

Picking up the Pieces, 1784–1785

In the summer of 1784, Burke's political career seemed to be sputtering to an inglorious close. In 1765, at the late age of 35, he had entered English politics as private secretary to the Marquis of Rockingham (1730–82), who had just been unexpectedly elevated to high office as First Lord of the Treasury. A year later, when Rockingham went into opposition, Burke followed him, serving as his faithful subordinate and spokesman through a long and dispiriting sojourn in the political wilderness. By 1782, when Rockingham finally returned to office, Burke's character had hardened, making him increasingly testy, inflexible, and self-righteous. Partly thanks to his difficult personality, instead of receiving the Cabinet position which his service had earned and his abilities deserved, his reward was the lucrative but subordinate post of Paymaster-General of the Forces. Then, on 1 July, after only three months in office, Rockingham died. Burke lost the patron who embodied his ideal of political virtue, and the hopes and expectations which had consoled him through those long years of opposition were blasted.

Burke tried hard to adjust. At first, indeed, some features of the political landscape appeared depressingly familiar. On Rockingham's death, George III (1738–1820) offered the Treasury to the Earl of Shelburne (1737–1805), who had returned to office with Rockingham in an uneasy alliance. For Burke and his friends, the royal choice represented an attempt to revive the king's old 'system', based on 'secret influence', which Rockingham and his friends thought they had destroyed. Unwilling to serve under a minister whom they distrusted, they resigned. At least Shelburne, formerly a treacherous colleague, was now exposed as an open enemy. After several months of instability and intrigue, Shelburne's ministry was defeated in the House of Commons. Burke's party, led now by Charles James Fox (1749–1806), returned to office in April 1783, in a pragmatic (and, as many thought, unscrupulous) alliance with their old antagonist Lord North (1732–92). Again excluded from the Cabinet, Burke was re-appointed

Paymaster. In one respect, at least, this second period of office was more rewarding, for he was chiefly responsible for an important piece of legislation, the controversial measure known as Fox's India Bill. In its defence, on 1 December 1783, Burke delivered one of the finest of his formal speeches. Had Fox's bill been enacted, Burke might have been remembered as the architect of what he grandiloquently styled the 'Magna Charta of Hindostan' (*WS* v. 386). But the Fox–North Coalition, lacking royal confidence, was built on weak foundations. Taking advantage of the India Bill's unpopularity, on 19 December, the king, having unscrupulously engineered the bill's defeat, dismissed the Coalition and appointed the young William Pitt (1759–1806) to the Treasury. Convinced that this move was unconstitutional, Fox, Burke, and their friends fought a long parliamentary battle to oust Pitt and recapture the government, even against the king's antagonism. Only after the general election of March 1784 did Burke realize that public opinion, so far as it found expression through the electoral system, was unmistakably against them. Over a hundred of Fox's supporters (dubbed 'Fox's martyrs') lost their seats. Pitt would remain Prime Minister for the remainder of Burke's life, and beyond. Burke had to digest an unpalatable reality. 'The people did not like our work', he confessed to his friend William Baker (1743–1824, one of 'Fox's martyrs'), 'and they joined the Court to pull it down' (22 June 1784: *C* v. 154). This was a bitter admission for one who, since his entry into politics, had consistently championed the rights and interests (if not always the temporary opinions) of 'the people' against 'the court', the king and those unscrupulous politicians who sought to extend and exalt the royal prerogative (the 'king's friends' of Burke's 1770 pamphlet *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents*).

Such a defeat would have prompted many a politician to re-examine his principles and the articles of his faith. On Burke, its effect was the opposite. For him, it only reconfirmed the lesson he had learned from his first session in Parliament, in 1766: distrust of the 'secret influence' of the Crown. To this capacious conspiracy theory Burke had repeatedly appealed to explain the unpopularity of his own party and the aristocratic politics that it represented. In the 1760s, the sinister influence of Lord Bute (1713–92) and the 'king's friends' had been the object of his hatred and mistrust. Now, refurbishing his theory, Burke simply replaced the 'king's friends' by another shadowy entity, the 'Bengal squad'. Pitt owed his victory in the 1784 election, so Burke believed, in large part to the money, influence, and propaganda mobilized by this group against the Coalition and its India Bill. Having pillaged India, they were now corruptly using part of their spoils to

purchase immunity to continue their depredations.¹ This nightmare never lost its grip on his imagination.²

Burke was therefore ready and eager to continue the fight against Pitt, as he had earlier battled North and Shelburne. But since the death of Rockingham his importance in his party had waned, and his opinions were less regarded by the younger men who (on both sides of the Commons) had now taken the lead. A new generation now dominated the Commons: Pitt, on the Treasury bench, supported by William Wyndham Grenville (1759–1834), and Henry Dundas (1742–1811); on the opposition side, Fox, and Richard Brinsley Sheridan (1751–1816), another Irish adventurer and Burke's rival for the palm of parliamentary oratory. At 54, Burke seemed an old man, a veteran lagging superfluously on the stage.

The first session after the 1784 election exposed Burke to a series of humiliations. On 14 June, when he moved a gargantuan resolution embodying a comprehensive defence of the measures of the Coalition, the quixotic gesture embarrassed even his own party. On 16 June, he left the chamber in high dudgeon after failing to gain a hearing in the debate on parliamentary reform. He was repeatedly baited by the younger members: a 'parcel of boys', as he called them.³ Representative of the abusive contempt heaped on Burke is a satirical poem in ridicule of his long motion of 14 June. Once a parliamentary Mercutio, the 'gay *enlivener* of each dull debate', Burke has sunk into a Thersites, his impotent speeches the 'rank effusion of a canker'd heart':

Why, like old *Priam*, wilt thou *Pyrrhus* fight
With arms unequal, with unequal might?
Like feeble *Priam*'s spear too weak to wound,
Thy bolt of slander tumbles to the ground.

Burke should retire rather than thus disgrace thy age | In puny wrangling and ignoble rage'.⁴ Stung by such taunts, Burke voiced a reluctance to continue the unequal struggle. To William Baker, he averred that 'for me to

¹ In the *Speech on the Nabob of Arcot's Debts* (28 Feb. 1785), E.B. charged Richard Atkinson (1735–85), with keeping 'a sort of public office or counting-house, where the whole business of the last general election was managed' (*WS* v. 543). Atkinson (who made his fortune as a government contractor during the American war) took a leading part in the opposition to Fox's India Bills and was himself elected to Parliament in 1784 (at a by-election; he was defeated at the general election). Belief in an 'Arcot squad' or 'Bengal squad' of MPs was not confined to E.B. In 1782, William Pitt claimed that 'it was a fact pretty well known, and generally understood, that the nabob of Arcot had no less than seven or eight members in that House' (7 May 1782: *PH* xxii. 1419). While the number of MPs with Indian connections increased after the 1784 election, from 31 in the Parliament of 1780–4 to 45 in that of 1784–90, these MPs did not form a bloc or 'squad' (Sir Lewis Namier and John Brooke, *The House of Commons, 1754–1790* (London, 1964), i. 149–56).

² *R* [66]; E.B. to Fitzwilliam, 21 June 1794 (*C* vii. 553); to Sir Hercules Langrishe, 26 May 1795 (viii. 254).

³ 8 June 1784; Debrett, xv. 140–1 (*PH* xxiv. 939–40).

⁴ 'Causidicus', 'On a Late Excentric Motion' (*Public Advertiser*, 19 July 1784).

look forward to the Event of another twenty years toil—it is quite ridiculous’ (*C v.* 154). Yet his actions belied this professed pessimism. Toil, not repose, was his element. He soon resumed an active and energetic political life, devoted to the causes and values in which he so fervently believed.

If not ready to retire, Burke was certainly glad of a temporary retreat to his country estate at Beaconsfield. Shortly after the fiasco of his motion of 14 June, he left London, although the session had more than two months to run.⁵ Beaconsfield offered many consolations besides escape from the mortifications of Westminster. Its attractions are admiringly if conventionally conveyed in a poem by the daughter of Richard Shackleton (1726–92), Burke’s oldest friend. When the Shackletons visited Beaconsfield in June, Mary (1758–1826) had been captivated by the estate and its master. During the summer, she expressed her homage in a topographical poem in the tradition of Ben Jonson’s ‘To Penshurst’ (*c.* 1612). In Mary’s vision, the imposing house, the wooded walks and the lush pastures, the arable fields and the growing plantations, the rustic tea-house and the neat farmstead, form an idyllic landscape, a fit setting for the principal figure, a man at once dignified and benevolent, of infinite versatility and abilities, who can turn from the weightiest problems of empire to compound pills for the poor.⁶ Tardy in responding to this effusion, Burke made up for the delay with a graceful letter of compliment, a genre at which he excelled. ‘You great artists’, he observed, ‘never draw what is before you, but improve it up to the Standard of perfection in your own Minds. In this description I know nothing of myself; but what is better, and may be of more use, I know, what a good Judge thinks I ought to be.’ As usual, he injected a little mild criticism in order to preserve his praise from sounding fulsome (13 Dec. 1784: *C v.* 200–1). Granting that Mary idealizes, the core of her poem captures an important truth. Burke’s range of interests and activities was remarkable, and he did literally dispense medicines for the poor as well as champion the oppressed millions of Bengal.⁷

The pleasure Burke took in country life and in the supervision of his farm was unaffected. But Beaconsfield was no Eden. Despite his professions to the contrary, even there Burke could never quite forget the tumults and the anxieties of political life. More palpable vexations were also liable to intrude. In 1784, these included a lawsuit, ‘a deluge of rain’ at harvest time (24 Aug.: *C v.* 167), and a robbery. The lawsuit was a libel case against a newspaper, in which, though technically victorious, Burke was awarded derisory damages

⁵ E.B. returned for a few days at the end of July, to oppose Pitt’s India Bill and to move for some papers relating to Hastings (*WS v.* 454–78).

⁶ ‘Beaconsfield, the Seat of Edmund Burke’; Mary Leadbeater (she married in 1791), *Poems* (Dublin, 1808), 95–101. The copy sent to E.B. in 1784 is at NRO (A. xxiv. 83).

⁷ Mary ‘saw this famous Senator . . . mixing with his own hands pills for the sick Poor’ (extract from a letter of 7 Sept. 1784 to an unknown correspondent; YB Osborn Shelves, Ballitore Boxes). E.B.’s most recent effort on behalf of the oppressed millions was his *Speech on Fox’s India Bill* of 1 Dec. 1783.

of £100 instead of the £5,000 he had sought.⁸ The rain was the easiest to bear, for even Burke could not take it personally. Then, on 28 September, while the Burkes were out, a highly professional team of criminals, dressed as gentlemen and servants, drove up to the house in broad daylight and made off with about 500 ounces of plate. Though observed, they were presumed to be legitimate visitors.⁹ The thieves were never found, nor the plate recovered. Burke's wife Jane (1734–1812) noted ruefully that their friends would now have to bring their own cutlery, in the French fashion. She consoled herself with the thought that 'if we are poor, we are honest'.¹⁰ This consolation was pleasantly reinforced by Mary Shackleton's poem (which probably reached the Burkes soon after the robbery), which depicts Beaconsfield as an island of virtue and benevolence in a wicked world.

The contents of the post were not always so agreeable. On the heels of the poem came a letter from Charles Bembridge (d. 1794), one of the two accountants in the Pay Office, suspended on suspicion of peculation, whom Burke had generously but unwisely reinstated soon after returning to office in April 1783. Unluckily for Burke, both men were indeed guilty. The second clerk, John Powell, committed suicide in May. Bembridge was later convicted, and sentenced to a fine and six months' imprisonment. This *débâcle* proved the worst embarrassment of Burke's short ministerial career. Reviving such unpleasant memories, no letter from Bembridge could have been other than unwelcome. The one Burke received on 2 October 1784 (C v. 169), was doubly so, for it carried another and more wounding sting, revealing the apparent perfidy of Richard Champion (1743–91), the first and closest of his political friends at Bristol. In order to help him, after Champion's porcelain manufactory had ended in bankruptcy, when Burke was appointed Paymaster, on each occasion he had named Champion as his deputy. In 1784, with Burke out of office and no other prospect of patronage in England, Champion decided to emigrate to America. When Bembridge reported to Burke his '*great Astonishment*' on hearing of Champion's imminent departure, Burke inferred that some discreditable financial transaction between them was about to be revealed. If so, Burke himself would not escape blame. Writing to his son Richard (1758–94), he called Bembridge 'a wild, precipitate senseless, and now desperate wretch'. To Bembridge himself, he protested his ignorance of any dealings between him and Champion, and affirmed his resolve not to interfere. 'I scarcely remember a troublesome affair in my life which has not arisen from a single cause', he groaned: 'the active part I have taken in other peoples concerns, where no advantage could possibly arise to myself, but where the business has subjected me to obloquy and misrepresentation'

⁸ E.B. sued the *Public Advertiser* for libels published in 1783. The case was tried on 15 July 1784 (C v. 159).

⁹ *Morning Herald*, 2 Oct. 1784; *Whitehall Evening Post*, 2 Oct.; *Annual Register* (1784–5), 202.

¹⁰ J.B. to Walker King, 3 Nov. 1784 (WWM BkP 1/1935).

(2 Oct.: 171). To Champion, he wrote at greater length and with more bitterness, while trying to sound sorry rather than angry. ‘All this I can break my Mind to’, he bleated, after reviewing the episode, ‘But new disputes and scuffles are too much for me; when I want repose as much as meat and drink’ (173).

Burke’s letter did not reach Champion before he sailed, and was not forwarded; nor did the two ever correspond again.¹¹ The ending of their friendship was the greater loss, because both Champion and his wife had been friends of the whole Burke family. Their affectionate intimacy is amply documented in the series of chatty letters that Burke’s brother Richard (1733–94) wrote to Champion.¹² That such a friend should have ‘less considered my *being* than his own temporary convenience’ (2 Oct. 1784: *C v.* 171) was the more wounding for being so unexpected. To his son, Burke lamented, as he had to Bembridge, ‘having been brought by my kindness to many people into more trouble than I can or will in future attempt to go through with’ (170). Yet he did not long keep this resolution. To the end of his life, he continued to entangle himself in beneficent schemes that often caused him more annoyance and frustration than satisfaction. Though he claimed to ‘want repose as much as meat and drink’, activity and business, however unrewarding, even ‘disputes and scuffles’, were the true nutriment of his soul.

Burke’s temper was easily ignited by a letter, especially one that called into question his own conduct or opinions. Nor, once engaged, could he easily let a matter rest. Though he had once professed not to understand the pleasure that the old Duke of Newcastle (1603–1768) seemed to take in a voluminous and time-consuming correspondence, Burke too came to find such activity ‘a sort of recreation’ (*C ii.* 40). Burke was an obsessive straightener of the record, a trait which makes his letters sometimes reveal more than he intended. A striking example is the case of Catherine Ridge (c. 1758–c. 1839), which surfaced about two weeks after the Bembridge affair. Catherine was the eldest daughter of John Ridge (c. 1728–76), one of Burke’s oldest Irish friends. In 1757, newly married himself, Burke had witnessed Ridge’s marriage. In 1773, on his last visit to London, Ridge had brought Catherine with him. The Burkes were delighted with her, and to keep her memory green, Ridge presented them with her portrait by Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723–92).¹³ Shortly thereafter, Ridge died, leaving six children without provision, though with some expectations from an uncle in the West Indies.¹⁴ Through the good offices of the Chief Secretary, Sir John Blaquiere (1732–1812),

¹¹ R.B. Jr. to R.B. Sr., n.d. (NRO A. XII. 7; *C v.* 173); E.B. to Bembridge, 29 Aug. 1791 (vi. 374–5). W.B. occasionally wrote to Champion from India.

¹² Most of R.B. Sr.’s letters to Champion are in NRO A. XVI. 1–38.

¹³ Catherine Ridge sat for Reynolds in December 1773; Charles Robert Leslie and Tom Taylor, *Life and Times of Sir Joshua Reynolds* (London, 1865), ii. 55. The portrait is reproduced in David Mannings, *Sir Joshua Reynolds: A Complete Catalogue of his Paintings* (New Haven, 2000), ii. 439.

