

# WHIGS—OLD AND NEW

DAVID MUNROE

NEARLY everyone has been introduced at some time or other into that remarkable society which surrounded George the Third during the last forty years of the eighteenth century. For many, especially for those who have been brought up in the Victorian tradition on the polite novels of Mrs. Gaskell, Bulwer-Lytton or even Dickens, the very slightest introduction is usually enough: there are some, however, who are so bold as to pursue the acquaintance further, and to these the experience usually falls into three stages. The first meeting is always unfortunate. Through school books Clive and the Pitts, George and Lord North, Grenville and the exasperating Junius, are made to appear in unnatural nightmares, wearing ridiculous tags which bear in hideous capitals some date or Act of Parliament. Through this lense the Georgians look about as lifeless as the walls that housed them. Another glance reveals a generation of extravagant dandies, addicted to wild carousal and high play at Almack's, at Brooks's, or even at Carleton House, whose morals were as loose as their wits were dull. Whoever survives these first two introductions will profit by the third. The colourless king and his court are fortunately lost in the brilliance of a company which remained always at safe distance from the royal person, a company of competent practitioners in art and literature. Johnson and Boswell write new life into biography. Hume and Gibbon are busy with their histories. Reynolds and Gainsborough, forsaking the tradition of Hogarth, daub their paint in a manner that continues to delight us. Horace Walpole delivers his delicious gossip to Sir Horace Mann, the Club meets on Mondays, the Royal Academy listens attentively to the discourses of its erudite president, and gradually classic correctness makes room for romance and the fires of reform and revolution are set alight. It may be an extravagant society into which we are about to enquire: it is also an accomplished one.

There are two figures in this fascinating company which history has brought into close association—Edmund Burke and Charles Fox. They were both Whigs, they were the Moses and brother Aaron who led their party through years of tiresome wandering, both were masterly orators whose sentences were touched by those graces which distinguish oratory from speech; moreover, they

were members of the famous Club which gathered about Doctor Johnson, and they respected literature sincerely. Now these are considerable bonds, and they might well have tied a Gladstone to a Peel without any discomfort to either of them, but it was quite impossible that they should ever do as much for Burke and Fox. Two tempers, which began on opposite sides of the fence over the Wilkes business and fell finally apart during the French Revolution, were hardly suitable team-mates even in parliamentary opposition. Nowhere, it is true, are the rules less exacting. The unanimous mind, supposedly an attribute of our cabinet system, is not nearly so necessary when men have no further need than to be irresponsibly cranky. But, you see, Burke and Fox could not even be cranky together. They could tease North, they could harpoon George, they could bullyrag with furious energy the party of King's Friends; yet all the while Burke was becoming more and more the high priest of the constitution, and Fox the gracious patron of all manner of reform. It was inevitable that this coalition should sooner or later be dissolved; and when it was, the Whig party split in two.

Fate and Fortune were the villains: they were in a queer, contrary mood. Fate, which no doubt is the provider of our in-born prejudices, left Burke without the slightest sympathy for those popular movements which Fox steadily supported. At the same time, Fortune kept the two side by side on the benches of the Commons during long years of opposition. The sight of reaction and reform, of romance and realism at such close quarters suggests deep and curious contrasts. Now contrasts, while they may lead to the precarious, are never dull and maybe we shall find amusement, or even instruction, if we follow more closely the footsteps of these wandering Whigs.

## I

With George the Third, Nature was not generous. She tossed him into an idle, indulgent court, where the manners and morals of Versailles were not inadequately mirrored. She gave him no heroic virtues, only a few homely ones which earned him no better title than "Farmer George". When he was past middle life, with domestic worries hard upon him, she snatched away his wits, at first for a week or two, and finally for ever. Still, Nature is never a stingy mistress: she usually contrives to balance the scales somehow; so as a final touch to this masterpiece of mediocrity, George was equipped with an extraordinary nose for trouble. A peculiar sense soon brought a peculiar satisfaction, and George goes down in

history as the king who could perhaps most easily turn mild commotion into riot or revolution. If trouble was brewing, he would speedily bring it to the boil.

