy land. They could not teach or practice law or own a horse worth more than 5 pounds.

Periodically, depending on the English political party in power, or the attitude of the reigning Monarch, some Penal Laws were relaxed and in some remoter parts of Ireland, the laws were simply ignored. Eventually, Irish Catholics were allowed to practice their own religion and to buy land. But the most debilitating statutes, denying them basic political, economic, and civil rights were kept in full force until the Act of Emancipation in 1829.

In much of 18th century Ireland the banning of schools led to the creation of secret schools. Because so many were held out of doors, hidden behind barns or hedges, they became known as "hedge schools". Before the Emancipation, it was estimated that there were 9,000 of these schools providing education for 400,000 children. Taught by itinerant teaches, students learned little more than the three "Rs". But there were exceptions. Portraits of two of these exceptions, I am pleased to report, adorn the walls

of our Literary Club. One, in fact, was a member of two Literary Clubs, and furthermore, was the Secretary of one. He is the subject of my paper this evening.

O'Halloran was the Master of the School at Ballyduff
He was loved, strict, and in appearance rough
His cane he never used, except to wave in air,
When driving home a point, considered worthy, rare
Occasionally he lost his class, going beyond the basics
Quoting lines from Shakespeare and the ancient Classics
Sure 'twas like fly-fishing, just a little pleasantry
Casting for an intellect, hiding in the peasantry

Though it was his greatest wish
Seldom did he land a fish
Finding work was goal enough
For his brood at Ballyduff

But O'Halloran never gave up. One day he thought it was time to cast a line, to give it another try.

He stood in front of his students, paused, and in a loud clear voice began.

“However little a flute may be out of tune the expert always notices, and in the same way” and, here he waived his cane in the air, “we all should be careful in life to avoid any chance disharmony, all the more because harmony in life is a higher and a more important thing than a flute out of tune”.

He paused for the giggles to subside and then asked, hopefully,

“And who do you think might have said that?”

A small boy, sitting in the front row, brought that day to school for the first time by his grandmother, Mrs. Nagel, timidly raised his hand and speaking with an accent that showed he was not from Ballyduff, politely answered, “If you please sir, it was Marcus Tullius Cicero”.

Edmund Burke was born in 1729 in a house by the side of the river Liffey in Dublin. His father Richard, a lawyer, had married Mary Nagel, a beautiful Catholic country girl, who had accepted her husband's religion, but quietly maintained her family ties. Their home was a modest one and often flooded by the river. Edmund, a sickly child, was sent off to the countryside to be cared for by Mary's mother in Ballyduff, County Cork. He spent most of his early boyhood years there, and, attending the only school available, became Mr. O'Halloran's star pupil.

Edmund was a precocious child. He had been taught to read and write by his parents and, at a very early age, was encouraged by his father to start reading translations

from the Greek and Roman classics. The works of Cicero featured prominently on his father's bookshelves. Most of us, with perhaps the exception of the classics and philosophy experts among us, know, in a general sort of way, that Cicero was one of the distinguished classical antiquity. Maybe not quite in the same class as Plato, Aristotle or Socrates, but nevertheless, he left his mark on philosophy, political theory, and especially on the art of oratory. Perhaps it is not surprising to find that Cicero had a particular appeal to eighteenth century Irish intelligentsia, a class both gifted in their powers and of verbal expression and passionate in their views on politics. Popular translations of Cicero were to be found everywhere in the homes of the educated Irish. They were impressed that Cicero had taught that the best orator should also be the best human being, who would understand the best way to live, and would act upon this by taking a leading role in politics, by instructing others through speeches, through the example of his life, and through making good laws. Cicero maintained that the most valuable parts of philosophy were those that could be directly transferred into politics. Young Edmund grasped all of this and, learning much from his mother of Ireland's troubles, found in Cicero a hero, and a mentor.

O'Halloran knew he had a prodigy on his hands. Not only could his pupil learn with remarkable speed but he could also engage in mature discussion in a manner well beyond his years.