¹⁴ James Ridge, a sugar planter in Jamaica, died on 8 Mar. 1784. E.B. was one of his executors, and in consequence a trustee for John Ridge, Jr., the principal beneficiary. The younger Ridge was a refractory

Burke obtained for Catherine a pension of £100 a year on the Irish establishment. To make the application, he had swallowed his pride and overcome his rooted dislike of asking for favours from those to whom, politically, he was in declared opposition. In 1773, Blaquiere had been the chief proponent of an Irish Absentee Tax. Opposition to it was fuelled from England, principally by Rockingham and Burke, and they managed to force its withdrawal. This willingness to expose himself to a rebuff for the child of his late friend shows Burke at his disinterested best. Blaquiere, in turn, evinced magnanimity in supporting such a request from a political opponent, when he had numerous dependants and expectants of his own.¹⁵

As with Burke's restoration of Bembridge, however, this charitable impulse brought more vexation than satisfaction. In this case, Catherine's pension excited or exacerbated family feuds and tensions. These erupted in 1784, when the younger sisters, blind Sarah (*c.*1766–*c.*1840) and Ann (*c.*1768–?), demanded that the pension be shared with them, claiming that this had been the original intention of the grant. The sisters appealed to Blaquiere, who was sympathetic, but initially unwilling to take action without consulting Burke. Explaining that he had envisaged the pension as a kind of marriage portion, Burke took Catherine's part, opposed the redistribution, and accused the younger sisters of exaggerating their poverty and of fomenting family discord. If they needed assistance, their brother, who had inherited about £1,000 a year from his uncle, was better able to assist them than Catherine (13 Oct. 1784: *C v.* 174–7). In response, while professing that Burke's opinion was 'Law and Gospel' to him on the subject, Blaquiere sought to engage his sympathies for the younger sisters:

if You had seen as I did last week in Dublin, and I never saw either of them before, the two Younger Sisters, both pretty, one of em even handsome, Leading the Elder, Stone blind, thro the Streets, with elegant deportments, but tattered rags, seeking almost for bread, Your heart woud have yarned, and You woud have been a Stronger advocate for something compulsory upon Miss Ridge than even I am at this moment—(6 Nov.: 181)

Burke was himself a master of pathos. Lachrymose scenes such as this can be found in some of his speeches.¹⁶ Accustomed to deploy affective rhetoric, he was the less likely to fall prey to it himself, or to respond to such sentimentality. Far from converting Burke, Blaquiere's appeal provoked him (as

teenager, and the trusteeship brought E.B. much vexation (E.B. to Charles O'Hara, Jr., 20 June, 11 July, and 22 Nov. 1784: *C v.* 152–3, 157–8, 190–2).

¹⁵ In his letter to E.B. of 28 June 1776, Blaquiere asked him to maintain a discreet silence about his part in obtaining the pension, 'circumstanced as we awkwardly stand together in our politicks' (NRO A. VIII. 50).

¹⁶ An example is E.B.'s speech of 6 Feb. 1778, attacking the use of Indian auxiliaries (*WS* iii. 355–66). Contemporary comments singled out as especially affecting a passage on the murder, on her wedding day, of a Miss McCrea (358).

opposition usually did) to a lengthier and more elaborately argued restatement of his original position. The incomplete copy that survives extends to about 2,500 words (182–7); the entire letter might have been twice as long. Even the extant portion illustrates Burke's rhetorical versatility. As if in implied criticism of Blaquiere's emotive appeal, he argued his case drily with legal precision, adducing the wills and the known or presumed intentions of the deceased parties. The sisters' odyssey to Dublin he dismissed as a publicity-seeking charade, more deserving of censure than sympathy.

Blaquiere, in turn, was no more willing than Burke to relinquish his own judgement. While conceding that he had misunderstood Burke's intentions, he affirmed that the Lord-Lieutenant had meant the pension to be shared among the three sisters, and recommended that it should be so divided. The Irish government naturally accepted his advice.¹⁷ Burke was chagrined. Venting his spleen in a letter to Michael Ridge (d. c.1820; John's surviving brother), he expatiated on the family's ingratitude more freely than he had in writing to Blaquiere (C v. 192–5). Nevertheless, he continued his efforts to improve Catherine's marriageability, and in 1791 she finally found a husband.¹⁸ Slight in itself, the episode exemplifies several facets of Burke's character. He was capable of active and disinterested benevolence. At no point did he stand to gain, personally or politically. Equally in evidence is his prickly self-righteousness. Most tellingly, once embarked, he could not disengage himself. Disagreement, as always, provoked him not to compromise or concession (he might, for example, have accepted Blaquiere's suggestion that, as the eldest, Catherine should receive £50, and her sisters £25 each), but to a deeper self-entrenchment.

Two months after the squabble among the Ridge sisters revived memories of one old friendship, another (though rivalry might be the more appropriate term) was severed when Samuel Johnson (1709–84) died on 13 December. Burke had known Johnson since about 1758. Intimate they had never been, both being too possessed by an urge to dominate. Politics kept them further part. Johnson had vehemently condemned the Seven Years War as a quarrel between robbers about possessions to which neither had any just claim.¹⁹ Burke spent the summer of 1756 helping his cousin William Burke (1728–98) with the *Account of the European Settlements in America* (1757), which vindicates British colonial ambitions. Burke's election to Parliament deepened the divide, leaving him less time for his old literary friends and multiplying the subjects about which he and Johnson disagreed. On successive political controversies, the two took opposite sides. Each of Johnson's four political pamphlets of 1770–4 attacks a cause that Burke championed in Parliament.²⁰

¹⁷ Blaquiere to E.B., 8 April 1785 (NRO A. II. 50); Blaquiere to Thomas Orde, 11 Aug. (cited C v. 195).

¹⁸ Lord Earlsfort to E.B., 17 Jan. 1787 (WWM BkP 1/2056); C v. 195.

¹⁹ 'Observations on the Present State of Affairs' (1756), in *Works* (New Haven, 1958–), x. 185–96.

²⁰ *The False Alarm* (1770) defends the seating of Luttrell in place of Wilkes, declared incapable of election. *Thoughts on Falkland's Islands* (1771) deflates the importance of the dispute with Spain, and

No wonder that, to preserve civility, they had to avoid politics. ‘I can live very well with Burke,’ Johnson claimed: ‘I love his knowledge, his genius, his diffusion, and affluence of conversation; but I would not talk to him of the Rockingham party.’²¹ Yet during those years Burke was a politician to the marrow. To keep the peace, they sharpened their wits on safer questions, such as the comparative merits of Homer and Virgil.²²

Johnson and Burke respected each other’s abilities. On occasion, they spent a pleasant evening together, discussing an academic topic such as the antiquity of Stonehenge. More commonly, they met in public as intellectual gladiators. Once, towards midnight, they fought a battle of wits so absorbing that one of the ladies in the audience exclaimed, ‘*there is no rising unless somebody will cry fire*’.²³ Politics, too, remained an insuperable barrier to true friendship. Johnson’s reiterated insistence on Burke being ‘an extraordinary man’ sounds like a determined attempt to be fair to an enemy.²⁴ Burke was less generous, his mind more warped by partisan prejudices. In 1770, when Johnson was attacked by name in the Commons, and opprobriously linked with the scurrilous pamphleteer John Shebbeare (1709–88), Burke did not rise to his defence.²⁵ Two years after Johnson’s death, he could still be savage where Johnson’s politics was concerned.²⁶ Not until 1792 did he deliver a public tribute that reciprocated the many encomiums he had received from Johnson.²⁷

In retrospect, both Johnson and Burke are readily perceived as champions of what are now termed ‘conservative’ values. Both upheld the prescriptive rights of property, the utility of the social hierarchy, and the restriction of political rights to the educated minority. Johnson was the more backward

argues against a war. *The Patriot* (1774) exposes the false ‘patriotism’ of the opposition at the time of the 1774 election. *Taxation No Tyranny* (1775) supports the right of the British Parliament to impose taxes on the American colonies.

²¹ Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill, rev. L. F. Powell (Oxford, 1934–64), ii, 181 (10 Apr. 1772).

²² *Ibid.* iii, 193 n. 3 (an undated contribution from Bennet Langton).
²³ Johnson to Hester Thrale, 9 Oct. 1783 (Stonehenge), 23 May 1780 (‘*no rising*’); in *Letters*, ed. Bruce Redford (Princeton, 1992–4), iv, 221, iii, 258.

²⁴ Thomas W. Copeland, ‘Johnson and Burke’, in *Statesmen, Scholars, and Merchants*, ed. Anne Whiteman, J. S. Bromley, and P. G. M. Dickson (Oxford, 1973), 289–303; Elizabeth R. Lambert, ‘Johnson on Friendship: The Example of Burke’, in *Johnson after Two Hundred Years*, ed. Paul J. Korshin (Philadelphia, 1986), 111–23.

²⁵ On 16 Mar. 1770, Thomas Townshend linked Johnson and Shebbeare as scurrilous pamphleteers. E.B. spoke next, but said nothing about Johnson. William Fitzherbert came to his defence, calling him ‘a pattern of morality’ (BL Egerton MS 221, fos. 22–8). E.B. may not have been present on 16 Feb. 1774, when Fox vindicated Johnson against another attack by Townshend (Egerton MS 251, fos. 297–306; *PH* xvii, 1054).

²⁶ On 16 Nov. 1786, at a dinner given by Sir Joshua Reynolds, E.B. was ‘intemperately abusive to a departed great man’ on subjects as obsolete as the Falklands crisis; Boswell’s Journal, in *Boswell: The English Experiment, 1785–1789*, ed. Irma S. Lustig and Frederick A. Pottle (New York, 1986), 98–9.

²⁷ On 15 Dec. 1792, E.B. called Johnson ‘a great and a good man’ whose ‘virtues were equal to his transcendent talents’ and whose ‘friendship he valued as the greatest consolation and happiness of his life’ (Debrett, xxxiv, 132; *PH* xxx, 109).

looking. While acknowledging that social mobility was inevitable in a modern, commercial society such as Britain, he frequently lamented the decay of social subordination, and the supersession of inherited distinctions by the power of mere wealth, with an ardour not found in Burke before the 1790s.²⁸ Even so, Johnson and Burke can fairly be placed, on general and philosophical grounds, in the same camp. Both were hostile to the ideas and writings from which the modern ‘liberal’ tradition descends. Since such philosophical questions are what chiefly interest posterity, opinions on them are apt to appear most characteristic. Differences on the local and temporary controversies of the day are easily minimized, demoted to an admittedly ‘intense disagreement on *factional* political issues’.²⁹ Neither Burke nor Johnson, however, regarded the questions on which they disagreed as merely factional. From his entry into Parliament until nearly the end of Johnson’s life, Burke had elevated ‘party’ as the foundation of political virtue. Johnson shared George III’s belief that ‘party’ was synonymous with factious self-interest. Johnson was a firm upholder of royal authority; Burke’s politics were aristocratic. On religion, they agreed more closely than on most ‘factional’ issues. Both, for example, showed an unusual respect for Roman Catholicism. Yet closer consideration reveals significant differences. For Johnson, theological beliefs remained of paramount importance, and he was deeply convinced of the exclusive truth of Christian doctrine. Burke cared less for speculative theology. His veneration of Hinduism may even have disposed him to regard Christianity as one of a number of ‘true’ religions that Providence had introduced into the world. The line he drew was between religion (any religion) and atheism, which he thought undermined the basis of society.³⁰

In part, these differences reflect disparities of background and generation. Johnson grew up in an English cathedral city; Burke, in a society where ‘religion’ was too often a shibboleth for privilege. In politics, too, their opinions were much influenced by early experiences. Johnson, born in 1709, was a full generation older. Arriving in London in 1737, he learned his politics during the last, turbulent years of the Walpole ministry, when most writers were ‘patriots’ and most ‘patriots’ in opposition. Once he had outgrown

²⁸ Review of Soame Jenyns, *A Free Inquiry into the Nature and Origin of Evil* (1757); Johnson’s *Works*, xvii. 409–10. Boswell noted that subordination was Johnson’s ‘favourite subject’; *Life of Johnson*, ii. 13 (15 Feb. 1766).

²⁹ James J. Sack, *From Jacobite to Conservative: Reaction and Orthodoxy in Britain, c.1760–1832* (Cambridge, 1993), 91.

³⁰ Speech on Toleration Bill (17 Mar. 1773), *WS* ii. 382–9, esp. 389; E.B. to John Erskine, 12 June 1779 (C iv. 84–5). J. C. D. Clark, ‘Religious Affiliation and Dynastic Allegiance in Eighteenth-Century England: Edmund Burke, Thomas Paine, and Samuel Johnson’, *ELH* 64 (1997), 1029–67; F. P. Lock, ‘Burke and Religion’, in *An Imaginative Whig: Reassessing the Life and Thought of Edmund Burke*, ed. Ian Crowe (Columbia, Mo., 2005), 19–36.

this accidental, youthful predilection, he came to value order and authority (and therefore, in practice, the royal prerogative), and conversely to distrust the factitious, self-interested complaints of the politicians who, out of power, wanted above all to achieve office. Burke arrived in London in 1750 at a time of political stability, even torpor, based on a near-monopoly of power in the hands of a Whig oligarchy. He distrusted the royal prerogative because he associated it with its exercise by George III in the 1760s, when it produced political instability and a succession of short-lived ministries. Thus what Johnson saw as a factious challenge to lawful authority, Burke perceived as a legitimate contention to re-establish the balance of power necessary for the health of the body politic.

Burke's last meeting with Johnson was recorded by Bennet Langton (c. 1736–1801), who found Burke sitting with four or five other friends of the dying sage:

Mr Burke said to him, 'I am afraid, Sir, such a number of us may be oppressive to you.'—'No, Sir, (said Johnson,) it is not so; and I must be in a wretched state, indeed, when your company would not be a delight to me.' Mr Burke, in a tremulous voice, expressive of being very tenderly affected, replied, 'My dear Sir, you have always been too good to me.' Immediately afterwards he went away.³¹

Temporarily at least, Burke could overlook their political differences and even recognize that the balance of magnanimity had been on Johnson's side. Friends of both men were well apprised of the ambiguity of their relations. Telling evidence is the oddly offhand tone in which Sir Joshua Reynolds phrased his request that Burke should act as a pall-bearer at Johnson's funeral in Westminster Abbey:

If I thought this Letter was to be paid for, I really believe it would have stopt my writing, as I have not any thing to say worth twopence. We can scarce expect you would come to town on purpose to attend the Funeral. If you think of doing Dr Johnsons memory that honour, we have fixed on you as the first Pall Bearer with Mr Fox. (C v. 205)

Reynolds would hardly have written thus unless he had been in some doubt about Burke's acceptance. Burke's reply does not survive, but he made the journey for the funeral, which took place on 20 December.³² Johnson was buried near David Garrick (1717–79) and the monument to Shakespeare, in what had already become 'Poets' Corner'. Most observers would have understood Reynolds's diffidence. In 1784, Johnson and Burke seemed 'mighty opposites'. The last decade of Burke's life would make him increasingly

³¹ Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, iv. 407 (Dec. 1784).

³² *Gentleman's Magazine*, 54 (Dec. 1784), 947. The account of Johnson's funeral was supplied by Sir John Hawkins.

Johnsonian: a passionate defender of monarchy, hierarchy, and the Established Church.

2

From the vexations which had accumulated since June, the approaching session of Parliament promised Burke at least the relief of activity and business. Activity, even without the prospect of success, was for him both therapeutic and energizing. ‘The more one has to do, the more one is capable of doing even beyond our direct Task,’ he told Mary Shackleton, to explain why, having neglected to write when he had ample leisure, he did so when ‘I never was more Busy in my Life’ (13 Dec. 1784: C v. 201). Burke, however, was unusual in this respect. For the most part, the opposition was content to drift. To William Windham (1750–1810), the loyal disciple who had seconded his quixotic motion of 14 June 1784, he could be openly critical. Inviting him to Beaconsfield to dine with the Duke of Portland (1738–1809; the party’s nominal leader), Burke commented bitterly on the opposition’s lack of a strategy:

I have been in Town for a day or two. I dined at Foxes anniversary. The meeting was numerous; and they were very steady, and in very good humour with one another, with him, and with their Cause. As to any plan of Conduct in our Leaders there are not the faintest Traces of it—nor does it seem to occur to them that any such thing is necessary. Accordingly every thing is left to accidents; and I thought Fox had great Faith in the Chapter of that Scripture. (14 Oct. 1784: 177)

This letter exposes the gulf between Burke’s conception of politics and Fox’s. The fault-line of the rift that led to their break in 1791 is already perceptible. Fox relished the personal side of politics, for it ministered to his own kind of egotism (as did canvassing, which Burke loathed). A remarkable extemporizer who could deliver a spellbinding oration after a hard ride from Newmarket or an all-night gambling session, Fox did not share Burke’s belief in the need for planning, preparation, and systematic study.³³ Initially, Burke had been dazzled by Fox’s abilities and charisma. Yet Fox had never been a true believer in the Rockingham creed. As early as 1779, Burke had been obliged to wean him from his eagerness to get into office at any price and with any colleagues.³⁴ Since Rockingham’s death, and Fox’s assumption of effective leadership, the party had lost touch with its principles, as set out

³³ Horace Walpole was fond of anecdotes about Fox’s rapid transitions from dissipation to business: to Sir Horace Mann, 2 Feb. 1770, 9 Apr. 1772, 16 May 1781 (YWC xxiii. 187–8, 399–400; xxv. 154). Fox could make himself master of complex material at short notice, but he lacked E.B.’s habit of systematic study.

³⁴ Fox to Rockingham, 24 Jan. 1779, in *Memorials and Correspondence of Charles James Fox*, ed. Lord John Russell (London, 1853–7), i. 207–8; Fox to E.B., 24 Jan., and E.B.’s endorsement (C iv. 39–41).

in its manifesto, Burke's *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents* (1770). In 1783, by entering into an opportunistic alliance with their erstwhile antagonist North, Fox had quickly shown how unfitted he was to head the old Rockingham party. The hunger for power exposed by this manœuvre had enabled the king to exploit popular outrage against the Coalition to defeat its great measure of reform, Fox's India Bill. In the session of 1784, Pitt had, with little opposition, enacted a bill in substance if not in appearance hardly less draconian than Fox's. Pitt's majority, as Fox himself ruefully noted, was 'much more *against* us than *for* the ministry'; Pitt's India Bill 'had begun to excite much discontent till I opposed it'.³⁵ Fox was thus the party's gravest liability as well as its most powerful loadstone. Burke wanted a plan: a strategy that would, ultimately, convince responsible public opinion (chiefly the independent MPs) that a new system was needed. Their programme should be built not on personalities but on principles. To the exaltation of the royal prerogative, it should oppose a party of disinterested virtue. This was the lesson of 1766: the Rockingham legacy, to which Burke remained true.

