

Seamus Deane *Foreign Affections: Essays on Edmund Burke*, Critical Conditions: Field Day Essays, Cork: Cork University Press in Association with Field Day, 2005. ISBN 1-85918-379-4 €29

This series of essays analyses Edmund Burke's representations of the French and American revolutions and his depictions of the failure and promise of the British Empire in Ireland and India. For the most part the essays have been published before though they are revised and up-dated. However, in being collected together and arranged according to a chronological order that takes us from a reading of Swift and Burke, through to the idea of empire in Cardinal Newman the sustained focus on Burke's themes of liberty, faction, revolution, and aesthetic and political representation is given the space to resonate with implicit connections and explicit clarifications of the complexities of Burke's vision.

The first three chapters contextualises Burke among his immediate predecessors and contemporaries: specifically Swift, Montesquieu and Diderot, and the last three chapters examine the legacy of Burke's thought in the work of key Nineteenth-Century liberal and Catholic thinkers such as Tocqueville, Acton and Newman. The middle two chapters, dealing largely with Burke on the French Revolution, draw on a number of essays written over the past few decades and are both the literal and metaphorical heart of the book: providing the core insights on the brilliance and subtlety of Burke's vision and thus allowing us this Burkean vision of the place of empire and local affections to illuminate our own late-capitalist globalised world.

Burke is one of the central figures in Enlightenment thought and its political and literary culture and estimations of his contemporary impact and historical legacy continue to be debated among scholars from a staggering array of disciplines. A hallmark of the debate is that wild oscillation as Deane describes it in estimations of his reputation 'from that of political hack to that of great political philosopher.' (2) From his crisp introduction and in particular in the central chapters of the book Deane presents us with a coherent Burke (though that is not his ostensible aim nor organising principle). We are led through Burke's on-going meditation on the function of empire through the turbulent decades of the late eighteenth century. Deane shows us how Burke's vision was put constantly to the test of revisions as political contexts changed and he shows us how Burke's depictions are part descriptive, part prescriptive and wholly relevant, if not indeed necessary to discussing the not so small topic as the function of emotion in modernity. Deane's reading of Burke reveals the depth and width of his reading and reflection on all of Burke's wide-ranging and copious, tracts and letters. This may seem rather pallid praise unless we remember that Conor Cruise O'Brien made a particular boast of having read all of Burke's works in writing his *Great Melody* and that most of the vast swathes of academic writing on Burke focus on particular discreet aspects of his oeuvre. Besides the sheer bulk of Burke's writings, they are also often ornately wrought works, rich in allusion, baroque in style, that were delivered under particular circumstances, within specific contexts (not always immediately obvious) which must be brought to bear on any interpretation. Deane fluidly summarises the contexts, development and refinement of Burke's representation and idealisation of political and aesthetic concepts and his elegant, often pithy, analyses of the contexts, impacts and legacy of Burke's work is a consummate achievement based on decades of familiarity and reflection on Burke's writing.

This book is replete with succinct, dazzling insights into Burke that most other scholars would spend many more pages laboriously unpacking. Take for instance Deane's summary of the 'heart of the Burkean aesthetic': '... It is profoundly non-romantic. According to it, no representation can or should compete with the actual...Representations are substitutes, not

deceits. But the possibility of deceit lies primarily in the observer or spectator and it is not difficult to recognise its most egregious form – the preferring of the substitute over the real.’ (90) Deane then proceeds to show how Burke regarded the revolutionary as losing contact with the world to give priority to the world of representation, and specifically the world of their own individual imagination: ‘Egocentricity has replaced sympathy; but it is an egocentricity that craves acclaim from others even though it has no genuine feeling for others.’ (90)

Most essays and books on Burke get infected with inner propulsion described by Cicero as vital to rhetoric: ‘*motus animi continuus*’. This force animates Burke, and academics writing on Burke often can’t resist the temptation to echo long and vivid Burkean fantasias. Also, most of us who write on Burke find ourselves involved in a Stockholm syndrome (an analogy made by biographer, Amanda Foreman), where our point of view is taken hostage to a defence or Oedipal destruction of who we imagine Burke to be and we often reveal more about our own psyches and attachments than shedding light on political or aesthetic concepts. Even the venerable Oxford University Press biographer of Burke, F.P. Lock, falls prey on occasion to this kind of wilful speculation such as in his discussion of Burke’s relationship with his father. Deane heroically sidesteps these pitfalls so common in Burke scholarship but takes as his focus the processes and conflicts, both contextual and conceptual in which Burke forged his work. However, this last point also leads me from a paean of praise to offer the opinion that the book would have been of much more general interest if Deane had engaged more with the emotions that Burke himself was representing. Deane’s book demands a certain knowledge or at least a commitment to knowing about European eighteenth and nineteenth century political thought and his method is as he remarks himself Burkean in its ‘piecemeal’ approach, that is in its minute and energised focus on specific aspects and issues which when read together resonate richly in broader themes. However, the richness of his reading is in the implications of Burke’s thinking as a critique of the place of emotions in the ‘permafrost of modernity’ (to quote historian, Alan Bray), implications that Deane is more than able to draw out given the evidence of his writings on Burke in *Strange Country: Modernity and Nationhood in Irish Writing since 1790* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997) where he brilliantly argued that Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* is a ‘foundational text’ in the canon of Anglo-Irish literature and can be read as ‘generating the possibility’ for a narrative of that great body of work which is Irish writing in English.(1) I would have liked to have seen Deane close his book by revisiting this reading rather than his the final essay on Cardinal Newman. This last essay scarcely mentions Burke though the comparison between his and Newman’s conception of universality/empire is obvious. As the permafrost of modernity is thawing in various ways, I would have liked Deane to have either made explicit the links between Burke and the Ireland, empire, Catholicism, function of literary representation and modernity encompassed in this essay or for him to have revisited *Strange Country* and his discussions of Burke, nationality and nostalgia (*nostos algia* home sickness, coined as a medical term by an Alsatian doctor in 1688, the year of the Glorious Revolution, an event that was both a touchstone and sticking point for Burke), to consider how Burke’s nostalgia, his sense of home amidst ‘*Foreign Affections*’ might bring us to root in the twenty-first century.

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