Burke's parents were delighted with his progress at Ballyduff, but the time had come when they felt their son was sturdy enough to face the rigors of boarding school and, although still very young, prepare for entry to Trinity College Dublin. He was moved to Ballitore School, just outside Dublin in County Kildare, kept by Richard Shackelton, a Yorkshire Quaker. This was a major change for the young Edmund. He took it all in easy stride and shot ahead of the other students.

Burke was considered ready for Trinity at the age of 14 and made his mark right from the start. "Who were your teachers?" he was asked at the entrance examination. Yes, they had heard of Shackelton of Ballitore, but it was the first they had heard of O'Halloran of Ballyduff.

I certainly don't remember amazing the examiners as Burke did, when, three years older than Burke, I took a similar classics examination at Trinity entrance two centuries later.

Burke won prizes galore as he progressed through college and became a University Scholar in Classics in his second year.

But the formal educational program at Trinity could not satisfy him. His mind, bursting with energy and ideas, needed some further outlet. In his second year, on the 21st of April 1747, he gathered together some fellow students and formed a Literary Club, and was appointed Secretary. The early minute book still exists, written in his handwriting. The Club had a most elevated purpose, set forth in words that had a true Ciceronian ring. It was, and here I quote, "for the improvement of its members in the

more refin'd, elegant, and useful parts of Literature, these seeming the most likely means for attaining the great end in view . . . the formation of our minds and manners for the functions of (a) Civil Society

. . . And as Language is the cement of Society so is the perfection thereof perhaps its greatest ornament, and not the least of its blessings . . . for this reason then the business of the Club is speeching, reading, writing, and arguing in Morality, History, Criticism, Politics and all the useful branches of Philosophy". Not bad for a 16 year old, and not a bad basis for a student literary club.

Burke's Literary Club faded after he left Trinity, but was resuscitated some years later to become the present College Historical Society, known as the "Hist", and recognized as one of the great student literary societies. Many of Ireland's historical figures and parliamentarians and some of its most distinguished orators received their training there. It still cherishes its Burke literary club origins.

Burke's interests, though lofty, were also human. His memories of the poverty he witnessed around Ballyduff would endure throughout his life. One of his first papers dealt with this subject.

He wrote, ". . . as you leave the Town, the Scene grows worse, and presents you with the Utmost Penury in the Midst of a rich Soil . . . Money is a stranger to them . . . As for their Food, it is notorious they seldom taste Bread or Meat; their diet in Summer, is Potatoes and sour Milk; in Winter, when something is required Comfortable, they are still worse, living on the same Root, made palatable only by a little Salt, and accompanied with Water; their Cloaths so ragged . . . nay it is no uncommon sight to see half a dozen Children run quite naked out of a Cabin, scarcely distinguishable from a Dunghill . . . I Appeal to anyone . . .(to account) for the Justness of this Picture."

When Burke graduated from Trinity he was sent by his proud father to continue his education in a London law center, the Middle Temple, but things did not work out quite as planned.

Burke had no interest in law as a career. Instead he spent time wandering around England and France trying to find direction for his life. His interests lay in philosophy and art. He completed a paper he had begun as a student on esthetics, "The Nature of the Sublime and the Beautiful", and managed to have it published. It caused a stir by virtue of its originality, lucidity and literary style. It caught the attention of the poet Lessing, who translated it into German and acknowledged that he made great use of the material for his landmark study on art criticism, "The Laokoön". I am obliged to you, Gunther Grupp, for the correct pronunciation.

Burke earned his keep by writing. He developed a popular magazine that surveyed world affairs, and became its editor. It is widely read as a source for England's overseas activities and impressed the Marquess of Rockingham, the wealthy, influential, but somewhat ineffectual leader of the Whigs in Parliament. Rockingham appointed Burke his aid and private secretary, opening the door for Burke to enter the world of

English politics. The Whigs were anti-Tory and their efforts were directed to trying to reduce the excessive power of the King. The quality of his writing, his dazzling conversational skills, his manner and bearing, soon also made their mark in other quarters, especially in the elite London literary circles. He received an invitation from the great Dr. Samuel Johnson to join his Club.

