In just the past two years, at least four books have been written about the man called the father of modern conservatism, Edmund Burke (1729–1797). What did this eighteenth-century British statesman contribute to political philosophy that twenty-first-century conservatives still find compelling and persuasive?

Born in Ireland to a Catholic mother and an Anglican father, Burke made a name for himself in London, first with a 1757 philosophical treatise on “the sublime and the beautiful” that brought him to the attention of some of the era’s greatest thinkers. In 1765 Burke was appointed private secretary to the British prime minister, the Marquess of Rockingham, and he entered the House of Commons the same year. Burke’s career in Parliament was marked by his oratorical vigor, his support for the American colonies’ grievances against the Crown and for Catholic rights in Ireland, and his crusade against government corruption, especially in Britain’s administration of its colonies in the East.

But Burke’s support of genuine reform and his rejection of arbitrary power did not a radical make. The signal work of his career, which marked him out as the quintessential conservative voice, was his Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790). Writing in the early months of the French Revolution, Burke foresaw the disaster that would unfold because the French had uprooted their long-standing traditions and institutions on the basis of abstract notions of the “rights of man” and the “sovereign individual.” He laid out an exhaustive defense of tradition, civil society, prudence, and constitutionalism, as well as respect for prescription and what he called prejudice, which “renders a man’s virtue his habit.”

As a principled defender of ordered liberty, Edmund Burke speaks to our age as much as he did to his own.
When bad men combine, the good must associate; else they will fall, one by one, an unpitied sacrifice in a contemptible struggle.

—"Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents" (1770)

People will not look forward to posterity, who never look backward to their ancestors.

—"Reflections on the Revolution in France" (1790)

Men are qualified for civil liberty in exact proportion to their disposition to put moral chains upon their own appetites.

—"Letter to a Member of the National Assembly" (1791)

Abstract liberty, like other mere abstractions, is not to be found.

—"Speech to Parliament on Reconciliation with the American Colonies" (1775)

Government is a contrivance of human wisdom to provide for human wants. Men have a right that these wants should be provided for by this wisdom.

—"Reflections on the Revolution in France"

Freedom and not servitude is the cure of anarchy; as religion, and not atheism, is the true remedy for superstition.

—"Speech to Parliament on Reconciliation with the American Colonies"