Because it was not, in his view, the product of prudence but rather the result of romantic abstraction and the will to power.

The efforts by Kirk and others to place intellectual conservatism on a Burkean foundation were met with skepticism by other conservative intellectuals, such as Richard Weaver, Frank Meyer, and Leo Strauss. Critics charged that Burke’s political theory lacked a sufficient grounding in metaphysical first principles. His emphasis on history and circumstance was dubious, they charged, because it provided no universal standard, which these critics insisted was the very problem with modernity. Kirk and Stanlis defended Burke for decades and demonstrated in their scholarship that he was not only acutely aware of the need to anchor politics in transcendent experience, but also understood, perhaps better than the ancients, that universality does not exist in an ahistorical realm of Platonic forms or in metaphysical abstraction. In the subsequent generation of conservative intellectuals, Claes Ryn took up the defense of Burke and Babbitt as insightful thinkers precisely because of their rejection of dogmatic and ahistorical thinking. Ryn’s notion of value-centered historicism is developed with Burke’s political theory in mind.

MICHAEL P. FEDERICI teaches political science at Mercyhurst College in Erie, Pennsylvania, and is the author of Eric Voegelin: The Restoration of Order.


Since the middle of the twentieth century, Edmund Burke’s political thought has been at the center of the conservative intellectual movement in America. His writings embody the principles that conservative scholars like Irving Babbitt, Russell Kirk, and Peter Stanlis have considered the foundation for political thought and action. His statesmanship represents, as well, the conservative impulse to preserve the time-tested truths that preserve and foster civilization. Burke is not, however, an antiquarian in the pejorative sense of the word. He favors reform rather than revolution and his statesmanship was often an exercise in arguing for needed changes in Great Britain’s foreign and domestic policies. Like Cicero, he was a patriot who saw imperial hubris as destructive to constitutional government and the good society. At one time or another he opposed British policy in India, Ireland, and America...
Human existence is enveloped in mystery and is forever moving. Man has great difficulty separating insight from illusion and ignorance and must strain to hold on to the higher meaning that existence may come to possess. Transmitting or deepening a sense of the universal is not a matter of copying a standard already available. It requires constant moral, intellectual, and aesthetic vigilance and fresh articulation of meaning. Goodness, truth, and beauty are in a sense an ever-unfolding discovery.... A traditionalism that attempts a mere repetition of the past loses the experiential reality of the universal in increasingly empty forms and routines.  

Ian Crowe, who in 1997 edited a collection of essays on the occasion of Burke’s bicentennial (The Enduring Edmund Burke), has now edited a new collection of essays, An Imaginative Whig: Reassessing the Life and Thought of Edmund Burke, on a range of topics related to Burke’s life, statesmanship, and political thought. The book is in some ways a continuation of the debate over Burke’s place in the conservative intellectual movement, but Crowe tries to move Burke scholarship beyond the parochial arguments of conservative intellectuals and make it part of the larger scholarly dialogue about the postmodern world. The book examines Burke’s views of natural law, human rights, religion, prudence, slavery, the French Revolution, and British policy in India, Ireland, and America. There are ten essays in the book, in addition to Crowe’s introduction. The contributors are experienced Burke scholars including, among others, Bruce Frohnen, Harvey Mansfield, and J.C.D. Clark. The essays tend to focus on Burke’s political ideas but they also include discussion of his statesmanship and biography. The title of the book is taken from Irving Babbitt’s Democracy and Leadership (1924).

It was Babbitt who inspired a renewed interest in Burke at a time when astute scholars in the West were first beginning to recognize the spiritually destructive aspects of modernity. Like Burke, Babbitt placed the hope for the restoration of Western civilization in a moral imagination enriched by the classical Judeo-Christian view of human nature as opposed to Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s romantic humanitarianism or Francis Bacon’s scientific naturalism. In responding to such historical and intellectual movements, conservatives have often been chided for a lack of ideas and imagination; they are characterized as morally didactic and opposed to progress and change. While such conservatives certainly do exist, they are of a different pedigree than Burke and Babbitt, who understood the necessity of reconstituting the true, the good, and the beautiful in the flux of changing historical circumstances.

Burke’s imaginative conservatism is especially evident in Bruce Frohnen’s wonderful essay, “Burke and the Conundrum of International Human Rights.” Frohnen illustrates Burke’s insistence on reform that is imbued with Christian principles and reverence for prescriptive wisdom by discussing his efforts to regulate the slave trade and religious oppression in Ireland. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Burke saw the inhumanity of slavery, but he also was wedded to the principle of prudential statesmanship. Consequently, his efforts to undermine slavery were not radical but realistic. He understood that the best chance of destroying slavery required a gradual movement toward the point at which it would lose its economic advantage. He insisted that slaves be treated as humanely as possible. Thus, Burke argued for restrict-
giong the slave trade by requiring families to remain intact, inspecting ships for health conditions, attending to the religious life of slaves, and creating conditions for manumission.