It was at Johnson's Literary Club, airing his thoughts in the company of some of the great minds of the day, that Burke further honed his considerable oratorical and debating skills, while he learned from the Marquess about the complexities of Westminster politics. With Rockingham's help Burke became a Member of Parliament for the city of Bristol, but did not hold his seat for long because of his outspoken Irish sympathies. He then became Member for Malton in North Yorkshire, an area less influenced by London Tories. Burke spent his long political career mostly in Opposition. Parliament was then a place with little authority in the hands of its Members. The Court still wielded enormous power and with the aid of a compliant legislature extracted vast treasures to maintain the Monarch's extravagant whims. Burke was fearless. With passion and reasoned logic he converted routine proceedings, with their inevitable foregone conclusions, into pivotal debates that began to change the face of British politics.

His speeches were delivered in 18th century English at its best. He seldom used notes. Most of his words would have been lost if they had not been recorded by admiring listeners. Under pressure he later wrote up his major speeches and they were widely distributed. Some, as you are well aware are still required reading in English and history courses in this country. I think the Encyclopedia Britannica gets it the right way round. In my edition it ranks Cicero, in greatness as an orator, at the level of Demosthenes and Edmund Burke.

Burke's first major political effort was a direct attack on the King, George 3rd. He pressed for Parliamentary control over Royal patronage and expenditures. He was the first to propose the creation of political parties to mobilize and co-ordinate the views of members. He defined parties "as bodies of men . . . each body united on matters of public principle, acting as a constitutional link between King and Parliament, providing strength and stability when in administration, and principled criticism when in opposition". During his brief tenure in Bristol, he explained to his constituents that, "When Bristol had chosen a Member he was not a member of Bristol, but he was a Member of Parliament. Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion". In Parliament he said, "government should provide a mutually restraining relationship between rulers and subjects", and in particular, "when in considering the need for social change, the major guiding principle should be to reaffirm the values embodied in tradition and in the ways of the past." People listened.

He was no conservative die-hard. He considered British policy in the American colonies to be, "imprudent, inconsistent and intransigent." Sir George Trevelyan, the noted English historian and statesman, has written of those times, "The majority of the

English public regarded the contest being fought out in America not as a foreign war but as a civil war in which English liberty, to which the colonists were entitled, was at stake". Trevelyan continues, "The benches of the Lords and the Commons were filled by an ever increasing band of placemen and pensioners subsidized by the King; and these gentlemen knew the work which the paymaster expected of them. The best of our statesmen, all, it is not too much to say, who are remembered with pride by Englishmen of every party, were shut out from the opportunity, and even from the hope of office; our national qualities of manliness and independence, (how very British!), had come to be a standing disqualification for employment in the nation's service."

Burke's voice rose clearest of all and warned, "If despotism were once established in America, arbitrary government, God forbid, would at least be attempted in the mother country."

When Burke spoke every seat in Parliament was filled, as when Churchill spoke many years later at times of national danger. Friend and foe alike, came to see and hear the Irishman. The famous novelist, Fanny Burney, seated in the visitor's gallery was obviously impressed. She wrote of Burke, "Tall, erect, well-formed, with a countenance of much sweetness, which I esteem very handsome. When aroused in debate, his mental strength is manifest in his broad brow and in the light of his large eyes. The spell in which he bound those fortunate enough to hear him speak, made them forget all else, as they listened to the winged words which fell from his lips". The fine bronze statue at the entrance to Trinity captures some of this, as he stands with arm raised pointing to the heavens in mid-oratorical flow.

To America, he was amongst its greatest allies at Westminster. As a mark of regard and trust, the New York Assembly appointed him their Representative in London.