For the first time in a decade, Parliament did not meet before Christmas. This marked the return of politics to something like the stability of the early years of North's ministry. Now, in 1785, the session opened as late as 25 January. Pitt kept the speech from the throne unusually brief. Apart from the standard paragraph on the raising of supplies, and an ambiguous allusion to securing 'the true Principles of the Constitution', the king's speech mentioned only three subjects: commercial relations with Ireland; continued action to reduce smuggling; and the latest recommendations of the Commissioners of Public Accounts.³⁶ The opening debate in the Commons began with a hallowed routine. Two ministerial members moved and seconded an address in reply, dutifully echoing each element in the speech from the throne. Usually, an opposition member would then propose an amendment as a test of strength. The failure of the first opposition speaker, Lord Surrey (1746–1815), to move such an amendment was therefore a tacit confession of opposition weakness. Burke, however, determined not to let the address pass unchallenged.

When Burke had spoken as part of an opposition team, he had typically waited until late in the debate. Now something of an outsider, he spoke early. In a manner happily reminiscent of his speeches of the 1760s and 1770s, he opened with a witty prelude. Contrasting Pitt's brevity with Shelburne's unprecedentedly long and verbose throne speech of 5 December 1782,³⁷ he likened Shelburne's to a 'large pye', Pitt's to a 'petty patty'. More prescient of

³⁵ Fox to the Duke of Portland, 27 July 1784 (BL Add. MS 47561, fo. 80).

³⁶ *CJ* xl. 453–4. The speech is about 250 words.

³⁷ *CJ* xxxix. 3–5. Even Philip Yorke, the ministerialist chosen to move the address in reply, thought the speech 'too long' (to Lord Hardwicke, [4 Dec. 1782]; BL Add. MS 35380, fo. 394).

the new Burke was the gravamen of his indictment, to which he devoted the greater part of his speech: the ominous absence of any reference to India. To prove that India was in need of more urgent attention than Ireland, he quoted extracts from a letter of Warren Hastings (1732–1818), Governor-General of Bengal, describing the ravaged state of Bengal and Oudh. He then moved an amendment to the speech, promising an enquiry into ‘all waste of the public treasure in the East Indies’ and every effort to ‘bring to condign punishment, the authors of such misdemeanors, if they shall be found to exist’.³⁸ Though he did not name Hastings in the amendment, in the body of his speech Burke had explicitly blamed him for the miseries of British India. The occasion thus marked another step towards the impeachment that Burke had meditated since 1782 and would initiate in 1786.

Pitt repaid Burke’s sarcasm. Burke, of all men, he taunted, was ‘the best qualified to judge of the comparison between a very short and a very long speech’, and reminded him of ‘the longest composition ever moved in that House’, Burke’s abortive motion of 14 June 1784, which had taken four hours to read. The grievances which Burke had described ‘with all the flowers of imagination’ no longer existed. His own India Act of 1784 had eliminated them. Now, therefore, ‘the business was ended’.³⁹ Pitt was wrong: the business was hardly begun. Burke would devote much of the next ten years to an uphill struggle to bring Hastings to ‘condign punishment’. Yet Major John Scott (1747–1819), Hastings’s over-zealous agent, exaggerated less than usual when he reported to his principal that Burke ‘made so violent, & so ridiculous a Speech, that there was not a Member in the House, who did not pronounce him to be absolutely mad’.⁴⁰ At least, most members probably thought or hoped that Pitt was right, and that the subject of India had been shelved. Burke’s amendment was rejected without a division, and the address itself likewise approved. But the false security engendered by Scott’s representation of Burke as a madman fallen into universal contempt would cost Hastings dear. Burke would soon prove himself a formidable, tenacious, and sometimes persuasive opponent.

The easy passage of the address with only token opposition did not, as might have been expected, lead to a smooth and uneventful session. Instead, Pitt suffered three humiliating reverses. Yet these triumphs offered no satisfaction to the opposition. Rather, they confirmed Pitt’s ascendancy. While members might refuse to follow him on a particular issue, they emphatically did not want to replace him with Fox. The first of Pitt’s defeats was the most personal. In the 1784 election, Fox had stood for Westminster; but as an insurance policy, he had also been returned for the pocket constituency of

³⁸ Debrett, xvii. 13–16 (*PH* xxiv. 1399–1402).

³⁹ *PH* xxiv. 1402–11. E.B. spoke again, briefly, in response to Pitt’s twisting of his remarks on Ireland (*PH*, xxiv. 1413).

⁴⁰ Scott to Hastings, 4 Feb. 1785 (BL Add. MS 29168, fo. 32).

Tain Burghs in Scotland. When the poll closed at Westminster (which, like most constituencies, returned two members), Fox stood second, and should therefore have been declared elected. Yet when Sir Cecil Wray (1734–1805), the defeated ministerial candidate, demanded a scrutiny, the High Bailiff (the returning officer) decided to make no return, pending its outcome. In a constituency with so many electors, a scrutiny would be a lengthy procedure. In the session of 1784, when the propriety of the scrutiny was questioned, Pitt had supported it, patently with a view to humiliating Fox into sitting as the member for Tain Burghs. In the partisan atmosphere of the day, he had easily carried the House with him. Now, however, when most feelings (though not Pitt's vindictiveness) had cooled, support for the scrutiny (and, in effect, the disfranchisement of Westminster) gradually fell. Much against his will, Pitt was eventually forced to drop the scrutiny and allow Fox's return for Westminster. In 1769–70, Burke had been one of the most vocal opponents of the North ministry's attempts to keep John Wilkes (1725–97) out of Parliament. The Westminster scrutiny was a parallel case: the government appeared to be seeking to control the membership of the Commons. The debates on the Westminster scrutiny offered ample opportunity for a display of Burke's alarmist rhetoric of 1769. Yet he was almost silent.⁴¹ Apart from asking a few questions when the High Bailiff was examined, he spoke only once, and then not on the merits of the case.

The one occasion when Burke felt impelled to intervene was on 4 February, on a motion to postpone the examination of the High Bailiff until Fox (who had strained an Achilles tendon) could be present. Pitt agreed, but could not resist a snide comment that responsibility for protracting the proceedings (a charge which the opposition had levelled against Pitt) would now rest with the other side.⁴² Offended by the sarcasm of Pitt's speech, Burke charged him with illiberality.

when two persons were in a state of hostility, or, to use a milder expression, in a state of competition or rivalry, there was a certain degree of delicacy to be observed by both towards each other; there was a decorum, that could not be transgressed by either, without dishonour. If two generals, rivals for fame, commanded opposite armies in time of war, which was the most hostile kind of competition, and one of them was wounded in an engagement, the other would certainly pass for a man of no elevated mind, who could treat with levity the wounds of his rival.

This is a familiar Burkean stance, seizing the moral high ground and stigmatizing his opponent as small-minded. Yet the image of the two rival generals reveals a dissatisfaction, which he could not articulate more openly, about the reduction of politics, since the dismissal of the Coalition in December 1783,

⁴¹ On 8 Feb., when witnesses were examined, E.B. put a question to the High Bailiff (*PH* xxv. 16). He made no contribution to the debates on 9, 18, and 21 Feb., and on 3 and 9 Mar. John Ehrman concedes that Pitt was in the wrong (*The Younger Pitt* (London, 1969–96), i. 217–23).

⁴² *PH* xxv. 6–9.

to a duel between Pitt and Fox. Towards the end of his speech, Burke spoke feelingly of Fox's inability to walk without assistance. Send for the surgeon, he dared Pitt, if you do not believe me.⁴³ Though willing enough to score a debating point, Pitt had not seriously accused Fox of malingering. Burke's outburst protests too much. The resentment that he directed against Pitt also, in some measure, encompassed Fox himself.

Why did Burke take such a minuscule part in this *cause célèbre*? His unusual reticence probably reflects his dissatisfaction with Fox, and his disapproval of Fox's decision to stand for Westminster. During the 1784 election campaign, he had complained that Fox, preoccupied with Westminster, could spare little time or attention to the party's overall strategy.⁴⁴ In Burke's view, the county contests provided the most reliable indicator of public opinion in a general election, for the only opinion that he valued was that of the educated, independent elector, epitomized by the county freeholder. A contest for Westminster, with twelve thousand electors drawn chiefly from the lower ranks of society, could only degenerate into a popularity contest of the kind that Burke himself had found so demeaning at Bristol. In 1777, eager to capture Fox for the Rockingham party, Burke had warned him that he was not formed to acquire 'real interior favour' at court. He should accordingly abandon any thought of fulfilling his political ambitions through the royal favour. 'Lay your foundations deep in public opinion', Burke advised, 'and I do not know so firm and sound a bottom to build on as our party' (8 Oct. 1777: *C* iii. 385). But for Burke, 'public opinion' was to be gathered not from the large urban constituencies, with their poorly informed, uneducated electorates, but from the counties, where the voice of property prevailed. For Fox to represent Westminster was thus, for Burke, not so much a triumph as a betrayal. He could therefore give only lukewarm support to the Westminster scrutiny. Though he hated Pitt and feared the power of the royal prerogative as much as did Fox, Burke could never become a Foxite. Further, Burke always distrusted the 'great man' in politics. In the 1760s, William Pitt the elder (1708–78) had affected the colossus. Now, Fox and the younger Pitt were competing for the mantle. Burke continued to co-operate with Fox, but the two were already drifting apart.

Pitt's main legislative initiative of 1785, known as his 'Irish Propositions', was intended to provide an equitable and permanent basis for future commercial relations between Britain and Ireland. Since 1779, successive ministries had promoted piecemeal dismantling of the machinery of British domination imposed in the aftermath of the Williamite conquest. They had

⁴³ *PH* xxv. 9–10.

⁴⁴ E.B. to Sir Gilbert Elliot, 26 Mar. 1784 (*C* v. 134). In 1788, when the opposition contested a by-election at Westminster, E.B. again complained that the money poured into the Westminster contests (which he estimated at over £50,000) 'would have brought in ten Members for an whole Parliament at the highest price' (414).

conceded partial free trade, greater religious toleration, and even legislative independence. Pitt's aim was to remove most of the remaining trade barriers between the two countries. In return, Ireland was to pledge a contribution to imperial defence that would increase in step with the economic growth that free trade was expected to bring. The Irish hereditary revenue, chiefly derived from the customs and excise duties (granted in perpetuity at the Restoration) provided a reliable index of national prosperity. As the economy expanded, the yield from these duties would rise. The surplus above a defined sum would be assigned to help defray the costs of imperial defence. The plan was plausible but unpopular. In Ireland, many feared that the bargain would prove on balance disadvantageous, while in Britain many manufacturers were sincerely if self-interestedly afraid of being undersold by competition from Ireland (where labour costs were lower). In both countries, opposition politicians were eager to exploit local fears and prejudices and to foment objections.⁴⁵

Pitt's propositions placed Burke in a quandry. In principle, he favoured imperial free trade, and he had consistently championed it in practice. In his first session in Parliament, when the Rockingham ministry contemplated a comprehensive revision of the trade laws, Burke had sought to 'hook' Ireland into a new imperial system. When the scheme was dropped, he personally sponsored a measure to allow the import of Irish soap.⁴⁶ More recently, when trade concessions to Ireland were mooted in 1778, he had incurred much odium by courageously supporting them against what he regarded as the myopic opposition of his Bristol constituents. At that time, he had countered the fears of the British manufacturers by arguing that the Irish economy was so much less developed that it could not, for many years, pose any real threat to British interests.⁴⁷ For all these reasons, Burke should have welcomed Pitt's proposals. Two considerations prevented him. First, he was deeply suspicious of, and therefore almost automatically opposed, any measure emanating from Pitt. Second, he now regarded Ireland with a jaundiced eye, vexed that the Irish had shown no gratitude for the efforts that he and his friends had made on their behalf in 1778–9. Nor did he approve of the legislative independence that had been conceded to Ireland (without consulting him) in 1782, for he did not trust the Irish Parliament to act in the best interests of the nation as a whole.⁴⁸ As with the

⁴⁵ Vincent T. Harlow, *The Founding of the Second British Empire, 1763–1793* (London, 1952–64), i. 558–616; Ehrman, *The Younger Pitt*, i. 195–216; Paul Kelly, 'British and Irish Politics in 1785', *English Historical Review*, 90 (1975), 336–63; David R. Schweitzer, 'The Failure of Pitt's Irish Trade Propositions, 1785', *Parliamentary History*, 3 (1984), 129–45.

⁴⁶ E.B. to Charles O'Hara, 1, 27, and 29 Mar., and 24 May 1766 (C i. 239–40, 246–7, 254–5).

⁴⁷ *Two Letters on the Trade of Ireland* (1778: *WS* ix. 507–17); and speeches of 6 and 19 May 1778 (519–27).

⁴⁸ The subtext of E.B.'s letter to Charlemont, 12 June 1782, which ostensibly congratulates him on the achievement of legislative independence, hints at E.B.'s disapproval (C iv. 459–60). E.B. to Fitzwilliam, 20 Nov. 1796, explicitly condemns it (ix. 122).

Westminster scrutiny, he was torn between his rational convictions and his emotional resentments.

Burke was initially so eager to controvert Pitt's propositions that he attacked them even before they had been formally opened. On 21 February, the day before Pitt was scheduled to reveal his propositions, Burke requested a postponement (which Pitt of course refused), transparently to provide himself with an excuse for a speech. Genuinely apprehensive about the scheme, and sceptical that the hereditary revenue would ever produce the expected surplus, he feared that the Irish Parliament, intoxicated with its new independence, would nevertheless, from motives of jobbery, burden the people with such expensive *folies de grandeur* as an independent Irish navy. Yet his speech also voiced his sense of injured virtue, his chagrin at having been unjustly vilified on both sides of the Irish Sea for having conscientiously performed his double duty to both countries.⁴⁹ The following day, in a speech lasting over two hours, Pitt outlined his propositions. Anxious not to proceed too precipitately, he ended by moving that consideration of them should be deferred to a future occasion. As soon as Pitt had finished, Burke rose to speak, as did Charles Marsham (1744–1811), MP for Kent. Since his entry into Parliament, Burke had been an acknowledged expert on economic subjects. Marsham certainly was not. Yet members called loudly for Marsham, seemingly fearful that Burke 'would enter largely into the question at that time'. Marsham, an opposition supporter, gracefully gave way. Burke, however, was stunned. Instead of delivering the expected speech, he merely 'begged that gentlemen would not be under any apprehension that he would tire their patience with a long speech, for he would say very little; an uninformed man, as he was, could throw but little light on the subject; and perhaps, during the whole progress of the business, he would not trouble them with a single speech'. Lamely, he ended by asking the chairman to read the resolution, wanting to be sure that it contained the phrase '*in time of PEACE*'. The chairman read the resolution, which indeed contained the words.⁵⁰ But Burke did not rise again. Marsham spoke briefly, asking for more time and information, but clearly expecting to be against the measure. Next, Lord North rose. No one objected to his making a substantial speech. Though the motion before the house was merely to defer consideration of the propositions, and most speakers professed to need more details before they could make up their minds, the battle lines were drawn and a full debate ensued.⁵¹ For Burke, the incident was another humiliation, worse than those of the previous session because the subject was not India. Even on Ireland, members did not want to hear him. Burke was not 'an uninformed man' on the subject of Anglo-Irish trade. His sarcastic self-abasement is measure of how deeply he felt the mortification.

⁴⁹ *Morning Herald*, 22 Feb. 1785; *WS* ix. 585–8.

⁵⁰ *Morning Herald*, 23 Feb. 1785.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* (*PH* xxv. 328–40).

During the next two debates on the propositions (on 3 and 11 March), Burke said nothing.⁵² Meanwhile, Pitt's plan had provoked so much opposition in both countries that he was obliged to delay its further consideration until after the Easter recess. During May, four further debates were held.⁵³ Burke spoke only in the second, on the 19th. William Wyndham Grenville, son of the George Grenville (1712–70) who had imposed the ill-fated Stamp Act in 1765, gave him the excuse he needed to break his rash, self-imposed pledge of silence.⁵⁴ Grenville ended his speech with a reference to Ireland making 'a contribution to the support of the navy, by which the trade, to a share of which she was to be now admitted, would be protected'. This led Burke to accuse the ministers of repeating the folly that had had provoked the American war and the loss of the colonies. In reply, Pitt denied that his scheme bore any analogy to the admittedly ill-judged attempt to tax America, and superciliously expressed the hope that Burke's alarmist comparison 'would not be carried over to his native country' without his own reply.⁵⁵

The allusion to his Irishness stung Burke into a second and longer speech. After an emotive response to Pitt's sneer at his nationality, explaining his notion of the duties he owed to Ireland and Britain respectively, he launched into a more detailed analysis of the Irish hereditary revenue than he had offered in February. This somewhat dry material was enlivened with a playful passage, pleasantly reminiscent of his speeches on Economical Reformation in 1780 (and welcome evidence that he had not entirely lost his sense of humour), repeating his fears of the extravagance in which the spendthrift Irish Parliament was likely to indulge:

a Navy would lead to a board of Admiralty; then would come a Navy-Office, a Pay-Office, and a Victualling Office; then there must be Dock-yards; then Fortifications to defend them; then there must be an Ordnance to furnish those Fortifications; next a Board of ordnance, with a Master-General, and all the other Officers; then he supposed it would be necessary every now and then to send the said Master-General, and all his friends, down to look at his own fortification, and to see whether he did his duty.⁵⁶

From his entry into Parliament, Burke had often employed such arguments from remote consequences. In this instance, determined to attack the propositions, yet unwilling to use the most persuasive argument against them, that they would hurt Britain, he squared his Irish patriotism with his loathing of Pitt by imagining the ruinous consequences which the proposals would in time produce. Long years of habitual opposition meant that Burke

⁵² *PH* xxv. 340–62. ⁵³ On 12, 19, 24, and 30 May (*PH* xxv. 575–778).