Everybody knows something of the Wilkes episode. The incident which provoked the wrath of Junius cannot have escaped even the most casual student of literature or history. It began with the election of 1768, and thereafter was enacted a most unusual drama. John Wilkes made a coarse hero, but for all that a popular one. The County of Middlesex, which elected him to parliament, provided the mob scenes, for it had about the longest voters' list in the kingdom. The villain too was easily available; for George, smelling trouble, was ready with the usual paraphernalia of soldiers, magistrates and Acts of Parliament to stir up the necessary atmosphere of alarm and pandemonium. There were just four acts, each of which opened with an election and closed with Wilkes being refused the seat. The mob knew its part, it provided a crescendo of fury which reached a dreadful climax with the appointment of the defeated candidate, Luttrell, to fill the vacancy. As the curtain fell, the audience saw to its horror that George was no longer at grips with Wilkes; his opponent now was the Middlesex mob.

Wilkes was a Whig: his party, however, did not hurry to the rescue. He had always been something of a forlorn figure among the influential families who controlled the frowns and smiles of political fortune. Once or twice, when he had been tempted to fly with the falcons, he had returned to the nest with ruffled wing, and still more ruffled temper, usually to celebrate the excursion with a pamphlet or two in which the big-wigs were treated with clumsy caricature or gleeful impudence. As a rule, the incident closed with everyone in ugly humour—except Wilkes. Can we wonder, then, if those who served as targets for this ridicule should be well content to let Wilkes and the parliament fight it out? Is it strange that they should be willing spectators of such a promising squabble? It was the appointment which changed the course of events. The king and his ministers had committed a grave error, for in the minds of most men parliament might expel but not disqualify. The constitution was threatened: and as everyone knows, the eighteenth-century Whig considered himself a sort of Lord High Protector of the Constitution.

Burke, although over forty and a man of reputation in literary circles, was still an apprentice to politics. This was only his second parliament, and he sat with the rest of the Rockingham faction, opposed almost as much to Chatham's Whigs as to the Ministry. From him as from most others the abuse of Wilkes drew only mild

protest in the early stages; it was the last act which raised the storm. In 1770 Burke published *Thoughts on the Present Discontents*, which was immediately recognized by most of the public as a Rockinghamite manifesto. It was an attempt to review the inheritance of George, to expose the trend of his policy, to discredit the King's Friends, to vindicate the public service, to heap honour on the party system, to examine the Middlesex dispute—and in a mild sort of way protest against the treatment of Wilkes. It was generally considered a bold attack, but it was obviously a party pamphlet, intended to serve the interest of Wilkes no more than necessary. Whether or not Burke spoke his own opinions entirely, we can only guess:—Wilkes was an accomplished demagogue, Burke was somewhat given to snobbery. Could the two have much in common?

When these events stirred the kingdom, Fox was a youth of nineteen, a member of parliament, a neophyte among the King's Friends—and about the most promising dandy one can imagine. The news of his election for Midhurst did not interrupt the gay amusements in which he was engaged on the Continent; it was six months before he claimed his seat. But then we cannot expect a youth to settle soberly into the dull routine of politics, especially a youth with the vigour and patrimony of Fox. However, as we have seen, politics at this moment were not particularly dull. There were mobs, there were riots, there were all sorts of election entertainments—what more could a young man ask? There was no question which side he should take; that was pretty well decided by circumstance. Was he not a son and satellite of Holland? Was not Wilkes a rogue? With youth it is usually the person, not the policy, that counts, and Fox was plainly disgusted by these enemies of law and order. With a gallant enthusiasm, which he later lavished upon far different causes, he obliged his Tory patrons with speeches full of promise and pomposity. He sat on platforms. He joined in the rough-and-tumble of parades. With his elder brother, he opened the doors of Holland House and invited Colonel Luttrell to breakfast.

The aftermath is exceedingly interesting. Before long, Burke and Fox sat side by side among the Whigs, beginning a partnership that was the talk of the town. Wilkes again contested Middlesex in 1774, won it and took his seat without a murmur of protest from the Ministry. Thereafter he rises from oblivion only once in a while, but these emergencies are always dramatic. One smiles to see him in the company of that stiff-backed Tory, Doctor Johnson, disputing passages of Horace and exchanging epithets against the

Scots. The smile becomes a chuckle when, ten years after the Holland House breakfast, we peep into Westminster Hall during an election rally and find Wilkes, by this time an ex-Lord Mayor, supporting the candidacy of Charles James Fox.