Though he supported the American Revolution, he spoke out bitterly against the French Revolution. England first favored the uprising, for it was against the French Royal Court, its ancient enemy. But Burke correctly predicted the "Reign of Terror" which would follow. He spoke directly to the man in the street, reaching over the heads of his political foes, as Cicero did in the Senate in Rome and as Churchill did in Westminster. Like Churchill, he spoke with bitter scorn of the enemy. "I thought ten thousand swords would have leaped from their scabbards to avenge even a look that threatened Marie Antoinette with insult. But the age of chivalry is gone. That of sophisters, economists and calculators has succeeded." "Rage and frenzy can pull down more in half an hour than prudence, deliberation and foresight can build up in a hundred years."

Burke's greatest struggle was the impeachment of Warren Hastings, Governor General of India. To Burke, Hastings was corrupt and unscrupulous and represented the worst of British overseas rule. Nothing quite like this had happened in Westminster since the trial of Charles 1st. The proceedings began with great pomp and ceremony with Burke playing the leading role as prosecutor. The trial dragged on for seven years and though patently guilty, at least on some of the charges, Hastings was cleared on all counts,

to live out the remainder of his years in dignified retirement in his ancestral home in Oxfordshire. Burke retired from politics, but did so not from pique. He had another life to live. He had had at least a partial victory. His exposures had shocked the public sufficiently to ensure that the same British standards, (such as they then were), would in future apply overseas as at home. Burke turned down an Earldom offered by a now admiring and ailing King, but he accepted a civil pension. With considerable financial help from his old and wealthy friend the Marquess, Burke bought a country house and 600 acres, the Gregories near Beaconsfield, Buckinghamshire, about halfway on the coach road between London and Oxford. Afterwards Queen Victoria awarded the vacant Earldom to her favorite, Benjamin Disraeli, whose home was Hughenden, about 7 miles distant from Beaconsfield.

There are two very different Burkes. The one we all know, a world figure, whose words will last as long as English is spoken; the political genius who refashioned English government, and who, in his day, was revered as much on the banks of the Potomac and the Ganges as he was on the banks of the Thames. And then there was Squire Burke, gentleman farmer of Beaconsfield.

With the help of the friendly staff, I found a treasure trove on Squire Burke in the archives of the small public library in Beaconsfield last summer. My wife's late older sister and her family lived in Beaconsfield for many years. They had a home on Penn Road leading to Penn Village where William Penn is buried. After we moved to the U.S. we bought a small flat in Beaconsfield; we loved the area and have many happy memories of family visits there. Our address was Cardain House, 3 Burke's Road. The area had been part of Burke's estate, now referred to as Beaconsfield New Town, less than a mile from the Old Town, Beaconsfield proper.

Beaconsfield

Lovely ancient Tudor town
Norman Church of some renown
Leafy lanes, an Inn, the Crown
Cornfields ripened golden brown
A cricket match on velvet green
No sight is there more serene
The bowler runs and swings his arm
The wicket, the batsman keeps from harm
The ball is struck, it fleeting flies
High up into the summer skies
Down it drops to strong safe hands
The next man at the wicket stands,
All held in thrall
By bat and ball
Villages nearby, in easy reach
Penn's school, where still they teach
Chalfont Saint Giles

Less than five miles
Blind to all this rural glory
Milton wrote his wondrous story
Paradise Lost; some's found in Beaconsfield
Burke found his Eden there revealed
No longer a great nation's leader
Became instead a cattle breeder
Expert on turnips and green peas
Planted many hardwood trees
Built irrigating draining trench
Built a school for orphaned French
Grew healing herbs for ailing sick
Claimed his physic did the trick
'Till one day, a rub his wife drank
Then his reputation sank

One of Burke's favorite stories went like this; "I am like an Irish peer whom I used to know, who was also very fond of dealing out remedies to his neighbors. One day this nobleman met a funeral, and he asked a poorer neighbor whose funeral it was. 'Oh my lord' was the reply, 'that's Taddy So and So, the man your lordship cured three days ago'". The portrait collage of members of Dr. Johnson's Club meeting at the home of Sir Joshua Reynolds, hanging in our Club library, shows a bespectacled Burke listening intently to Dr. Johnson, seated at the head of the table. His father-in-law, Dr. Nugent, a London doctor, sits just across from him.