⁵⁴ E.B. mounted a coded attack on Pitt's propositions in the debate on a collateral issue, a petition presented on 16 Mar. (*PH* xxv. 362–7).

⁵⁵ *Morning Herald*, 20 May; *WS* ix. 589–93. *PH* xxv. 631–67 has a variant report.

⁵⁶ *WS* ix. 592 n. 1 (from the *Morning Chronicle*). The choice of the Ordnance as an instance of jobbing extravagance was meant to satirize the fortifications proposed in England by the Duke of Richmond.

was never unprovided with an argument. Yet factious as his opposition to Pitt's propositions might be, Burke was genuinely concerned that the Irish Parliament, dominated by the 'Protestant Ascendancy' that he hated, would seize the opportunity to impose extra and unnecessary taxes on the Catholic majority to provide lucrative jobs for themselves and their friends. These fears were never realized. Though the British Parliament approved Pitt's plan, even as amended it proved so unpopular in Ireland that the Irish government withdrew it. This reverse gave Burke the double comfort of humiliating Pitt while saving the Irish from their own follies.

Pitt's third defeat of the session was on parliamentary reform. His new scheme (his third and last), unveiled on 18 April 1785, was so cautious and moderate that his hopes, and those of his supporters, were high. Up to thirty-six 'rotten' or 'pocket' boroughs were to be disfranchised, and their representation transferred to the most populous of the counties. The process was to be voluntary: in effect, those borough proprietors who were willing to sell would be bought out. If any boroughs beyond the thirty-six chose to surrender their representation, their seats would be allocated to the largest unrepresented towns (such as Birmingham, Manchester, and Sheffield).⁵⁷ Parliamentary reform was a question that cut across the usual loyalties. Fox (converted to the cause in 1780) supported it, but many of those who normally followed Pitt were opposed. Burke had always reprobated parliamentary reform of any kind, even when token approval of a measure certain to be defeated would have safely purchased him a little cheap popularity.⁵⁸ Regarding the composition of Parliament as answering every practical purpose, Burke always discountenanced any attempt to tinker or tamper with it. Here was an opportunity for a statesmanlike speech, rising above the petty animosities of the day. Burke failed to take it, instead delivering the weakest of his speeches on the topic. Beginning by ridiculing Dundas for his unprincipled conversion, since his junction with Pitt, to the cause of reform, Burke spent more time on personal attacks than on considerations of principle. Indeed, he used the occasion chiefly to strike at some of his most hated *bêtes noires*: Pitt himself; the proponents of more extensive reforms, such as Christopher Wyvill (1738–1822) and the Duke of Richmond (1735–1806); and the borough-mongers ennobled by Pitt as a reward for their support at the last election. Fortunately for the cause, other members, most notably Lord North, mounted a more reasoned case against reform. North spoke for the majority. Pitt's measure, modest as it was, was rejected by 174 to 248.⁵⁹ In terms of a parliamentary vote, this was the apogee of support for reform in Burke's lifetime. When next introduced into Parliament (in 1790), events in revolutionary France had made the idea of

⁵⁷ *Morning Chronicle*, 19 Apr. 1785 (*PH* xxv. 432–50).

⁵⁸ Lord John Cavendish to Lady Spencer, 13 May 1780, commending E.B. for a courageous speech against shorter parliaments (BL Althorp Papers F 121).

⁵⁹ *Morning Chronicle*, 19 Apr. 1785 (*PH* xxv. 450–75).

reform so suspect that even advocates such as Fox acknowledged that it did not command widespread support.⁶⁰ Not until 1832 did the Old Sarums of the system Burke revered lose their representation.

These three defeats were exceptional. Most of Pitt's ministerial measures were passed without difficulty. An example is the Offices Reform Bill, part of his plan to increase the efficiency of the civil service. The bill was hardly controversial, though its appointment of commissioners of enquiry with extensive powers gave a handle to the opposition. One debate (on 8 March) is of particular interest, because Burke's speech offers a representative sample of his style, and a contrast with Sheridan's. Sheridan spoke first. While employing some hyperbole and one striking image (he called it 'a rat-catching bill, instituted for the purpose of prying into vermin abuses'), he concentrated on the bill itself and the minutiae of its provisions. Burke's speech illustrates the digressive richness with which he could treat the most mundane topics. In a characteristic opening, dignifying the subject by appealing to the loftiest constitutional authority, he called for the reading of a clause from Magna Charta. When this drew a laugh from the Treasury bench, he accused ministers of treating Magna Charta as contemptuously as they would an old ballad. Seizing on phrases used by previous speakers, he once more demonstrated his talent for extemporization. Taking up Sheridan's 'vermin abuses', he compared Pitt to Edgar in *King Lear*, feeding (in his guise as Mad Tom) on 'Rats and mice, and such small deer'. The bill might be a reptile, but it would be found 'to bite hard where the constitution ought not to be lacerated'. Drawing on his own stock of metaphor, Burke noted that most schools of art were known by some characteristic, such as excellence of colouring or design. Pitt's bill had 'an obvious tinge' of the school in which he had been trained (Shelburne's), 'the school of large promise and little performance'. Thus Burke contrived to attack the bill from opposite angles, first as a daring violation of the constitution, then as a nugatory exercise unlikely to have much practical impact.⁶¹ The second criticism proved the more prophetic. Modern authorities agree that, despite the draconian powers given to the commissioners, the bill did not result in significant reform.⁶²

3

Despite the reverence for the constitution that led him to oppose parliamentary reform, and the partisanship that made him oppose almost any reform proposed by Pitt, Burke was no complacent defender of every aspect of the

⁶⁰ 4 Mar. 1790 (*PH* xxviii. 452–79).

⁶¹ *Morning Chronicle*, 9 Mar. 1785 (*PH* xxv. 367–75). E.B. drafted, but appears not to have used, a passage deploring the effects of the bill on the morale of the civil service (transcript in WWM BkP 27/209).

⁶² J. E. D. Binney, *British Public Finance and Administration, 1774–92* (Oxford, 1958), 16–17, 48, 280; Ehrman, *The Younger Pitt*, i. 308–9.

status quo. Though he wanted to give ‘the currency of a proverb’ to his maxim ‘*To innovate is not to reform*’ (*Letter to a Noble Lord*, 1796: *WS* ix. 156), reform, he acknowledged, was sometimes necessary. For example, he was often critical of the state of the criminal law, and supported moves to correct or mitigate what he and many contemporaries recognized as its excessive rigour.

A notorious development in English law during the eighteenth century was the multiplication of capital offences, as the legislature repeatedly resorted to the death penalty as a deterrent. In 1766, for example, to uproot a tree or plant during the night was made a felony, and therefore in theory a capital crime.⁶³ This Act was typical of such legislation, which to modern sensibilities is likely to appear overprotective of private property and careless of human life. In 1789, however, some market gardeners thought that the law of 1766 provided insufficient protection. They therefore persuaded William Mainwaring (1735–1821), who as an active Middlesex magistrate often sponsored such legislation, to introduce a bill to extend the felony to daytime uprooting. Concern for the security of property triumphed, and the bill easily passed the Commons.⁶⁴ Respect for the sanctity of property rights was always a leading article in Burke’s political creed. Nevertheless, he was one of the minority that opposed the bill as an unnecessary and repugnant addition to an already excessive array of capital crimes. This stand may surprise those who know him chiefly as the author of the *Reflections*, as the defender of the inherited inequalities and iniquities of the *ancien régime*. Yet it was consistent with his attitude to a range of similar questions, on which he took what in retrospect seems the more ‘liberal’ or ‘progressive’ side. The 1789 bill provoked one of his most vehement calls for reform. Reprobating ‘the whole system of the penal laws in this country’ as ‘radically defective’, he advocated ‘a revision of the whole criminal law, which, in its present state, he thought abominable’.⁶⁵ From Burke, this was a remarkable declaration.

Since Burke left no comprehensive or systematic speech or essay on the subject of crime and punishment, his views have to be collected from occasional statements on such questions as happened to engage his attention. An example is his support in 1780 of a measure, promoted by Lord Beauchamp (1743–1822), to amend the harsh provisions of the law on insolvent debtors. Mercantile interests invariably opposed any attempt to weaken the sanctions against bankrupts. Burke’s courageous and principled stand was unpopular

⁶³ According to William Blackstone, 160 statutory offences were felonies without benefit of clergy (and therefore liable to the death penalty); *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (Oxford, 1765–9), iv. 18. The 1766 Act was 6 George III, c. 36.

⁶⁴ The bill to amend the 1766 Act was brought in on 22 May and passed on 26 June 1789 (*CJ* xlv. 403, 488). It was rejected in the Lords on 13 July (*LJ* xxxviii. 502). Windham, who on 20 May had spoken against leave to bring in the bill (*PH* xxviii. 140–5), may have kindled E.B.’s interest in the issue.

⁶⁵ 28 May 1789; *PH* xxviii. 146–7.

at Bristol, and became ‘rather the most prevalent’ of all the charges made against him at the 1780 election.⁶⁶ In 1785, another question surfaced which provides an illuminating comment on Burke’s opposition to parliamentary reform, since it shows that his dislike of innovation was not always motivated by a concern for the entrenched powers and privileges of the propertied élite. He was equally prepared to oppose a rash project that threatened even such pariahs of society as convicted criminals.

The English criminal law of Burke’s day was more draconian on paper than in practice. Death was the prescribed penalty for felony, which embraced a multitude of crimes, including ‘grand larceny’, the theft of property worth over one shilling. The disproportion between the pettiness of the crime and the severity of the punishment was often condemned.⁶⁷ What kept the death penalty on the statute book for so many offences, and even extended it to new ones, was the belief in its deterrent force. Yet in practice, the law was often mitigated. In capital cases, juries were sometimes reluctant to convict for small offences. Some offenders escaped on a technicality; many (chiefly those able to mobilize influence) obtained pardons. Beginning in the 1660s, numerous criminals condemned to death were so pardoned, conditionally on their agreeing to be transported to the American colonies. From 1717, transportation could be imposed directly by the courts for particular criminal offences. By the 1770s, more than 1,400 criminals were transported every year.⁶⁸ This traffic was interrupted in 1775 by the war with the colonies. Existing prisons were already overcrowded, so that any increase in long-term imprisonment as a punishment would require an extensive programme of construction.⁶⁹

An alternative expedient was devised by William Eden (1744–1814), MP and Under-Secretary of State. Eden was the author of *Principles of Penal Law* (1771), which argues (*inter alia*) that the death penalty is too severe for most crimes against property, and advocates forced labour as a punishment preferable to death or transportation.⁷⁰ The American war gave him an

⁶⁶ *Speech at Bristol Previous to the Election* (6 Sept. 1780: *WS* iii. 634–7). The English translator of Beccaria, anticipating the objection that ‘a treatise of this kind is useless in England, where, from the excellence of our laws and government, no examples of cruelty or oppression are to be found’, places imprisonment for debt at the head of his list of four desirable reforms; *An Essay on Crimes and Punishments* (2nd edn. London, 1769), pp. vii–viii.

⁶⁷ Samuel Johnson, *Rambler* No. 114 (20 Apr. 1751: *Works*, iv. 241–7); Dr Primrose, in Oliver Goldsmith, *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766), ch. 27; Blackstone, *Commentaries*, iv. 9–12, 17–19. William Paley, however, defended the number of capital offences on the ground that, since few are actually executed (‘scarcely once in ten’), the deterrence of the death penalty operated without requiring excessive severity in practice (*Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* (3rd edn. London, 1786), 532–7).

⁶⁸ William Eden to E.B., 17 Mar. 1776 (C.iii. 252).

⁶⁹ Simon Devereaux, ‘The Making of the Penitentiary Act, 1775–1779’, *Historical Journal*, 42 (1999), 405–33.

⁷⁰ *Principles of Penal Law* (London, 1771), 269–98, 33–4.

opportunity to test his speculations. He proposed, as a temporary measure, to house convicts in hulks moored on the banks of the Thames, and to employ them in dredging and cleaning the river. Although Burke was a leading member of the opposition, Eden sent him a copy of his plan at an early stage (17 Mar. 1776: *C* iii. 251–2), a tribute to his reputation as a philanthropist. Burke's response was lukewarm. Capital punishment, he agreed, was cruel. Founded on 'humane and equitable principles', Eden's proposal made 'an happy exchange, if there be no other, for the Butchery which we call justice'. Yet Burke remained convinced that, if a suitable destination could be found, transportation, which at least avoided the danger of 'letting wicked people loose upon the publick', would be preferable. Eden's scheme to make the criminal positively useful to society, he feared, would be a matter of 'infinite charge and difficulty' (252–3). When Eden's Hulks Bill was introduced into Parliament, Burke therefore opposed it.⁷¹ Yet he was prepared to support a more carefully considered experiment in penology. He joined with Eden in sponsoring a bipartisan bill to authorize the construction of penitentiaries designed for the incarceration of prisoners condemned to hard labour. This bill was introduced on the last day of the session, being intended to do no more than ventilate the idea.⁷² The Hulks Bill, a government measure, became law, and by August 1776 convicts were at work on the Thames. The hulks were managed by a private contractor with experience of transporting felons, Duncan Campbell (1726–1803). Conditions on the hulks were at first extremely unhealthy, and the mortality of prisoners was high. Adverse publicity led to some improvements, and in July 1777 Burke was one of a number of MPs invited by Campbell to inspect conditions.⁷³

When the Hulks Act was reviewed in 1778, Burke (who may in the interim have visited the hulks) again advocated the resumption of transportation. He proposed Canada, Nova Scotia, or Florida as possible destinations.⁷⁴ As no such alternative was immediately available, the Act was renewed, again for a limited time, pending the search for a permanent solution. In 1779, a ministerial committee considered West Africa, and Botany Bay, on the newly charted east coast of Australia, as possible sites for a penal colony. In 1784, an Act was passed to permit convicts to be transported to any destination, but for lack of a suitable site nothing was done.⁷⁵ Burke's interest in the subject was rekindled when, in March 1785, he heard that a shipload of convicts was on the point of being sent to Gambia. Immediately, he raised the matter in

⁷¹ 13 May 1776; Almon, *Parliamentary Register* . . . 1774–1780 (London, 1775–80), iv. 117–18.

⁷² On 14 May 1776, leave was given to bring in a bill 'to authorize the Punishment by hard Labour of Offenders . . . liable to be transported . . . and to establish proper Places for the Reception of such Offenders'. E.B. was one of ten members named to prepare it. William Eden, whose brainchild it was, presented the bill on 23 May, the day of prorogation (*C*7xxxv. 796, 809). A similar bill was enacted in 1779 (19 George III, c. 74).

⁷³ E.B. to Campbell, August 1777 (UBL (III), 942–3).

⁷⁴ *General Evening Post*, 24–6 Mar. 1778 (*PH* xix. 970–1).

⁷⁵ Alan Frost, *Convicts and Empire: A Naval Question, 1776–1811* (Melbourne, 1980), 7–32.

Parliament, arguing that transportation to Gambia was a deferred but hardly less certain sentence of death. On being assured that no contract had yet been signed, he agreed to postpone his intended motions.⁷⁶ News that Burke had spoken on their behalf soon reached the convicts, and he received several letters on the subject.⁷⁷ With Burke and the ministers otherwise preoccupied, the matter was allowed to rest until 11 April, when Lord Beauchamp (another opposition member) reopened it. Burke again condemned the plan to send convicts to West Africa. Pitt's reply was evasive.⁷⁸ Two orders for transporting felons to West Africa had been signed as early as 11 March, though they were not made public until 12 April. Beauchamp's initiative forced the suspension of these orders (though more were signed on 13 May), and a Commons committee, under his aegis, was appointed on 20 April. Burke was an active member, attending six of ten recorded meetings held between 26 April and 25 May. Evidence vindicated Burke's earlier claims about the unhealthiness of Gambia. The committee's final recommendation (the result, as Beauchamp insinuated, of ministerial pressure) was a penal colony at Angra das Voltas (now Alexander Bay, at the mouth of the Orange River). On further investigation, however, this site too was deemed unsuitable, and in August 1786 Botany Bay was finally selected as the site for the experiment.⁷⁹

Although the First Fleet did not sail for Australia until May 1787, the image of a colony of convicts proved an immediate gift to satirists. In November 1786, a pair of caricatures by John Boyne (c.1750–1810) depicts the leaders of the opposition, bankrupt financially and by extension politically, embarking for, and landing at, Botany Bay. Burke is prominent in both, dressed as the bishop of the new colony. The casting acknowledges that, among the opposition leaders, Burke enjoyed a certain moral superiority.⁸⁰ Boyne would have been surprised to learn that Burke actually imagined being sent to New South Wales, not of course as convict-bishop, but as Governor. In 1793, after the resignation of Governor Arthur Phillip (1738–1814), when his friend Captain Woodford (d. 1812?) sought the post, Burke spoke on his behalf to Henry Dundas, the Secretary of State

⁷⁶ 16 Mar. 1785; *PH* xxv. 391–2. A memorandum about a contract to ship 150 convicts to Gambia, probably sent to E.B. at this time, emphasizes the unhealthy climate and the hostility of the inhabitants (NRO A. xxiv. 63).