## II

Although the policy which provoked the American colonists was undoubtedly a mistaken one and the revolution itself a sad disaster, George the Third rendered posterity at least one service:—he brought into harmony, if not into unison, the three supreme voices of England's parliament. It may have been the merest accident, and it may be argued that some other event might as readily have put Chatham, Burke and Fox on one side of the House; but the fact remains, no other event ever did. And not only were these tart tongues raised at once and to one purpose, they were also raised to a rare pitch of power and sweetness. As a statesman Chatham is remembered for his conquest of the French: as an orator he has a reputation resting entirely upon his American speeches. Much the same is true of Burke. When he spoke on domestic policy in his early years, he was usually pedantic; when he dealt with India or the French Revolution, he never was quite reasonable; it is only when he champions the colonists that he strikes the mellow mood. Fox too was at his best, though for another reason. He was reaching maturity, and American conciliation was the first cause of his heart. With youthful vigour and freshness he threw himself into the argument, growing in power and reputation with each new encounter. In his first parliament he drew from Walpole the comment; "He answered Burke with great quickness and parts, but with confidence equally premature". The promise was now fulfilled when he attracted to the doors of the House a crowd of fashionable ladies with the formidable Duchess of Devonshire at their head. Almost in a bound he had become worthy of a place in this trio of talent.

Once again Burke spoke for his party. During the interval his fame in the country and influence with his associates had grown enormously, to be sure: still he was far from independent. The driver's seat was now his without dispute, but the coach wore the arms of Rockingham. However that may be, the history of the Rockinghamite opposition to Lord North is simply the story of Edmund Burke. He laboured desperately to prevent the revolution; but when it actually came, his energy was largely spent. In two masterly speeches he indicted the Government's policy and

offered a scheme for conciliation. The Ministry slept. In public letters to the sheriffs of his constituency, Bristol, he sought to arouse the nation. His countrymen were indifferent. This furious campaign lasted two years, and throughout it Lord North slept on the Treasury bench while England slept in its pub. Now Burke did not hanker after applause, in fact he usually seemed to prefer abuse, but he was not the man to stomach apathy. If his audience would not listen, he would grow sulky or change his tune. On this occasion the course was clear. In 1776 the Rockingham Whigs decided to secede from parliament, and thereafter their opposition was weak and irregular.

With Fox it was different. After he crossed the floor of the Commons in 1774, he did not immediately join the Whig factions, nor did he ever subscribe entirely to their doctrines. He spoke for himself. With astonishing bad manners he called North a blundering pilot and a knave; with graceful animation he answered Lord George Germaine in a speech which brought compliments from all sides; with polite prudence he refused the invitation to secede with the followers of Rockingham, and with shrewd judgment he alternated his attacks between the policy and the ministers who pursued it. In most things he agreed with Burke, in condemnation of the troublesome taxes, in the scheme for reconciliation; but when he declared "If America must be defeated or abandoned, I would abandon it," he certainly went further than Burke or the majority of Whigs would ever go. His opinions, or perhaps it was his personality, did attract some support however, and he gradually became the leader of a small, fierce faction. His boisterous spirit also aroused enemies. Writing to the Prime Minister, George gleefully breaks the news that Fox is about to set out for Paris, and then offers this advice: "I think you cannot do better than bring as much forward during the time parliament shall be assembled as can with propriety be done, as real business is never so well considered as when the attention of the House is not taken up by noisy declamation".