Club Members periodically made the trip to Beaconsfield. He would show his visitors his prize cattle, take them for walks through the woods or go by carriage to Windsor Great Park to view the Castle. He was particularly friendly with Sir Joshua, who valued Burke's views on art. The painter made a special trip to see Burke's advice on an important new project. The Empress Catherine of Russia had commissioned him to do a painting to add to her collection at the Hermitage in Saint Petersburg. The subject was to be of his choosing, it could be of any size and he could name any price. As they discussed this, walking through the woods, they came upon the bailiff's cottage in a small clearing. Burke had suggested a painting of the Infant Hercules struggling with two serpents, and pointing to bailiff's infant son rolling on a mat before the door said, "and there is a splendid subject for you". And so the celebrated painting came into being. It returned to England in recent years as part of a Reynolds' exhibition at the National Art Gallery, on loan from the Soviets. Reynolds did several portraits of Burke including a fine example that hangs in London's National Portrait Gallery. Burke looks thoughtful and concerned as if contemplating the words he was about to use in some important debate. Reynolds made an engraving of this portrait and sent copies to any of Burke's admirers. Burke was flattered that his friend had honored him so. Without his knowledge Reynolds had appended some lines from Paradise Lost, likening him to the angel Abdiel, for his unswerving loyalty and fearlessness in facing the power of evil.

"Among the faithless, faithful only he;

Among innumerable false, unmoved,
Unshaken, unsexed, unterrified,
His loyalty he kept, his love, his zeal;

And so on, ending with:

And with retorted scorn his back he turned
On those proud towers, to swift destruction doomed

A considerable number of impressions had been run off before Burke learned of what he considered a greatly extravagant though well intended compliment. Acutely embarrassed he hastened off to Reynolds and insisted that the lines be obliterated from the plate, and that all impressions that had not been distributed be immediately destroyed.

It was mid-morning on a Saturday, market day in Beaconsfield. My wife Myfanwy and I, accompanied by my nephew-in-law, Robert Norrie, were on a special mission. The only members of our family now living in Beaconsfield area are the Norries. The green was crowded with stalls. Local farmers, growers, craftspeople and others, were selling their wares to townsfolk, as had their forebears done for centuries before. Jars of honey, fresh baked bread, vegetables and fruit of every sort, woodwork and much more were changing hands, but we did not delay. Our object was to visit Burke's burial place.

Beaconsfield Church looked beautiful in the early autumn sun as we approached it from the green. Nothing of the original 13th century Norman structure remains. The Church was rebuilt and additions were made at intervals during the past 800 years, with a major reconstruction in the 1850s.

The vicar, the 58th since the church was founded, was on a mission to India, but the church warden was most helpful as was the lady arranging flowers for a wedding that afternoon.

Burke, his wife and son Richard were buried together but instructions were left that there be no memorial. Although he had spent much of his political life fighting oppressive anti-Catholic and anti-Dissenter policies and like his mother, his wife was born Catholic, Burke remained a member of the Church of England and attended his church regularly. He respected all religions. "When you have diversity, bear it; have as many sorts of religion as you find in your country; there is reasonable worship in them all. Let it be a serious religion; take what you can get; cherish, blow up the slightest spark". His great basic tenet was, "Know history and man's nature and you may presume to guess at God's intent". Records had it that the Burkes had been buried in a vault below the center aisle. We walked down the aisle but saw no sign of it. Burke died in 1797, aged 67. The funeral was the largest ever seen in that part of England. It was attended by the greatest in the land as well as his farming neighbors and his tenant workers. The pall bearers of the remains of the man who had once been the polite little