⁷⁷ C. Peat to E.B., from Newgate, and expecting to be sent on the first ship to Gambia, 18 Mar. 1785 (WWM BkP 1/1971); Herbert Keeling to E.B., 24 Mar. (NRO A. II.11); Eugene Keeling to E.B., 2 Apr. (BkP 1/1976). Eugene Keeling had two sons (Herbert and Charles) awaiting transportation.

⁷⁸ *Morning Chronicle*, 12 Apr. 1785 (*PH* xxv. 430–2).

⁷⁹ Frost, *Convicts and Empire*, 33–49. 'Minutes of Committee of House of Commons Respecting a Plan for Transporting Felons' (NA HO. 7/1).

⁸⁰ *Non Commission Officers Embarking for Botany Bay* (1 Nov. 1786: BMC 6990); *Landing at Botany Bay* (16 Nov. 1786: BMC 6992); both attributed to John Boyne. BMC 6990 is reproduced in Nicholas K. Robinson, *Edmund Burke: A Life in Caricature* (New Haven, 1996), 87. In the same vein, on 22 Dec. 1789 a paragraph in *The Times* suggested that 'patriots' of various nationalities (E.B. and Sheridan from England) should be sent to Botany Bay.

responsible. Writing on the same subject to another friend, John King (1759–1830), the Under-Secretary, he made this curious comment: ‘I confess, if I were young myself, I should like this Employment. To turn what is dangerous to society to its advantage is a great, and if it is managed with ability, an honourable Task.’⁸¹ Given a second chance, men might not only erase the stain of their criminality, but acquire independence and even affluence. Burke, of course, thought primarily in terms of allowing men from the middle ranks of society to redeem themselves. As early as the *Account of the European Settlements*, he had likewise seen the West Indies as a place of redemptive exile.⁸²

Burke took an interest in particular cases as well as general principles. The case of James George Semple (c. 1759–99?) provides an apt illustration of his belief in the restorative possibilities of transportation.⁸³ A plausible rogue, after a long if chequered career as a confidence man, in 1795 Semple was sentenced to transportation for the theft of a muslin shirt.⁸⁴ He appealed to Burke, as so many in distress had done. Burke’s response to his plight is recorded in two letters (neither to Semple) written about a week apart and strikingly different in tone. The first, to an acquaintance who was trying to obtain a pardon for Semple, is typical of his letters of its kind: cogently reasoned, carefully composed, and relating the particular question to general principles. Declining to support the request for a pardon, Burke argued that transportation was in Semple’s own best interest. Allowed to remain in England, with his reputation blasted, he would most probably repeat his offences and bring himself to the gallows. Transportation would provide an opportunity to make a new start in ‘a place where he is not oppressed by the judgment he has suffered; and where none but honest ways of life are open to him’. In New South Wales, ‘the climate is good, the soil is not unfavourable. There is even some choice in the society’ (to J. E. Devereux, 19 Oct. 1795: C viii. 327–8).⁸⁵ With characteristic generosity, Burke offered to contribute ‘my mite’ to a collection for Semple (a complete stranger), and to recommend

⁸¹ E.B. to John King, 29 Oct. 1793 (C ix. 441; complete text of letter, BL Department of Manuscripts, M.571). The appointment was given to John Hunter (1737–1821).

⁸² *Account of the European Settlements in America* (London, 1757), ii. 103–5.

⁸³ E.B. was not alone in succumbing to Semple’s charm. On 9 Mar. 1795, Boswell heard a long story from the ‘wife of a stablekeeper’ about ‘how she had been swindled by Major Semple’; *Boswell: The Great Biographer*, ed. Marlies K. Danziger and Frank Brady (New York, 1989), 311–12. In addition, Boswell had probably read some of the numerous unfavourable paragraphs about Semple that had appeared in the newspapers since his arrest in January. Yet only a few days later, he responded to an appeal from Semple, then in prison, and subsequently wrote several letters on his behalf (YB Boswell Papers C2456–63 and L827, 834–5; Mar–Apr. 1795).

⁸⁴ Newgate Register, 1794–5 (NA HO. 26/4, fos. 41–2); *The History of the Swindling and Amorous Adventures of James George Semple* ([London, 1795]), 119–25. Semple’s own version of events is recorded in *The Life of Major J. G. Semple Lisle . . . Written by Himself* (London, 1799).

⁸⁵ Though admitting ‘want of Management’, E.B. remained optimistic about Botany Bay. The government ought to have provided about 1,000 ‘good young Women among the lower Classes’ to ‘soften the

him, through his friend the Under-Secretary, for favourable treatment by the governor of the colony. Burke's sympathies stemmed from his belief that 'they who have suffered, and even deservedly suffered, by the sentence of the law, are very far from the worst or most disagreeable men in the world' (328). 'Think whom we send out with disgrace & receive with Triumph', he had once admonished the Commons; to whom do 'we throw open the folding doors of this house & conduct between two of the antient Gent[leme]n of the Land to y[ou]r Table to shake your Land'.⁸⁶ Indian delinquents, the ravagers of provinces and the scourge of humanity, were more proper objects of punishment than such petty criminals as Semple. Far from being punished, they could use their spoils to buy their way into Parliament. Yet this disturbing paradox never led Burke to question the wisdom of the system that permitted the open purchase of seats, still less to countenance its reform.

A week later, Burke wrote a second letter on Semple's behalf. A less studied document, it is more emotive and bears witness to his mixed feelings. Burke came closer to supporting the request for a pardon, asking for 'a Respite of the Sentence till the next embarkation, and until the full extent and true Nature of the Offence are ascertained and compared with the Rigour of the Sentence' (to John King, 26 Oct. 1795: C viii. 329). Revealingly, he digressed into a paragraph on the legal wisdom of his late brother. On Richard's authority, he reprobated the tendency to treat and prosecute frauds as felonies.⁸⁷ By blurring this distinction, Burke argued, the law itself became the malefactor:

The Law ought as religiously to prevent one Crime from being punished as Another, as it ought to save innocence from being punishd at all. The Law itself getting into this Crookedness, becomes the Swindler, and gets the blood of Men under false Pretences—much worse it is than under false Pretences obtaining their Money. (329–30)

By thus shifting the blame onto the law, Burke half convinced himself that Semple was an innocent victim. The weakness of the argument betrays its emotional origin. What caused Burke's change of heart? The letter to King

Manners and mend the Morals of the Colony'. Most of the convicts, he still believed 'would make good Husbands & Parents when living under a new state of Society' ('Extracts from Mr Burke's Table-Talk, at Crewe Hall. Written down by Mrs Crewe', *Miscellanies of the Philobiblon Society*, 7 (1862–3), pt. 5, 5–7.) These remarks probably date from early 1797. E.B. had evidently heard some of the early criticisms of the colony.

⁸⁶ Draft for a speech against transportation to Africa (YB OF 5.339; partly transcribed in WWM BkP 27/207).

⁸⁷ This was no mere technicality. At his trial (for stealing 'one yard of muslin, two yards of calico, and one linen shirt), Semple's counsel argued that the evidence, if true, amounted to no more than 'obtaining goods under false pretences', a fraud, not a felony. Explaining the point of law to the jury, Mr Justice Buller agreed with regard to the muslin and calico. With regard to the shirt, however, since no price had been fixed (Semple claimed to have taken it as a sample to show his sister), no credit had been given. If the jury were convinced that Semple removed it, not intending to return it, they should convict him of theft (and therefore felony). After some hesitation, the jury so convicted, and Semple was sentenced to fourteen years'

was written under the immediate influence of a packet of papers from Semple, which moved him deeply. The case provides a revealing instance of his feelings at work.

Burke's opinions on many social issues (such as poor relief) were those of his day, and are therefore liable to appear repellently severe to a modern sensibility, shaped by a more egalitarian and compassionate ethos. His views on crime and punishment are an exception. Thus he describes convicts as:

the diseased & infirm part of our Country; which we must treat with harshness indeed but with all the tenderness in our power. They are under *Cure*; & that is a state w[h]ich calls for tenderness & diligence & great consideration. We are in a great Hospital & it ill becomes us to be angry with our Patients.⁸⁸

Only the word 'harshness' reminds the reader that this is a voice of the eighteenth century. The idea of crime as sickness, commonplace today, was not so in Burke's time. Although many contemporaries shared his revulsion against the ferocity of the criminal law, theirs remained a minority opinion. Not until 1808 did the tide turn, and Parliament began to reduce the number of crimes for which the death penalty might be imposed.⁸⁹

Yet the 'progressive' element in Burke's attitude to criminality should not be exaggerated. He did not regard the death penalty as wrong in itself. Rather, his objection to its excessive use was grounded on social utility. A life should be saved if it could be made useful to society. The death penalty was 'cutting the Gordian Knot', an admission of defeat on the part of society. Little as he liked forced labour as a punishment, it was preferable to death: having 'no great Idea of the *Benefit* of such Labour: but if I can save Life—every thing which is not *lost* is to be computed for *gain*'.⁹⁰ Yet keenly as he perceived what was amiss with society, Burke was not, at heart, an active reformer. In an early essay, while he denounced excessive economic inequalities as 'a kind of Blasphemy on Providence', he advocated no more radical remedy than a more caring paternalism on the part of the rich.⁹¹ Likewise, he retreated from any practical application of his idea of the convict as in need of cure rather than punishment: 'My Plan. I have no plan, but to choose proper Magistrates. To give them proper means. & to punish them severely if they do not use them. This age is sick of plans. No plan can give knowledge integrity

transportation (*The History of the Swindling and Amorous Adventures of James George Semple* (London, [1795]), 119–25).

⁸⁸ YB OF 5.339.

⁸⁹ In 1808, Sir Samuel Romilly secured the repeal of a single, obsolete statute imposing the death penalty. The pace of reform quickened following the report of a parliamentary enquiry held in 1819; Sir William Holdsworth, *History of English Law* (London, 1922–72), xiii. 279–87.

⁹⁰ Draft for a speech supporting forced labour as preferable to the death penalty (National Library of Ireland, MS 5923, no. 38; partly transcribed in WWM BkP 27/207).

⁹¹ *Reformer*, No. 7 (10 Mar. 1748; *WS* i. 98). The essay is subscribed Æ, which was probably E.B.'s signature (*supra*, i. 57–8).

vigilance, & modesty.⁹² This is Burke's habitual remedy: put men of virtue in charge, and leave the problem in their hands.

4

The counterpart of Burke's faith in the efficacy of appointing 'proper Magistrates' was the removal and punishment of those who betrayed or abused their trust. For Burke, the pre-eminent example of such a magistrate was Warren Hastings, whose punishment Burke sought relentlessly, perhaps obsessively, for fifteen years. His prosecution, or persecution, of Hastings remains one of the most controversial episodes of his career. Viewed in isolation, it can appear, as many contemporaries saw it, as the vindictive pursuit of a heroic figure by a disappointed and embittered man. Seen against a broader background, Burke's actions and attitudes assume a different character. Though Hastings became the focus of his attention, his real concern was with the government of British India. When accused of exploiting India for the purposes of party, he denied the charge. 'I have no party in this Business, my dear Miss Palmer [Mary, 1751–1820, niece of Sir Joshua Reynolds], but among a set of people, who have none of your Lillies and Roses in their faces; but who are the images of the great Pattern as well as you and I' (19 Jan. 1786: *C v.* 255). In truth, Burke's motives were mixed. What cannot be denied is that he pursued at considerable personal and political cost what he thought was the cause of millions of people on the other side of the globe. In the conduct of his great crusade, he often displayed some of the worst traits of his character, yet he never lost sight of his grand object.

To understand how Burke's concern for British India seemingly narrowed into the prosecution of Warren Hastings, some consideration needs to be given to the history of British involvement in India, as well as to the evolution of Burke's own views. Following the death of Aurangzeb (1618–1707), the central authority of the Mogul Empire, already severely strained by decades of continuous warfare, rapidly collapsed. In the resulting power vacuum, ambitious satraps, such as Alivardi Khan (*c.* 1667–1756) in Bengal, established their independence, while the colonial powers, principally Britain and France, sought to expand their commercial activities. During the War of the Austrian Succession (1740–8), India became a subsidiary theatre of war between them. Both powers sought allies among the local princes. This rivalry intensified after the peace of Aix-la-Chapelle, setting the stage for India to become an important site of conflict during the Seven Years War (1757–63). Britain and France were accordingly drawn more deeply into Indian politics. In 1757, Siraj al-Daula (d. 1757), Nawab of Bengal, made an

⁹² YB OF 5.339.

unsuccessful attempt to dislodge the British from their foothold in his province. The British victory secured for the East India Company effective control of Bengal, larger and more populous than Britain itself.

In retrospect, British rule over Bengal appears the harbinger of later imperial ambitions. Contemporaries, however, anticipated no such outcome. Indeed, the East India Company prohibited any further territorial expansion. Instead, it sought (if ineffectually) to turn to commercial advantage the accident of war that had given it possession of Bengal. The context of Burke's interest in India is thus not the imperialism, political and cultural, of the nineteenth century. When Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800–59) went to India in 1834 as a member of the Supreme Council, the problems were larger but (in his view at least) simpler. Convinced of the superiority of European institutions and culture, he had no hesitation about imposing them on India.⁹³ Burke and his contemporaries enjoyed no such confidence, and were not driven by missionary zeal for their own cultural practices. They wrestled with a smaller but still intractable problem: how to reconcile the mercantile role of the East India Company with its new, unprecedented, and (as many thought) incompatible function as a ruling power. All wanted to draw economic advantages from India. Some sought to do this while minimizing the damage to Indian society and institutions, and without imposing undue burdens on the native population. Both Burke and Hastings dreamed of achieving these impossibilities.

In 1743, when Burke was still a schoolboy at Ballitore, his friend Newcomen Herbert decided to seek his fortune in India. His plan probably first brought India into Burke's ken. To qualify himself, Herbert, previously apprenticed to a grocer, had first to learn French and accounting. Not until about October 1745 did he leave for India. This was hardly a propitious moment for such a voyage, since Britain and France were at war. Herbert's ship was actually captured by the French, though subsequently retaken. Herbert himself died soon afterwards, either on the resumed voyage to India or shortly after his arrival.⁹⁴ His fate was not unusual: about half those who went out to India in the eighteenth century died there.⁹⁵ An intriguing speculation suggests itself. In 1750, the young Warren Hastings went out to India, in similar circumstances to Herbert. What if Hastings had died, and Herbert survived? On such contingencies can the course of history depend.

⁹³ John Clive, *Thomas Babington Macaulay: The Shaping of the Historian* (London, 1973), 307–21, 369–77.

⁹⁴ Herbert to Shackleton, 11 Feb. 1743, 1 Oct. 1745 (YB OF 17.278, 296); E.B. to Shackleton, 15 Feb. 1746 (C i. 62). The fact of Herbert's death is recorded in a poem drafted on the MS of his last letter to Shackleton (1 Oct. 1745). The poem itself is deliberately uninformative, asking the reader not to enquire about Herbert's end, on which 'Oblivion's shadow lies' (YB OF 7216).

⁹⁵ P. J. Marshall, *East Indian Fortunes: The British in Bengal in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1976), 217–19.

In 1750 the East India Company (first chartered in 1600) remained primarily a commercial enterprise. The British presence in India was still minuscule, confined to small areas around the three principal trading stations at Bombay, Madras, and Calcutta. The company's importance in the British economy, and in British politics, however, was already considerable. It was a growing and profitable importer and exporter, one of whose imports (tea) was an article of nearly universal consumption. Its stocks and bonds provided a safe and convenient investment. It contributed largely to government revenue. It provided career opportunities that made it part of the intricate network of political patronage.⁹⁶ The Battle of Plassey (1757) marked, or rather symbolized, a new phase in the company's history. The defeat of Siraj al-Daula by the company's forces under Robert Clive (1725–74) led first to *de facto* control of Bengal under puppet nawabs. This was legitimated in 1765 by the 'grant' from the Mogul Emperor of the *dimani* (revenue administration).⁹⁷ This grant secured to the company the tax revenue of a country with a population of between 10 and 20 million. As a result, vast sums (sometimes estimated as high as £4 million a year) were expected to flow into the company's coffers, while little account was taken of the expense of defending and administering Bengal. The prospect of increased dividends triggered a speculative boom in the company's stock.⁹⁸ One of those who invested largely, beginning about June 1766, was Lord Verney (1714–91), Burke's patron at Wendover; and Verney took Will Burke into partnership.⁹⁹ Burke had followed events in India closely, partly in order to report them in the *Annual Register*. Now, however, he became more closely and ambiguously involved, as the company attracted not only speculators but political scrutiny. In July 1766, when William Pitt, ennobled as Earl of Chatham, returned to office, he proposed an enquiry into the legitimacy of the company's territorial acquisitions, the source of its new wealth. He knew what this investigation should find: that the company had no right, and should compound for possession by making a large annual payment to the Treasury. This contribution would help finance the huge debt accumulated during the Seven Years War. Since what the Treasury gained would be lost to the shareholders, any such enquiry was anathema to the speculators.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁶ H. V. Bowen, *Revenue and Reform: The Indian Problem in British Politics, 1757–1773* (Cambridge, 1991).