J.C.D. Clark provides an interesting essay comparing Burke’s view of the American and French Revolutions. As one might expect from a statesman whose paramount political virtue was prudence, Burke did not view all revolutions equally. He considered the American Revolution the result of failed British policies that he had consistently opposed. Burke’s opposition to the French Revolution is what he is best known for, and thus one can find the central elements of his political theory in his Reflections. Yet few of the essays address Burke’s reaction to the French Revolution—and this is one of the book’s chief virtues. So much Burke scholarship has focused on the Reflections that his prior decades of statesmanship and writing are obscured. The book does, however, help readers understand why Burke would have fought so vehemently against the Jacobins at the end of his life. The Reflections are the culmination of a lifelong search for the wisdom of the ages and prudential statesmanship.

Harvey Mansfield contributes a brief essay on Burke’s conservatism. He finds continuity in Leo Strauss’s and Peter Stanlis’s readings of Burke. They both identified natural law as the foundation of Burke’s political thought. In Mansfield’s view, Burke represents a return to the ancients as an antidote to modernism. Stanlis agrees in the sense that Burke did not make compromises with modernity, but Strauss believed that he did. Mansfield asks, “Might not prescription be considered compromise with modernity rather than return to tradition?” But Mansfield tends to ignore Strauss’s condemnation of Burke as an historicist who paves the way for Hegel.

In Natural Right and History (1953), Strauss charged that Burke’s “intransigent opposition to the French Revolution must not blind us to the fact that, in opposing the French Revolution, he has recourse to the same fundamental principle which is at the bottom of the revolutionary theorems and which is alien to all earlier thought.” That principle is that might makes right and Strauss asserted that “Burke comes close to suggesting that to oppose a thoroughly evil current in human affairs is perverse if that current is sufficiently powerful,” a view embraced by Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes’s dissent in Gitlow v. New York (1925). Strauss concluded that what “could appear as a return to the primeval equation of the good with the ancestral is, in fact, a preparation for Hegel.”2 In the end, Strauss believed that Burke contributes to the crisis of modernity rather than providing a way to resist it. This view is contrary to Stanlis’s reading of Burke.

One of the central issues addressed in a few of the essays is the problem of Burke and the natural law, an issue that Stanlis raised to prominence with his seminal book Edmund Burke and the Natural Law (1958). Was Burke a natural law thinker? Joseph Pappin and Jeffery Nelson aim in their essays to establish a link between Burke’s political thought and traditional natural law theory. Pappin traces connections between Burke and Thomas Aquinas while Nelson explicates Stanlis’s argument that Burke’s political thought is imbued with traditional natural law. This is a view difficult to reconcile with Strauss’s reading of Burke. Nelson’s essay is also a much-deserved tribute to Stanlis, who did immeasurable work to draw scholarly attention and appreciation to Burke.

What is missing in the book’s consideration of the natural law question is discussion of Burke’s historicism and his understanding of imagination. An essay on Babbitt’s reading of Burke would have helped in this regard—and would have been especially fitting given the prov-
enance of the book’s title. Burke does not conceive of universality in rigidly legalistic terms. While he rejects Rousseau’s humanitarian relativism, he holds to a notion of universality that is historically based and grounded in experience. Like Aristotle, Burke recognized the presence of universality in particularity. He rejected the Jacobin notion that abstract principles are the source of wisdom and truth. The challenge for statesmen is to use historical experience as a guide to understanding civilization and then to reconstitute civilization in the specific circumstances of the day. Imagination is essential in the process of reconstitution because it is the human faculty that puts individuals in touch with what is possible, given the limits of the human condition and historical circumstance. Moral imagination is not there for the asking; it must be cultivated by a number of factors, not the least of which is a quality of will that fosters civilization and the good life.

An Imaginative Whig does what it sets out to do: it re-examines the life and thought of Edmund Burke. Readers who are interested in Burke will be compelled to reconsider their understanding of his political thought and statesmanship. It is also apparent from reading the book that the debate about Burke within the conservative intellectual movement in America will continue precisely because that debate goes to the heart of what most conservatives are searching for: a prudent way to preserve and reconstitute the traditions that make human life meaningful, civil, and happy.


Those who savor everything English as precisely their cup of tea will find Peter Ackroyd’s Albion truly suited to their taste. Daring and delightful in concept, an exploration of the roots of his country’s creativity, it is a daunting enterprise. Consider the time span, more than two millennia, from the myths of antiquity to the events of only yesterday. Regard the cast of characters, literally hundreds, as one critic observed, “everyone from Beowulf to Virginia Woolf.” Not only is this a work of impressive scholarship, but it is as well a serious demonstration of the importance of the past and of tradition, of those essential values that distinguish an enduring society.

Americans are likely to find this volume particularly fascinating since our own country at its beginnings was a rebel offshoot of the British Empire and we continue to share a common language, a literary heritage, and other strong cultural influences. Even such a significant Briton as Winston Churchill, who stubbornly led the English resistance in the war against the fascists, was half American, which perhaps explains why he does not appear in this text. But Ackroyd misses little else.

He comes masterfully qualified to this

Carl Guldager is a retired journalist and regular contributor to Modern Age.