Since it is during this period that Burke and Fox first became friends, we may find it profitable to enquire somewhat further into the extent of their intimacy. As we have seen, their political opinions offered no obstacle, and their interests apart from politics were even more akin. Both were members of the famous Club, where conversation was erudite—and endless. There and elsewhere Fox listened with attentive admiration to the generous talk of his elder, acknowledging in after years that from these conversations he had learnt more than from all the books he had ever

read. They wrote letters too, filled mostly with politics, but far from prosaic and certainly in a tone of polite affection. Fox, in these, was not at his best. His style is pompous, and one grows weary with its artificial phrases. But the genial grace of Burke is ample compensation; his splendid sallies come bursting through as he writes: "What the Tories are when embodied and united with their natural head, the Crown, and animated by their clergy, no man knows better than yourself". There is perhaps nothing very profound in his part of the correspondence; still, profundity is never so welcome as warmth. What is more to our purpose, however, is that the relation is tutor and pupil throughout. Fox admires and Burke readily accepts the admiration. The twenty years which separated them was no necessary barrier to their friendship, it was rather the accident which brought them together at a time when one was looking for a master and the other for a disciple. They dined out together, and were seen about town, it is true; yet each continued his former amusements. Burke was still the principal crone of Johnson, and entertained splendidly at Beaconsfield. Fox was oftener at Almack's than the Turk's Head, and to his acquaintances it seemed his sessions at the gaming tables were only punctuated by his appearances in the House. His indifference to criticism was amazing, both in politics and out. When he visited Madame du Deffand in Paris, she was blind to all but his debts, and her comment was *Votre Charles Fox n'est pas un homme; il a l'audace d'un Cromwell*. This reckless gaiety, this careless indulgence, even though tempered with a free and courageous spirit, was hardly meant to match the sober dignity of Burke.

As for the war, it was a complete disaster, and after 1778 everybody but the king was willing to admit defeat and be done with it. The Ministry pursued its policy with less success than ever; the colonists began to squabble amongst themselves over a federal constitution; Lord North protested his incompetence to the king and demonstrated it to everybody; Fox carried on the opposition with whatever support he could muster. It was on the sixth of April, 1780, that one of the Foxites moved: "That the influence of the Crown has increased, is increasing, and ought to be diminished." The motion carried, and before long North resigned. Apparently the first skirmish with the king had ended in victory. Burke had begun the battle; yet in the royal mind there is no doubt most of the blame went to Fox.

### III

Lord North's resignation proved, to the Whigs, a mixed blessing—or perhaps no blessing at all. Just as soon as the duty

of opposition was removed from their shoulders and a measure of power came within their grasp, they began to squabble furiously among themselves. The issues of the moment—economical and parliamentary reform, Indian affairs and a settlement with America—were not particularly controversial, and not at all the sort one would expect to cause confusion in a party with an appetite for office; yet in 1782, as a dozen years earlier, the warring factions failed completely to find a common ground. Rockingham to be sure took the seals; but when he died shortly after, the Ministry fell apart just like any arch robbed of its keystone. Here began that ridiculous parade which Walpole neatly describes in a letter to Lady Ossary:

I hope, Madam, you have been rejoiced at the appointment of every new Prime Minister that we have had this last fortnight, Mr. W. Pitt, the Duke of Portland, Lord Temple, Lord Gower and Lord Thurlow. There may have been more for aught I know. . . . At present there is no premier at all, at least there was not a quarter of an hour ago.

If he had put to his list the ill-fated coalition of Fox and North, he would have brought this exasperating game of musical chairs to its inevitable climax. When next the music stopped (the musicians having been handsomely bribed by the king) William Pitt was the survivor—and he took the seat to stay.

Burke's part in this strange performance was a deep disappointment both to himself and to his supporters. He was given the Pay Office without cabinet rank, indeed a miserable reward for his outstanding service, but his conduct even in this minor position, under the coalition at least, was singularly indiscreet. The scheme for economical reform, which he not only proposed but also to some extent carried into effect, was indeed a real accomplishment; however, it was about the only one. The terms of Fox's India Bill were his: so also were the charges against Warren Hastings, which led him to become stage manager of a dreadful performance, as futile as it was extravagant. Far more pitiful even than this is the spectacle of tremendous talents being gradually corrupted by unreasonable prejudices, sheer hatred and bitter jealousy. Burke's temper was becoming very ugly; Hastings and the East India directors had already felt its fierceness, and before long his friends would too.