⁹⁷ The grant of the *dimani* extended to Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa, the three provinces under the aegis of the Nawab of Bengal. Orissa, however, had effectively been ceded to the Marathas in 1751. 'Bengal' is used loosely to refer to the territory, including Bihar, administered by the company from Calcutta.

⁹⁸ Lucy S. Sutherland, *The East India Company in Eighteenth-Century Politics* (Oxford, 1952), 141–7; Bowen, *Revenue and Reform*, 16–17.

⁹⁹ Lucy S. Sutherland and John A. Woods, 'The East India Speculations of William Burke', *Proceedings of the Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society (Literary and Historical Section)*, 11 (1964–6), 183–216.

¹⁰⁰ Sutherland, *East India Company*, 138–76; Philip Lawson, 'Parliament and the First East India Enquiry, 1767', *Parliamentary History*, 1 (1983), 99–114.

Burke's first parliamentary speech on India, delivered on 25 November 1766, was directed against the projected inquisition.¹⁰¹ His position was influenced by several factors. Any proposition emanating from Chatham, whom Burke loathed, was sure to incur his antagonism. Will Burke expected to gain substantially if the company kept the lion's share of the newly acquired revenues. Independently of these considerations, Burke may genuinely have disapproved of the measure as an unjustified interference in the company's affairs, as did many MPs with no personal motives. This mixture of personal and political motives is characteristic, for Burke always denied that measures could be separated from the men who proposed or were to implement them. Burke opposed first the enquiry, and then every stage of the bill to limit the dividend that the company might declare. The main ground of his objection was the unwarranted invasion of the rights of private property. Absent from this episode is any concern for the natives of Bengal, or for the drain of money from the province, prominent themes in his later speeches on India. Indeed, he welcomed the prospect of a thousand East India Company proprietors each drawing an additional £1,000 a year from Bengal and spending it in Britain, 'animating your arts & manufactures & encreasing the produce of every one of y[ou]r inland Duties'.¹⁰² Chatham's withdrawal (when he was incapacitated by some mysterious illness) facilitated the negotiation of a compromise. The company agreed to make an annual contribution of £400,000 to the Exchequer, while the question of its right was shelved. A limitation of its dividend to 10 per cent was, however, imposed.¹⁰³ This settlement represented a severe setback for the speculators. Worse, Bengal did not generate the vast surpluses so confidently expected. Instead, the company's expenditure rose to meet income. In 1769 the speculative boom collapsed, and Will was left irredeemably in debt to Verney.¹⁰⁴

In 1767, the contest was between the government and the company. No one had expressed much concern for the inhabitants of Bengal. This indifference changed, as information flowed into Britain about India itself, and particularly about the effects of British rule in Bengal. The company came under increasing criticism for sanctioning, if not itself practising, rapacity and oppression. In March 1772, Horace Walpole (1717–97) recorded the 'great clamour' raised in England against 'the oppressions in India . . . under the rapine and cruelty of the servants of the Company'.¹⁰⁵ Yet in April, when

¹⁰¹ E.B. told Charles O'Hara that he 'jumped up instantly' on the motion for an enquiry and 'took my own Ground, I think very cautiously, lest they [the other factions in opposition] should give us a ground on which we should not be able to act' (27 Nov. 1766: C i. 281). The debate was not fully reported, and the precise nature of this 'ground' is uncertain.

¹⁰² Draft for a speech on the East India enquiry or the Dividend Bill (WWM BkP 9/31). Reports for this session of Parliament being scanty, E.B.'s draft cannot be assigned to a particular debate.

¹⁰³ Sutherland, *East India Company*, 174–5.

¹⁰⁴ In 1771, W.B. owed Verney £23,500 (Sutherland and Woods, 'East India Speculations', 206).

¹⁰⁵ *The Last Journals of Horace Walpole during the Reign of George III from 1771–1783*, ed. A. Francis Steuart (London, 1910), i. 72 (30 Mar. 1772).

a parliamentary committee of enquiry was instituted, Burke spoke against its formation, defending the company's independence as stoutly as he had in 1767. Once more, he argued that 'the *Charter* ought to be held inviolable', and he blamed the ministry for not preventing whatever 'enormities' had been committed.¹⁰⁶ As earlier, his attitude was partly determined by his being in opposition. Lord North could do no right.

In response to this unwelcome scrutiny, and with a view to averting further ministerial meddling, the East India Company proposed to send out a team of three supervisors to reform the administration of Bengal. As the most prominent independent politician to have taken a sympathetic interest in the company, Burke was asked to head this commission.¹⁰⁷ By now, even Burke could no longer claim that all was well. Yet writing to John Stewart (d. 1778), a friend who had lately joined the company's service in Bengal, he still expressed himself only diffidently about abuses in the company's rule. 'We entertain,' he wrote, 'perhaps erroneously, an opinion, that there have been great mistakes and mismanagement' (30 Oct. 1772: *C* ii. 358). In the context of the charges that were being levelled against the company, this was mild language indeed. During the session of 1772–3, however, when there was widespread agreement that greater ministerial control over the company was needed, Burke remained more concerned with 'secret influence' than with India. He therefore opposed North's Regulating Bill to the last, arguing that abuses in India were being exaggerated to provide a pretext for an extension of ministerial influence and patronage. Left to itself, he claimed, the company was capable of reforming 'every capital disorder' in India, and of creating 'a system one of the most beautiful ever seen established in any place'.¹⁰⁸

Between 1773 and 1780, Burke completely lost his faith in the company's ability to reform itself, and became one of its harshest critics. This shift was largely the result of fuller information about the reality of the company's rule. Burke was soon convinced that, not only were the company's own territories misgoverned, but that its baleful influence spread devastation and oppression well beyond its boundaries. Two episodes were particularly important in effecting this conversion. The first to surface was the dispute between the Nawab of the Carnatic and the Raja of Tanjore, which came to the attention of Parliament in 1777. Burke became deeply involved, partly as a result of Will Burke making a voyage to India and returning to London as agent for the

¹⁰⁶ 13 Apr. 1772 (*WS* ii. 371–4).

¹⁰⁷ E.B. to Richmond, 4 Aug. 1772 (*C* ii. 319–21); W.B. to Charles O'Hara, n.d. (National Library of Ireland, MS 16687, no. 73).

¹⁰⁸ 10 June 1773 (BL Egerton MS 250, fos. 215–16). The idea, but not the wording, is found in the report reprinted in *WS* ii. 393–6 from the *London Evening Post*. E.B. probably had in mind the company's method of recording all consultations in writing, which at the opening of the impeachment he called 'a constitution . . . so great, so excellent, so perfect, that I will venture to say that human wisdom has never exceeded it' (15 Feb. 1788: *WS* vi. 295). He would repeatedly accuse Hastings of subverting or circumventing this system.

raja. For the first time, the protection of India itself against the company and its rapacious officials became his theme.¹⁰⁹ The second episode was an indirect and unforeseen result of the operation of North's Regulating Act. This Act left the powers of the Supreme Court vague on crucial points: on its relation to the Supreme Council, and on who was subject to its jurisdiction. Determined to assert its own interpretation of its authority, the court made itself generally unpopular. The council petitioned the Commons, complaining of the court's undue extension of its powers. Another petition, advancing similar charges from a different point of view, was signed by many of the British inhabitants of Calcutta.¹¹⁰ These petitions, received in 1780, were referred to a Select Committee. Preoccupied with the American war, Lord North took little interest in the question, and allowed the committee to be dominated by members of the opposition. Burke was one of those elected. This committee produced a bill, enacted (after drastic modifications in the Lords) as the Bengal Judicature Act of 1781, which stands as one of Burke's few legislative achievements in a parliamentary career largely devoted to opposition.¹¹¹

Work on the committee laid the foundation of Burke's detailed knowledge of British India. It also brought him into contact with a high-caste Hindu, probably the only one to visit England in the eighteenth century. In 1780, Raghunath Rao (d. 1783), deposed *Peshwa* (chief) of the Marathas, sent agents to London to petition the British government to assist his restoration. One of these agents, Humund Rao, gave evidence to the Select Committee about Hindu caste practices.¹¹² Burke later invited him to Beaconsfield. The visit impressed Burke deeply, and he was fond of talking about it. In 1784, when Mary Shackleton was shown the estate, she received and recorded the full story:

He shewed us a flag on which a Bramin, who . . . was two days at Butler's Court, used to dress his dinner; he would eat in no house which was not his own, so they had given him this [a greenhouse]. Tho' he had a servant he prepared his own dinner, using I think neither animal food or wine, eating off the ground stripped from his waist up & throwing away his dinner if any one came within a certain distance from him.¹¹³

Burke was unusual in treating with respect Hindu practices generally regarded as, at best, absurd superstitions. The encounter became sufficiently

¹⁰⁹ *Supra*, i. 414–16.

¹¹⁰ The petitions were received on 4 Dec. 1780 and 1 Feb. 1781. A third petition, from the East India Company, was received on 9 Mar. (Cf xxxviii. 97–9, 159–62, 278–80). The petition of the British residents was taken to England by William Hickey (1749–1809; the memoirist), son of Joseph Hickey (c. 1714–94), Burke's friend and legal adviser. Hickey himself gave evidence before the committee, and wrote a graphic (if probably overdrawn) account of E.B. in action; *Memoirs of William Hickey*, ed. Alfred Spencer (London, 1913–25), ii. 299–303.

¹¹² Lambert, cxxxviii. 39–40.

¹¹³ Mary Shackleton's Diary, 11 June 1784 (National Library of Ireland, MS 9310, p. 116).

notorious for Ralph Broome (d. 1805) to ridicule it in one of his lampoons on the Hastings trial.¹¹⁴

Investigation of the complaints against the Supreme Court completed Burke's conversion from a defender to a critic of the East India Company. This conviction was reinforced by a concurrent development. The petitions from Calcutta arrived at nearly the same time as news of the invasion of the Carnatic by Haidar Ali (c.1722–82) of Mysore. This mattered, and in response North secured a Secret Committee composed of ministerial nominees, chaired by Henry Dundas. Burke opposed the secrecy, but accepted the committee's conclusion: the need for greater ministerial control of the company.¹¹⁵ Speaking of the Regulating Act of 1781, which extended ministerial control over the company, he acknowledged to Lord Macartney (1737–1806), an old friend who was now Governor of Madras, that 'None of us opposed that Measure of power to Ministry as we had done on the former occasion [in 1773]' (15 Oct. 1781: *C* x. 11). From Burke, normally a stickler for his own consistency, and unaccustomed to agree with Lord North on any subject, such an avowal that he had changed his mind is a remarkable testimony to the strength of his new conviction.

The Select Committee was reconstituted in December 1781 with a more extensive brief. Burke became its most forceful and energetic member. Between February 1782 and November 1783, it produced eleven reports.¹¹⁶ The first led to a resolution in the Commons for the recall of Sir Elijah Impey (1732–1809), the unpopular Chief Justice. Since Impey was a Crown appointee, a ministerial order ensured his recall.¹¹⁷ Subsequently, Dundas, as Chairman of the ministerial Secret Committee, moved a string of resolutions based on its reports, including one for the recall of Hastings. Hastings, however, though appointed by an Act of Parliament, was an employee of the company, not subject to recall by the Crown. The directors voted to comply with the vote of the Commons, but the Court of Proprietors reversed the order.¹¹⁸ In calmer times, a determined ministry would have been able to impose its will on the company, by legislation if necessary. In the confused political situation of 1782, however, ministries had more urgent priorities.

¹¹⁴ 'A Story. Burke—The Bramin—and the Hot-House'; *Letters of Simplin the Second . . . 1789* (London, 1789), 97–100.

¹¹⁵ The six reports of the Secret Committee, submitted between 27 June 1781 and 6 Mar. 1782, are reprinted in Lambert, cxlii–cxlv. They are the 'six great chopping bastards' ridiculed in the *Speech on the Nabob of Arcot's Debts* (*WS* v. 550). E.B.'s annotated set of the originals is now in BL (749.d.1). His notes are mostly summaries of the text, probably intended as location aids. E.B.'s speech against the appointment of a secret committee (30 Apr. 1781: *WS* v. 135–9) is an eloquent plea for open government.

¹¹⁶ Reprinted in Lambert, cxxxviii–cxli. E.B.'s 'Observations' on the First Report, and the texts of the Ninth and Eleventh (minus the appendices), are in *WS* v. 145–89, 196–378.

¹¹⁷ *CJ* xxxviii. 978; *PH* xxii. 1313–14 (3 May 1782).

¹¹⁸ *CJ* xxxviii. 1032; Debrett, vii. 197–200 (28 May 1782). The resolution also demanded the recall of William Hornby, President of the Bombay Council. Sutherland, *East India Company*, 383–5.

To Burke, naturally, this defiance of the legislature became further proof of ‘secret influence’ at work to counteract the responsible constitutional power.

When the Fox–North Coalition took office in April 1783, there was general agreement that the East India Company, and therefore its territories in India, should be subject to closer parliamentary supervision. As the Coalition’s acknowledged expert on the subject, Burke could now give practical effect to some of his ideas about British India. These views are eloquently expressed in two of the reports of the Select Committee, the ninth and the eleventh. The Ninth Report describes the control and systematic exploitation of Bengal by a gang of criminals, with Hastings as their chief (25 June 1783: *WS* v. 196–333). The Eleventh Report concentrates on the scandalous extortion practised by British officials under the pretence of accepting ‘presents’ for the company’s use (18 Nov. 1783: 334–78). The Coalition embodied its plans for reform in two bills. One, concerned with the administration of British India, reflects the evidence and conclusions of the reports, prohibiting many of the abuses they identified. More controversial, however, were the provisions of a second bill, not adumbrated in the reports, for vesting control of the company in a board of commissioners appointed by Parliament for a fixed term. This was the proposal, excoriated as an unscrupulous invasion of the company’s property and patronage, which enabled the king to exploit underhand means to defeat it, gambling on its unpopularity.¹¹⁹ To Burke, the king’s action was another manifestation of what he later identified as ‘Indianism’, the old ‘secret influence’ in a new guise. Returned ‘nabobs’ were deploying their ill-gotten wealth, squeezed out of India, to thwart the elected legislature of Britain. Burke now had an explanatory framework, or perhaps rather a distorting lens, through which he saw Indian issues.

So vehemently had the East India Company opposed Fox’s bills that it naturally looked to Pitt as its saviour. Yet Pitt was no less determined on reform than Fox, though the means he chose were more devious. His India Act, while ostensibly leaving the company its commercial independence, on political questions effectively subordinated it to a ministerial Board of Control.¹²⁰ Burke, however, obsessed by his dread of ‘secret influence’, saw Pitt not as a dispassionate reformer but as a screener of delinquents. He therefore interpreted Pitt’s Act not as a measure to impose ministerial control on a recalcitrant company, but as a victory for the company over the principles of Fox’s India Bill. Convinced that Pitt’s victory in the 1784 election had been materially aided by the ‘Bengal squad’, Burke impugned Pitt’s Act as the payoff for their support. On 28 July, despite his earlier humiliations on

¹¹⁹ Fox’s proposals were contained in two bills. E.B.’s speech of 1 Dec. 1783 was in support of the Vesting Bill, by far the more controversial, which was defeated in the Lords on 17 Dec.

¹²⁰ Formally, the Board of Control was a subcommittee of the Privy Council. The first president was Lord Sydney, the Home Secretary, but Dundas dominated it from the outset, becoming virtually minister for India.

the floor of the Commons, he returned briefly to London to argue against the bill's third reading. This was an unusual stage at which to oppose a measure. Regretting his earlier silence, Burke resolved to denounce not merely the bill itself (about which he said little) but the collusion he suspected between the Bengal squad and the ministry (*WS* v. 455–9).

Re-energized by his attack on Pitt, Burke determined to launch his own initiative, despite the lateness of the season. On 30 July, he therefore made a series of motions for papers, papers intended to criminate Hastings and lead to his recall and prosecution. Not content simply to move for the papers, Burke spoke at length to explain their importance. At the third motion, his patience exhausted, Pitt called Burke to order. When Burke refused to yield the floor, the occasion degenerated into an undignified squabble.¹²¹ Pitt's impatience is easy to understand. Even impartial members were probably puzzled by Burke's rambling vehemence. As a reasoned, coherently argued exposition of Burke's ideas, his *Speech on Fox's India Bill* of 1783 is much superior. The interest of Burke's speeches of 30 July 1784 is that they are rhetorically less 'well behaved', less structured and more passionate. At moments, Burke assumes the mantle of an Old Testament prophet, denouncing 'the righteous judgement of God' against 'oppression, speculation, rapine, and even murder' (*WS* v. 468, 475). To Burke's auditors, the biblical allusions and language, the frequent bursts of hyperbole, and the reliance on generalization rather than detail, probably undermined the persuasive effect of his speeches. Indeed, Burke was manifestly near the limit of his self-control. But perhaps nowhere else is the sincerity of his feelings more evident, the depth of his concern for 'millions of hopeless individuals' (473), and his rage that others seemed determined to ignore the crimes against humanity committed by the company's officers. Yet there was just enough absurdity about Burke's message to taint the whole. Who could credit the suggestion that the defeat of the Coalition was one of the first marks of 'a dissolution at hand', of 'that awful and irreversible verdict which is registered in Heaven against us' (468)? The impression of mental unbalance was reinforced by the repeated oscillation (especially after Pitt called him to order) between passages of high moral outrage and descents into rancorous personalities.