boy who had brought so much pleasure to O'Halloran of Ballyduff, were the Duke of Portland, Earl Fitzwilliam the Lord Chancellor, the Speaker of the House of Commons, afterwards Lord Sidmouth, the Duke of Devonshire, the Earl of Inchiquin and Sir Gilbert Elliott, afterwards Lord Minto. His old Literary Club friends, Dr. Johnson, Sir Joshua Reynolds, Oliver Goldsmith, David Garrick the actor, and James Boswell were all now dead. His death marked the end of that incomparable literary group.

Burke's reputation as a visionary genius grew as every year passed and no-one felt greater pride, or took greater credit, than O'Halloran of Ballyduff. He frequently reminded his listeners; "Sure it was here he got his grounding. He picked up some things at Ballitore and at Trinity but never forget it was O'Halloran who first placed a Latin grammar in the hands of Edmund Burke".

Shortly after Burke's death the Gregories was destroyed by fire, leaving no trace of Beaconsfield's most famous residence, except for a grassy mound. No mark of Burke's presence in Beaconsfield remained. As the centenary of his death approached this rankled the then 53rd vicar, the Reverend G.A. Cook. He felt that something should be done. Ignoring Burke's wish, he launched an appeal with a letter to the London Times to build a memorial in the church, which would be unveiled as the centerpiece of the centenary celebrations. No longer should Burke's commendable modesty prevent such a tribute being paid by a society who owed him so much.

The amount collected for the memorial was 113 pounds, 14 shillings and 6 pence. It was constructed in bas-relief in pearly grey Derbyshire alabaster, by the sculptor Alfred Drury, based on the Reynolds' portrait in the National Portrait Gallery. It cost 81 pounds and fixing it to the wall cost 3 shillings 6 pence. After paying sundry expenses, there was a surplus of 2 pounds, 16 shillings and 7 pence left over for the Sanctuary fund.

I stood gazing at Burke's image on the wall in that silent sun-lit setting and could not restrain myself from gently touching the cool alabaster brow and cheek that Fanny Burney so admired.

But where was the vault? The church warden had gone, but the lady arranging the flowers was still there. "Excuse me. Do you know where Edmund Burke is buried?" "I certainly do" she replied with a big smile, "He's under the seventh pew on the left in the third row. It happens to be my pew. I sit over him every Sunday." I looked, she was right. There beneath her seat was a brass plate, fixed to the floor, engraved Edmund Burke 1730-1797. "Why don't you sit there, if you wish". I accepted her invitation with mixed feelings. It seemed disrespectful, irreverent. The lady explained that he had been buried under the center aisle as requested, but during the mid-19th century reconstruction the pews were re-arranged, a new center aisle was created and the vault could not be moved. I sat there thinking about it and gradually accepted the fact that the great humorous Irishman would not have objected. How could he relate more closely to a community, where he had spent his happiest years, than to be regularly sat upon!

The day following the publication of the appeal in the London Times, the following somewhat chiding editorial appeared, "After all, little good is done by building church memorials if the pious do not resort to only true shrine, in this case, Burke's own works". But this memorial, a pearly alabaster modest piece of Victorian art in a small ancient church, appropriately celebrates Burke's happiest years as Farmer Squire, a period overshadowed by his great achievements and receiving little attention by historians.

What of Burke's relevance to America in these days of terrorism and threat of war? Perhaps it is worth recalling the words of Henry Grattan a leading Irish statesman in Burke's day.

"His immortality is that which is common to Cicero and Bacon; that which can never be interrupted while there exists the beauty of order, or the love of virtue and which can fear no death except what barbarity can impose upon the globe." At the height of the French "Reign of Terror", it was Burke who said, "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing."

Literarian
Non-sectarian
Trinitarian
Parliamentarian
Amateur Agrarian
Hero Politico
The Hedge School Cicero