Part of the trouble arose from the trend of party fortune, or rather perhaps the distribution of party favours. Shelbourne, a new recruit, was given a place in the front rank almost immediately. Sheridan, a good-natured dilettante, was taken into the party



councils. Fox now had the lead in the Commons; and the precocious Pitt, though by this time a renegade Whig, was given preferment out of all proportion to his parts. Burke stood out in the cold. His friends were willing enough to use his talents, but not very ready to pay the price.

When the Whigs were in office, Fox was Foreign Secretary; when they were out, a dissolute gamester. During the short periods of power, no one paid more scrupulous attention to business. He forsook his usual resorts and pastimes, made brilliant speeches in the House, and gave the country a far more lively foreign policy than it had enjoyed for a long time. The moment he was turned out of the secretary's chair, he was the same old Fox. Then he would set out for Newmarket (with the Prince of Wales usually in tow) and squander whatever was left of a fortune after faro at Brooks's. Stories of this extraordinary dissipation were spreading all over the kingdom. His countrymen were growing weary of such extravagance; his friends, of such debts; but in spite of these vexations Fox was still as good-humoured as ever, and as ready to serve every noble cause.

#### IV

The last act is pure tragedy. In one corner of the stage, a man grown old without any of the comforts and compensations which sometimes grace the good; a warm romantic who takes alarm at the very moment when the fires of romance are being set aflame; a hater of fanaticism suddenly himself become fanatic; a spirited companion whom dispute and death have robbed of his friends; and perhaps most sad of all, a hopeful father broken now completely at the death-bed of his son! Opposite stands another figure whose tragedy, while it may be less distinct, is equally severe and certain. Beyond the merry eye and ample waist lies a much tortured spirit, tortured as well from within as without. A lover of virtue corrupted by vice: a dreamer of dreams teased by reality. Never complaining, always apparently merry, never quite losing hope, and with power in his grasp he dies. The curtain falls with greed and pride and stupidity still omnipotent.

The changes wrought by the years in Burke were not so much in his principles as in his temper. Without the least inconsistency the champion of the American Revolution became the critic of the French. Burke was always a Conservative at heart and, as Coleridge has pointed out, his principles did not change, it was only his inferences. The size of the French undertaking quite appalled him, and without troubling to enquire into the original condition of

things (a natural but somewhat unusual precaution) he flew into a tantrum at the very moment when the schemes of moderate men seemed likely to succeed. Not content with disrupting the Whigs by these strange manoeuvres, Burke was a perfect fury among the Tories. Until his arrival the camp was quiet, and Pitt was paying as little attention as possible to events across the Channel. But there could be no calm with Burke. War abroad and all sorts of gags at home followed in his train. Once again the Tories were "embodied and united with their natural head, the Crown, and animated by their clergy,"—only this time Burke was their High Priest.

Could the Whigs look on without wonder? Their old philosopher and guide gone over to the Tories! It was amazing news. "A damned wrong-headed fellow, through his whole life jealous and obstinate," was the comment attributed to Fox when he was not yet recovered from the shock, and the whole party was in much the same mood. Soon, however, their senses revived and they took up the battle with their accustomed spirit. Steadily they opposed the war, repeatedly they denounced the various acts by which Pitt tried to strangle radical and even liberal opinion, once or twice they made overtures to Burke only to be refused, and they used every opportunity to applaud the spirit, if not the character, of the Revolution. But it was hopeless. Every passion in the country was roused, and reform is a tender passion which usually burns alone. Fox was moderate and sensible, but the kingdom was in a rage and would not hear him. Finally in 1797 both antagonists withdrew—Burke at the call of the inevitable (he died on the ninth of July) and Fox, in secession, retired to the gentle pleasures of his garden and his Vergil. Once afterward he came to office, only for a few months however, and at the price of compromise with the Grenvilles. Still, it was a queer trick of fortune that, after a life in opposition, he should die in office.

Among the Victorians, saints were much invoked. It was only natural therefore that the political parties should feel the need of some superior spirit as patron and adviser. The Tories, with their respect for constitutional complacency and settled security, chose Edmund Burke; on the other hand the Whigs, toying timidly with the spirit of reform and boasting of a love for liberty, became worshippers at the shrine of Charles Fox. And, after all, did they not choose well?