During the course of his speeches on 30 July, Burke became increasingly outspoken in making Hastings his chief culprit, 'the scourge of India'. In Burke's imagination, Hastings had become a 'dreadful Colossus . . . not to be shaken by any individual' who 'lorded it over every thing that was great and powerful and good in India, and in England' (*WS* v. 476). While not wholly without foundation (principally the company's failure to recall him in response to the resolutions of the Commons), this was a wildly exaggerated notion. Hastings had many enemies, and considerably less political influence

¹²¹ *PH* xxiv. 1252–73; *WS* v. 460–78 (E.B.'s speeches).

in England than Burke supposed. Nevertheless, the belief warped Burke's proceedings. Having convinced himself that Hastings was personally responsible for all the ills of India (and again, Hastings's long tenure in office lent the idea some credibility), Burke pursued him to the exclusion of any more general investigation into the system. Hence the redress of 'the grievances of many millions of people' (475) came to depend on the prosecution and conviction of one man, Warren Hastings.

5

Burke might have resumed his crusade against Hastings in the 1785 session of Parliament, had the unexpected resurfacing of an old problem not temporarily diverted his attention. That question was the repayment of the debts of the Nawab of the Carnatic (usually known as the 'Nabob of Arcot', after his capital). The Carnatic was one of the independent states carved out of the ruins of the Mogul Empire. After the Seven Years War, it was ruled by a nawab installed by the British, Muhammad Ali Khan (d. 1795), who managed to retain much greater political independence than did the titular nawabs of Bengal. But thanks to the war and his subsequent attempts to expand his territory, the nawab had incurred vast debts. Some of his debt was to the company itself, principally for military assistance during the war. The company's official policy was to oppose the nawab's expansionist ambitions. The private creditors whose loans were at risk unless his revenues could be increased, however, encouraged him.¹²² In particular, they hoped to transfer to the nawab control of Tanjore, a wealthy, semi-independent state to the south, ruled by a Hindu raja (Tuljaji, d. 1787). In 1773, the company's troops occupied Tanjore and placed it in the hands of the nawab. This episode, and particularly the use of the company's forces, incurred the disapproval of the directors in London. They therefore dispatched a new governor to Madras, Lord Pigot (1719–77), with instructions to restore Tanjore to its raja. In 1776, Pigot did so, only to be himself deposed (on the pretext of having exceeded his powers) by a majority of the Madras council. The real motive behind this coup was to return Tanjore to the nawab, and thus to recommit its revenues to the liquidation of his debts.¹²³ News of these events provoked an acrimonious controversy in England. Since Pigot was an ally of Rockingham, the dispute became a party issue.

¹²² Jim Phillips, 'A Successor to the Moguls: the Nawab of the Carnatic and the East India Company, 1763–1785', *International History Review*, 7 (1985), 364–89.

¹²³ Jim Phillips, 'Private Profit and Imperialism in Eighteenth-Century Southern India: The Tanjore Revenue Dispute, 1775–1777', *South Asia*, NS 9/2 (1986), 1–16.

Will Burke now re-enters the story. Having lost his seat in Parliament at the 1774 election, he was unemployed and in need of a fortune to recoup his losses of 1769. Since India still appeared a land where wealth might be acquired rapidly and without much effort, Will accepted with alacrity even the humble role of a courier, carrying dispatches to Pigot. This was a desperate move, for he had been unable to secure an official position with the company, and the richest pickings in India were largely the preserve of company servants. He had, however, some hopes of an appointment as agent for the raja. Agents for the nawab had been active in London for some time. By the time Will reached Madras, his dispatches were useless. Pigot had died in prison, adding an extra twist to the scandal. Will did, however, secure the Tanjore agency. Without actually visiting Tanjore or meeting the raja, he at once returned to London.¹²⁴ Back in England, he communicated to Burke his enthusiasm for the raja's cause. Tanjore became the prototype of Burke's vision of the indigenous Indian state.¹²⁵

Will Burke wrote two pamphlets on behalf of Tanjore. The first, 'Reflexions on the Nabobs Debts' (1778), was probably intended only for private circulation. Burke undoubtedly read it, for he joined a query in the margin of a fair copy. He may even have helped write it. One passage that sounds Burkean describes the plight of a Hindu prince, a former ally of the British, now 'a miserable fugitive in a Village near Madrass, in a state next to absolute beggary; and indeed in a Condition to affect the feelings of all those whose Sensibility is not rendered wholly callous by Tyranny and Avarice'.¹²⁶ The pathos of the ancient Hindu nobility reduced to indigence is a recurrent motif in Burke's later speeches on India. Burke certainly contributed to Will's second and much longer pamphlet, *An Enquiry into the Policy of Making Conquests for the Mahometans* (1779: *WS* v. 43–124). In this case, several passages in Burke's hand confirm his share in the composition. These include a paragraph which decries the nawab's government as a 'Mahometan tyranny' and contrasts it with the benevolent paternalism of Hindu princes (116). Will Burke's Tanjore agency created an unfortunate appearance, exploited by his enemies, that Burke's opinions on India were mercenary, and should therefore be discounted. Independence was a highly valued quality in the eighteenth-century House of Commons. Burke's New York agency had

¹²⁴ W.B. left London in June 1777; travelling overland, he reached Madras on 30 Aug. Departing in late October, he was back in London in May 1778.

¹²⁵ E.B. paints an idealized picture of Tanjore in his *Speech on the Nabob of Arcot's Debts* (*WS* v. 522). The reality was rather different. In his letter of 7 Jan. 1785 to R.B. Jr., W.B. gives an unfavourable account of the government of Tanjore (NA PRO. 30/8/361, fos. 53–4).

¹²⁶ 'Reflexions on the Nabobs Debts written in the year 1778. By W.B.' (Bodl. MS Eng. hist. c. 17, fos. 318–63; quotation from fo. 328). If this passage is by E.B., it forms a piquant contrast to his brusque rejection of Blaquiére's sentimental picture of the Ridge sisters (*C* v. 181, 185–6), and exemplifies Frances Crewe's observation that 'Those who had known Luxury and were reduced met with most of his Compassion' ('Extracts from Mr Burke's Table-Talk, at Crewe Hall', 29).

allowed his enemies to impute unworthy motives to his stand on America. The charge that Burke was biased by Will's Tanjore agency was kept alive long after that agency had ceased, and indeed when his views on India by no means coincided with Will's.¹²⁷

By 1784, while the debts remained unpaid and unfunded, they appeared to have become less contentious. Fox's India Bill had provided for a full enquiry before payment of any of the private debts. Pitt's Act made a similar provision.¹²⁸ In a pamphlet written to explain and defend this Act, William Wyndham Grenville, a member of Pitt's Board of Control, claimed that the payment of the nawab's debts, 'discriminating . . . those which have been justly incurred, from those which have been forced upon him by the injustice and extortion of English oppressors' was one point 'upon which all men are agreed' and which Pitt's Act settled.¹²⁹ In 1783, Henry Dundas had acknowledged that 'the greatest part' of the debts were 'debts of corruption'.¹³⁰ During the second half of 1784, however, Dundas, now in effect Pitt's minister for India, was intensively and successfully lobbied by representatives of the creditors.¹³¹ Accordingly, when the directors submitted a dispatch ordering an enquiry into the debts (as mandated by Pitt's Act, and as Dundas himself had proposed in 1783), to their dismay, Dundas used the Board of Control's power (given by Pitt's Act) to rewrite the paragraphs relating to the debts, ordering their payment in full, without any further enquiry.¹³²

Word of this reversal reached Burke about 23 October 1784.¹³³ Even more alarming than the initial news was the gloss on it placed in a letter of 8 November from another informant with inside knowledge. This reported not only the return to the nawab of the sequestered lands (in effect, giving him the resources with which to repay the private debts), but the removal of a clause which would have required Hastings to leave India within a year of the arrival of his successor. In consequence, 'the Governor General still stands possessed of a Grant of the empire of the East in perpetuity'.¹³⁴ This insinuation fuelled Burke's belief that Pitt and Dundas were deeply implicated in a plot to screen and abet both Hastings and the Arcot creditors. This was far

¹²⁷ On 24 Feb. 1785, Major Scott accused E.B. of being virtually an agent for the Raja of Tanjore, and W.B. of being 'actually in that character at the present moment' (*Morning Chronicle*, 25 Feb.; Debrett, xvii. 284). W.B. seems, however, to have ceased to act for the raja in 1782, when he became Deputy Paymaster.

¹²⁸ Fox's Bill, in Lambert, xxxv. 370; Pitt's Act (25 George III, c. 19), clause 37.

¹²⁹ *Thoughts on the Present East India Bill, Passed into a Law, August 1784* (London, 1784), 25–6. Published anonymously.

¹³⁰ 14 Apr. 1783 (*PH* xxiii. 758).

¹³¹ John Call to Dundas, 13 Oct., 2 Nov. 1784, 22 Jan. 1785, 'Thursday morning' (BL (OIOC) IOR H/318, pp. 5–7; H/317, pp. 107–17, 313; H/318, pp. 1–2).

¹³² The texts of the original and amended dispatches are printed in *Original Papers Relative to the Rights and Pretensions of the Nabob of Arcot and the Rajah of Tanjore* (London, 1785). On the territorial dispute between Arcot and Tanjore, Dundas also reversed the directors' decision, which had favoured Tanjore. E.B. deals only briefly with this secondary issue (*WS* v. 538).

¹³³ Stephen Thurston Adey to E.B., 22 Oct. 1784 (NRO A. II. 105).

¹³⁴ Unknown to E.B., 8 Nov. 1784 (NRO A. II. 108). The letter was signed, but the signature has been torn off.

from the truth. Neither Pitt nor Dundas wanted Hastings to continue in Bengal. Indeed, unknown to Burke, Hastings was about to quit Calcutta of his own accord, chagrined not to have been asked to stay on with the more extensive powers that he believed he needed to consolidate British power in India.¹³⁵

Far-fetched as collusion between Dundas and Hastings appears in hindsight, Burke's belief in it was not entirely implausible. Hastings was not himself an Arcot creditor, nor had he been at all closely connected with the nawab's creditors. Yet he had thwarted Lord Macartney, who as Governor of Madras had been inveterately hostile to the claims of the creditors. During the war, the company had assumed the revenue administration of parts of the nawab's dominions, in order to guarantee funds with which to defray their military expenses. Macartney had proposed to retain these after the peace, until the nawab's debt to the company should be liquidated. Hastings, as Governor-General, overruled this plan.¹³⁶ This decision was consistent with his declared policy of minimizing direct British control of the internal affairs of the dependent states (such as Oudh and the Carnatic), and relying on the operation of indirect influence. Burke, however, interpreted his action (which certainly facilitated repayment of the private debts) as giving *carte blanche* to the creditors to continue their oppression of an already war-ravaged and overburdened country. The episode also strengthened Burke's misconstruction of Hastings as primarily motivated by greed for money.

Outraged as he was by Dundas's action, Burke could not immediately raise the matter in Parliament, which was not expected to convene until after Christmas. He therefore decided to approach Pitt. Given Burke's intemperate abuse of Pitt in the previous session, this was a desperate move. His willingness to make it evinces the genuineness of his concern. The interview, at which Burke was accompanied by Dudley Long (1743–1829; one of his colleagues on the Select Committee of 1781–3), began inauspiciously. Pitt declared that he had to leave almost at once, perhaps an instinctive defence against Burke's habitual prolixity. Burke therefore confined himself to a request for a copy of a letter recently received from Hastings, which (so he had heard) spoke disrespectfully of the reports of the Select Committee. The weightier matter of the Arcot debts he proposed to defer until Pitt had more leisure. Pitt agreed to a second meeting, which probably took place on 3 December, with Burke accompanied by William Windham as well as by Long. Pitt was icy and unaccommodating. By refusing a second request for a copy of the letter, he unwittingly confirmed Burke's (unfounded) conviction that he and Hastings were acting collusively. Turning to the Arcot debts,

¹³⁵ Hastings to Marian Hastings, 24 Sept., 26 Dec. 1784; *Letters of Warren Hastings to his Wife*, ed. Sydney C. Grier (Edinburgh, 1905), 326–30, 409.

¹³⁶ T. G. Fraser, 'India, 1780–86', in *Macartney of Lissanoure, 1737–1806: Essays in Biography*, ed. Peter Roebuck (Belfast, 1983), 154–215, esp. 177–81, 190–9, 205–7.

Burke asked whether the matter was quite settled, or whether the ministers were open to persuasion. Stopping just short of a decisive negative, Pitt replied that only new information could induce him to reopen the question. Burke parried by suggesting that Pitt had made up his mind prematurely, after hearing only the point of view of the creditors. Pitt closed the interview by reaffirming his confidence that ‘the Business had been fully enquired into’. Thinking as he then did of Pitt, Burke can have entertained no expectation of a change of heart. Indeed, his taking detailed minutes of the interviews suggests as much: that he wanted to record Pitt’s intransigence and refusal to listen.¹³⁷

Burke’s next move was to approach the Lord Chancellor, Lord Thurlow (1731–1806). A most unco-operative colleague, Thurlow disliked Pitt as much as Burke did, and was the leading troublemaker in the cabinet. Yet except for this well-known hostility to Pitt, Thurlow was not a promising ally, since he was a professed admirer of Hastings. Sharing Burke’s taste for homely expressions of contempt, he had dismissed the reports of the Select Committee as no more worthy of credit than *Robinson Crusoe*.¹³⁸ Even so, convinced that Dundas’s action was actually illegal, being in contravention of Pitt’s Act, Burke hoped that Thurlow, who relished throwing legal obstacles in the way of his colleagues, might be sympathetic to the strictly legal aspect of the controversy. Accordingly, when Burke wrote to him, the day after his second interview with Pitt, he presented the dispute as ‘rather a judicial determination on property than a mere matter of State’ (4 Dec. 1784: *C v.* 198). Thurlow invited Burke to dinner on the 13th to explain the business. From this meeting, Burke formed the impression that Thurlow agreed with him about the debts.¹³⁹ This promising start came to nothing, perhaps because Thurlow found that the strictly legal case against Dundas was weaker than Burke had led him to hope. Whatever his motives, Thurlow was playing a double game. At the same time as he was encouraging Burke, he was telling Major Scott that ‘we shall be held contemptible through Europe

¹³⁷ ‘Conversation with Mr Pitt respecting some documents against Mr Hastings on Friday’ [3 Dec. 1784?] (WWM BkP 9/77–8). The letter in question, from Hastings to the directors, was dated Lucknow, 30 April 1784, with a long postscript dated 13 May (BL (OIOC) IOR E/4/42). Scott printed it, but Pitt, having ‘refused a Sight of it to Burke’, asked that publication be suspended (Scott to Hastings, 10 Jan. 1785: BL Add. MS 29167, fo. 347). It was subsequently printed in the *Morning Chronicle*, 18 and 19 Jan. 1785, and in pamphlet form as *A Letter from the Honourable Warren Hastings, Esq. Governor-General of Bengal, to the Honourable the Court of Directors of the East-India Company* (London, n.d.). To the pamphlet text, Scott added an appendix, in which he called E.B.’s *Speech on Fox’s India Bill* ‘the ingenious Novel published by Mr. Dodsley, under the Title of Mr. Burke’s Speech’ (41)

¹³⁸ 9 Dec 1783; *PH* xxiv. 124, 126–7. In his speech on 28 July 1784, E.B. attributes to Thurlow the phrase ‘mere fables’ (*WS v.* 455).

¹³⁹ Thurlow to E.B., [13 Dec. 1784] (WWM BkP 1/1953). Philip Francis, commonplace book, entry for 14 Dec. 1784 (BL (OIOC) MS Eur. D. 20, p. 58). Thurlow may have offered some opposition to Dundas’s proposals (Thomas Orde to the Duke of Rutland, 14 Dec. 1784, in HMC (Rutland), iii. 159).

if you [Hastings] are not supported and honoured.’ Scott in turn led Hastings to expect a peerage on his return, not an impeachment.¹⁴⁰

Faced with this second rebuff from a minister, Burke determined to take his case to Parliament. With Pitt and Thurlow, Burke had tried to keep the Arcot debts outside the arena of partisan politics. Raising the matter in the Commons meant abandoning that ground. Burke knew that the ministry was unlikely to yield. The iniquitous debts would be paid. His aim now was to convict the ministry before the court of public opinion. The parliamentary occasion was therefore hardly more than a pretext for a lengthy speech which could be published as a pamphlet. Instead of mounting a direct assault on the ministry, however, Burke and his allies decided to make a motion for papers. This was rather an artificial ploy, for the relevant papers had already been published as a pamphlet.¹⁴¹ Its purpose was to attract independents, who might be reluctant to support a direct motion of censure. Fox introduced the motion on 28 February 1785 with a speech of studied moderation. He stressed the previous unanimity on the subject of the debts. Pitt’s Act, as well as his own bill, and the bill introduced in 1783 by Dundas, had all provided for an enquiry. The ministry was therefore renegeing on its own undertaking. Instead of condemning the debts as altogether or largely fraudulent, he simply asked for an enquiry, to which no legitimate creditor should object. Generalizing his argument, Fox warned against the ill consequences of implicit faith in, and blind obedience to, ministerial diktats. He alluded to the Westminster scrutiny as a point on which the House had lately asserted its independence.

Dundas countered with three principal arguments. By a strained interpretation of the wording of Pitt’s Act, he was able to claim that the decision to bypass an enquiry did not infringe the letter of the law. Second, without asserting that no particle of the debts was above suspicion, he argued that, for the most part, the debts were genuine, and that delay in payment would impose hardship on the creditors. Finally, and most compellingly, he made the issue one of confidence in the ministry. The Board of Control had not acted lightly or without full information and long cogitation. If their actions did not meet with approval, they should be not merely censured but replaced. Was Pitt, or Fox, the more worthy of belief?¹⁴² This reduced the debate to a question that everyone could understand, and since, of all subjects, India was the one on which Fox least inspired trust, it was a powerful argument. As far as the outcome was concerned, the vote might as well have been taken before Burke spoke as after.

¹⁴⁰ Scott to Hastings, 7 Dec. 1784 (BLAdd. MS 29167, fo. 182). The terms in which, in his letter to E.B. of [14 Dec.], Thurlow expressed his predilection for Hastings were misleading if not duplicitous (C.v. 202).

¹⁴¹ *Original Papers Relative to the Rights and Pretensions of the Nabob of Arcot and the Rajah of Tanjore* (London, 1785).

¹⁴² *PH* xxv. 163–71 (Fox), 174–82 (Dundas).

Burke, however, was never deterred by the impossibility of success. He had prepared a long and elaborate speech, and he delivered it, speaking for about four hours.¹⁴³ Opening with a witty dissection of Dundas's self-defence, he showed that he had lost none of his ability to extemporize (*WS* v. 485–6). Then followed his prepared exordium, a demolition of Pitt's reputation as an economist. Meanly economical at home, as evidenced in his cheese-paring Offices Reform Bill, Pitt was profuse and profligate in India, squandering the resources of the Carnatic to satisfy his corrupt supporters (489–91). Turning to the debts themselves, Burke developed a masterly narrative, replete with detail but clear in outline, of the growth of the debts. Highlighting the manifest presumptions of fraud in the creation of the debts, and in the exorbitant rates of interest that had swelled them to so monstrous a bulk, he traced them to collusion between the nawab, eager to enlist the British military power in his schemes of conquest, and the creditors, a knot of rapacious bloodsuckers. The directors had repeatedly discountenanced these 'debts'. Having no official standing, they did not merit the protection of Parliament. Nor, after the ravages of the recent wars, could the Carnatic afford the burden of their repayment (518–23).

Towards the end of his speech, Burke returned to the British aspect of the case, charging a corrupt connection between Pitt and the creditors and their agents. For Burke, the leading villain was the notorious Paul Benfield (1741–1810), whom he had attacked as early as 1781 (*WS* v. 124–32). Burke thus advanced two grounds for investigating the Arcot debts: justice to the Carnatic (for once, he foregrounds the plight of the Indian peasant, rather than the misfortunes of the formerly opulent), and corruption at home. Even members who cared nothing for the Carnatic, he argued, should be concerned at the creation of a fund for political bribery larger than any previously known, enough to purchase a phalanx of dependent MPs. The gravamen of Burke's charge was not that Dundas and Pitt had corruptly received money themselves. Indeed, he conceded that they had not. Rather, they had benefited from its corrupt use on their behalf. Far more dangerous, Burke argued, than to bribe a minister, is to enable a minister to bribe others. The existence of such a 'corrupt and destructive system' (550–1), a chimera of Burke's imagination, had been an article of faith since his entry into politics. On this favourite subject he never tired. Many an inward groan must have greeted his avowal, a little before 1 a.m., that 'the more material half of the subject has hardly been touched on' (550). But after four hours, even Burke was flagging, and he concluded without going deeply into the detested 'system'.

¹⁴³ At the Hastings trial, Joseph Gurney, the most proficient shorthand reporter of the day, told Gibbon that a ready orator would speak at the rate of 7,000 to 7,500 words per hour; *Memoirs of my Life*, ed. Georges A. Bonnard (London, 1966), 192. The printed text of the speech (which E.B. is more likely to have expanded than abbreviated) is about 30,000 words, and so would have taken about four hours to deliver. Wraxall probably exaggerated when he timed E.B.'s speech at 'nearly five hours' (*Historical and Posthumous Memoirs*, ed. Henry B. Wheatley (London, 1884), iv. 86).

This speech has garnered some remarkable encomiums. No one can have been less disposed to admire or praise than Nathaniel Wraxall (1751–1831), a close friend of Benfield, the *bête noire* of the speech. Wraxall's letters to Benfield are filled with references to Burke as 'the *cursed Paddy*'. Yet Wraxall, admittedly in his later *Memoirs*, conceded 'the mass of knowledge' which Burke displayed in the speech, and doubted whether Demosthenes or Cicero could have delivered it with greater 'energy, eloquence, or animation'.¹⁴⁴ Many passages as eloquent and enjoyable as any in Burke's earlier speeches could be cited in vindication of what may appear a hyperbolic judgement. The witty opening is one example. Another is the characterization of the ministry's inconsistencies as 'true to itself, and faithful to its own perverted order'. Penurious in public, prodigal in secret, the ministers are flagellants who 'whip their own enormities on the vicarious back of every small offender' (*WS* v. 490–1). A third is the evocative description of the Carnatic (520–3), which shows Burke's imaginative empathy for a country that he had never seen. His imagery and metaphors are as inventive and varied as ever, ranging from the comic picture of Dundas and the reports of his Secret Committee as a bashful bride with 'six great chopping bastards' (550) to the powerful figure of the 1784 election as a tornado (551). To look beyond particular passages, the whole speech is a remarkable fusion of two seemingly incompatible elements: a mass of financial detail is expounded with passion and energy.

Yet there are good reasons why the *Speech on the Nabob of Arcot's Debts* has fallen into neglect. Its recondite, topical subject matter is only the most obvious. The argument relies heavily on the kinds of proof that Aristotle called *atechnoi* (inartificial), pre-existing 'factual' evidence rather than arguments conceived or 'invented' by the art of the speaker.¹⁴⁵ There are few of the maxims or appeals to general principle which make Burke's writings and speeches such rich quarries for quotation. Further, the rhetorical persona is less engaging. The tone is often shrill, angry, and rancorous. The reader misses the voice of wise and moderate statesmanship characteristic of Burke's great American speeches of 1774–5. Burke always sought to occupy the moral high ground. In the earlier speeches, this stance is accompanied by a becoming diffidence. The Arcot speech is more overtly and gratefully self-righteous. Burke's speeches on America were delivered knowing that he would not actually persuade his audience. Yet they are energized by his maintaining the fiction that his hearers were open to conviction. This rhetorical optimism is absent from the Arcot speech. Its peroration, indeed, is an implicit admission of defeat: 'Let who will shrink back, I shall be found at my

¹⁴⁴ Wraxall, *Memoirs*, iv. 86. Nearly every letter that Wraxall wrote to Benfield in 1786 contains a brief and contemptuous reference to 'the *cursed Paddy*' or 'the *damned Paddy*' (BL (OIOC) MS Eur. C. 307/2). Thomas Moore also praised the speech extravagantly (*Memoirs of the Life of the Right Honourable Richard Brinsley Sheridan* (London, 1825), 319). A modern critic has even called it 'arguably Burke's greatest speech' (Regina Janes, '“In Florid Impotence He Spoke”: Edmund Burke and the Nawab of Arcot', *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, 16 (1986), 91–105).

¹⁴⁵ Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1355b.

post. Baffled, disheartened, subdued, discredited, as the cause of justice and humanity is, it will be only the dearer to me' (*WS* v. 552). This self-image as a lonely, embattled soldier would return with increasing force and frequency. In one sense, indeed, Burke needed to be defeated. Pitt's victory would signally confirm Burke's belief in the prevalence of the evil tentacles of the Indian conspiracy. Had members shown their independence and voted for an enquiry, his thesis would have been disproved.

Other features of the Arcot speech that make it a more sombre and less agreeable read than its predecessors reflect a generic difference. The earlier speeches were all deliberative. Each sought to influence a decision about a future course of action. The Arcot speech was judicial, and therefore retrospective.¹⁴⁶ Burke had no occasion to express a positive vision, as he did so memorably in his *Speech on Fox's India Bill*. Making a judicial case, he emphasized facts and figures, and often sought to let the facts speak for themselves. Further, a judicial case requires one or more culprits. Consequently, there is much *ad hominem* material in the Arcot speech. In the heat of debate, Burke had often indulged in personal abuse of his opponents. But in his more considered efforts, such as *Speech on American Taxation* and the *Speech on Conciliation*, he had practised greater restraint. In the *Speech on American Taxation*, for example, George Grenville is not demonized, but treated respectfully as a statesman whose virtues and talents were unsuited to the role in which circumstances cast him.¹⁴⁷ In the *Speech on the Nabob of Arcot's Debts*, on the other hand, Pitt and Duple are coarsely and brutally pilloried. Sometimes, indeed, Burke brilliantly succeeds in turning personal invective into wit. The best example is the narrative of Benfield's career of electoral bribery, which Burke treats with irony to make Benfield a parliamentary reformer (*WS* v. 541). Too often, however, Burke's invective is merely abusive and repulsively gross. An example is the image of the debts as a mass of 'foul putrid mucus' (531). Judicial rhetoric naturally emphasizes the enormity of the crimes committed. Burke's hyperboles of crimination, however, while often affecting, are open to the charge of irrelevance. The description of the atrocities committed by Haidar Ali is an instance (519–20). Burke indeed links them to the activities of the nawab and his creditors, but the chain is so long as to weaken their force and to create an appearance of sensationalizing. The effect of the speech is thus diminished by a discordance between the factual arguments and the hyperbole. Rhetorically, an argument of financial detail requires a calm and neutral presentation, and this is how Burke presents it. His hyperboles, in such passages as that describing the atrocities, are at once a strength and a weakness. They energize and enliven the speech,

¹⁴⁶ Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1358b.

¹⁴⁷ 19 Apr. 1774. E.B. may have softened the passage on Grenville when he printed the speech (*WS* ii. 431–2). But even in Brickdale's report (quoted, 431 n. 3), E.B. does not approach the vehemence of the attack on Benfield in the *Speech on the Nabob of Arcot's Debts*.

but they expose him to the charge that his ‘facts’ too are caricatured or invented. All these features of the Arcot speech reappear, in more exaggerated forms, in his speeches at the trial of Hastings.

Burke advanced a cogent case for Fox’s motion: that enquiry should precede payment of the nawab’s ‘private’ creditors. The most unexceptionable testimony to its force comes from Lord Cornwallis (1738–1805), whom Pitt and Dundas had sent to Bengal as Governor-General with a mandate to retrench profusion and check corruption. In a private letter, Cornwallis called the debts ‘fraudulent and infamous’, and assumed that Dundas had agreed to their payment ‘because you could not help it’. In reply, Dundas claimed that ‘every consideration of wisdom and policy, suggested the propriety of the arrangement’. ‘Wisdom and policy’ can here be translated as ‘political expediency’.¹⁴⁸ The best defence of Pitt’s acquiescence that his most authoritative biographer can muster is that India was ‘an explosive and intricate subject’ which inspired in him only ‘a bored distaste’. His approval of the payment of the Arcot debts is excused as ‘typical of his behaviour when he was embarrassed and his attention was not really engaged’.¹⁴⁹ In other words, he held his nose and looked the other way. There could hardly be a more complete confirmation of the truth of Burke’s charges.

Compelling as its argument appears in retrospect, Burke’s speech did not, at 1 a.m. on 29 February 1785, seem to require refutation. Fox’s motion was defeated by 69 to 164.¹⁵⁰ For Burke, of course, this vote merely confirmed his interpretation of the corrupt influence of the ‘Arcot squad’. As late as 1787, he remained convinced that the House of Commons elected in 1784 had been ‘chosen for the express purpose of discrediting the last’ (that is, the Commons of 1780–4, which had defeated North and Shelburne, and defied Pitt; *C v.* 341). Burke much exaggerated its subservience. In this session (1785), it refused to follow Pitt’s lead on three important questions: the Westminster scrutiny, his Irish Propositions, and parliamentary reform. The defeat of Fox’s motion cannot be attributed solely to ministerial influence. Admittedly, the question was not decided on its merits. Few questions were. What Burke could not overcome was prejudice against the opposition on questions relating to India, the legacy of Fox’s India Bills of 1783. On 16 February, in a debate on a motion for papers on India, Fox himself acknowledged this, giving as one reason for obtaining the papers that he was ‘convinced the more the real state of the Company’s affairs became known, the less unpopular would be his Bill’. On 24 February, another debate on India papers degenerated into acrimonious personalities.¹⁵¹ On both

¹⁴⁸ Cornwallis to Dundas, 4 Nov. 1788, in *Correspondence*, ed. Charles Ross (London, 1859), i. 376. Dundas to Cornwallis, 3 Apr. 1789 (NLS MS 3387, p. 70). Michael Fry, *The Dundas Despotism* (Edinburgh, 1992), concedes that the episode was ‘certainly not creditable’ (120).

¹⁴⁹ Ehrman, *The Younger Pitt*, i. 195.

¹⁵⁰ *CJ* xl. 571.

¹⁵¹ *PH* xxv. 151–62.

occasions, to independent members with no particular interest in India, the opposition appeared obstinately preoccupied with refighting lost battles. More generally, and especially on financial questions, Pitt enjoyed a reputation for integrity and probity, where Fox was mistrusted. Thus Wraxall asserted that Pitt did not need to reply to ‘allegations which his character sufficiently repelled’.¹⁵² When Pitt appeared meanly vindictive, as he did about the Westminster scrutiny; when powerful vested interests clamoured against him, as they did against the Irish propositions; or when a cherished constitutional principle was at stake, as in the case of parliamentary reform, his usual supporters were prepared to desert him. On so arcane a subject as the Arcot debts, which few members understood, they were not.

Nothing daunted by defeat, Burke determined to take his case to a wider public by printing his speech. He had done as much before, most recently with his *Speech on Fox’s India Bill*. In one respect, however, publication of the Arcot speech broke new ground. Not only did he circulate the text in manuscript for comment and correction, he added a substantial appendix of documents. In the printed text, these documents occupy nearly as many pages as the speech itself.¹⁵³ Burke wanted to provide irrefutable evidence that he was not inventing or exaggerating. Yet even with this massive buttressing, the *Speech on the Nabob of Arcot’s Debts* provoked no pamphlet debate.¹⁵⁴ None of his earlier published speeches had been greeted with such silence. Burke had yet to convince his opponents that his case was plausible enough to require refutation.

The episode of the Arcot debts deepened Burke’s suspicions of Pitt and Dundas. This distrust in turn influenced the strategy of his impeachment of Hastings. Had Burke come to regard them as potential allies, rather than implacable antagonists, he might have sought, and perhaps even obtained, a greater measure of ministerial co-operation and support. More generally, what Burke attributed to the machinations of the ‘Bengal squad’ renewed and reinforced his perennial conviction that ‘secret influence’ was at work. Thus in July 1785, on hearing that Will’s position as Deputy Paymaster in India was threatened with suppression, Burke at once concluded that Will was a mere stalking-horse for himself, and that his old enemies were at work:

I am utterly without recourse. Such is the result of my near twenty years endeavours; endeavours carried on, without interruption of more than two or three years together in that period,—to cure the disorders, and to bring to justice the Villians, who in the India house and in India, have been labouring for the destruction of so large a part of Mankind. The result is that the worst of these miscreants have not

¹⁵² Wraxall, *Memoirs*, iv. 89.

¹⁵³ E.B. to George Leonard Staunton, 15 June 1786 (C v. 212); Windham to E.B., 6 Aug. (218–19). In the pamphlet version of the *Speech*, the speech itself extends to 98 pages, the appendix to 93.

¹⁵⁴ Newspapers first reported that both Scott and Wraxall were preparing replies, then denied that Scott was (*Public Advertiser*, 15, 19 Sept. 1785; *Daily Universal Register*, 22 Sept.).

only escaped punishment but are settled in power, and furnishd with means, to wreak their Malice upon the head of every man who has attempted to bring them to justice. (C v. 214–15)

This passage, as sincere as it is self-deluding, is the product of a selective memory that has mentally rewritten the story of his concern with India. On India, Burke was increasingly losing touch with reality, and incapable of expressing himself except in the strident superlatives of self-righteous moral outrage. The plan to abolish Will's position (which was eventually dropped) was probably no more than one of the petty economies which Pitt was pursuing about this time. Burke refused to acknowledge that his appointment of Will, who received £5 a day for duties that were hardly onerous, was itself widely perceived as a flagrant case of nepotism.¹⁵⁵ Nor had hostile observers forgotten Will's earlier stockjobbing, Richard Sr.'s land speculations in Grenada,¹⁵⁶ or Burke's own restoration of Powell and Bembridge. Such episodes had tarnished his reputation for financial probity, and their memory undermined his credibility as a critic of Pitt's.

¹⁵⁵ Cornwallis called it 'a most unnecessary job . . . a great embarrassment to us, and a material hindrance to the public business' (to Lord Rawdon, 2 Dec. 1789, in *Correspondence*, ed. Ross, i. 452).

¹⁵⁶ Dixon Wecter, *Edmund Burke and his Kinsmen: A Study of the Statesman's Financial Integrity and Private Relationships* (Boulder, Colo., 1939), 57–66.