A CONSERVATIVE TITAN
British Conservative MP Jesse Norman has written an excellent book about Edmund Burke. It is a book in two parts, the first a reasonably straightforward biography of the subject and the second an analysis of his ideas, with a diversion into Norman’s own political manifesto.

Norman joins a number of British MPs who have written biographies of former politicians, Roy Jenkins and William Hague being the best known. Another recent example was Bill Cash whose biography of John Bright was reviewed in the IPA Review in October 2012. Cash tried to convince his readers that the demonstrably liberal Bright was a conservative; Norman has the simpler task of justifying his view that ‘Burke is not a liberal’.

Norman is essentially correct that despite occasional flashes of liberalism, Burke was a conservative. He was influenced by the Enlightenment but never really of it and, as Norman puts it, Burke’s ‘extraordinary achievement to be the first and greatest critic of modernity itself.’

However, at the same time it is important to recognise that Burke was a Whig and many of the positions he adopted during his career were indeed quite liberal. Burke was sympathetic to free trade, winning praise from Adam Smith; he opposed British oppression in Ireland and India; and he supported the American Revolution. He also had an understanding of the role of a member of parliament way more sophisticated than many of his modern counterparts for, as he told the electors of Bristol in his famous 1774 victory speech, ‘your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgement; and he betrays instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion.’

Burke served in the House of Commons for 29 years from 1765 to 1794, and while he only held office for a brief period, his career demonstrates that holding office and having lasting significance are two entirely different things. Given his comparatively humble Irish roots, it was a tribute to Burke’s intellect and writing skills that he came to be seen as a potential MP. Through his literary talents, he had gained access to some of the leading cultural groups in London, mixing in clubby fraternity with the likes of Samuel Johnson, Joshua Reynolds and David Garrick. However, his key patron was to be the Marquis of Rockingham, who engaged Burke as his private secretary, and then a few months later secured Burke a ‘pocket borough’ in parliament.

At that time, Rockingham was in government, but he was not to be there for very long, being out of power for the next 16 years. Norman gives great weight to the return of Rockingham and his Whig followers to government in 1782 describing it as ‘an extraordinary moment not just in Britain’s political history but that of the world.’ The fact that a parliamentary grouping, which had been on the opposition benches since 1766 had remained intact, remains in Norman’s eyes ‘a remarkable and woefully under-recognised achievement’. This oversight is probably explained by the fact that Rockingham himself died within months of regaining the Treasury benches and, without him, the grouping fell apart, with the faction headed by Charles James Fox, and still including Burke, ending up in coalition with the dreaded Tory Lord North.

Norman describes Burke as the ‘main architect’ of the Rockingham Whigs but, when the proto-party finally collapsed, it was because Burke walked out on it.

The party ended on 6 May 1791 when Burke announced to the Commons that his friendship with Fox was at an end, due to their wildly differing interpretations of the French Revolution.
Fox saw the French attempting to accomplish what the English had achieved in the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and ensure the end of tyrannical monarchical rule. He believed that the Whigs had a duty to ‘support the transition to a new and stable constitutional order.’ In contrast, Burke saw something radical and sinister, a case he made in his most famous book *Reflections on the Revolution in France* which was published in 1790. Events in the next few years in France seemingly vindicated Burke, but the fact that the French Revolution got diverted into Jacobinism does not mean that this was the inevitable outcome.

To engender sympathy for Burke’s position on the French Revolution, Norman paints it in the colours of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Thus Burke’s views are juxtaposed against one of the least palatable philosophers in history. Of course, this leaves out a vast range of positions, particularly liberal ones. What lifts Norman above the role of pamphleteer is that he has the decency to point out to his readers that ‘in some ways the two men [Burke and Rousseau] had more in common than either might have cared to admit.’ In similar vein to his use of Rousseau, Norman selects Jeremy Bentham as the apogee of liberalism, an odd choice, but one which allows him to what he clearly regards as the most favourable representation with Burke’s conservatism.

Another disappointing characterisation comes when Norman tries his hand at some American political history. He describes it as ‘astonishing’ that, as Secretary of State, Thomas Jefferson undermined President George Washington and later tried to destroy the reputation of his former friend President John Adams. He fails to mention that Jefferson had highly principled reasons for his concern about Washington, who had become overly influenced by the centralising Alexander Hamilton, while it was hard not to take strong issue with Adams when he was promoting the Alien and Sedition Acts, gross violations of civil liberties.

Late in the book, there is a whole chapter which is only tangentially about Burke. Rather it uses Robert Putman’s ideas about ‘social capital’ as the launching point for Norman to outline his personal political philosophy.

Norman is smart enough to understand the benefits of liberal individualism, but also conservative enough to find fault with many of them and, intriguingly for a conservative, attacks liberal individualism for being Western-centric. According to Norman, ‘liberal individualism mistakes the true order of priority between the individual and society.’ It does so because it places too much emphasis on rationalism when other factors, such as emotional attachment to our own community or country, or respect for habit and custom, should be given precedence. It is another false dichotomy. One can be a liberal individualist and also recognise that Burke’s ‘little platoons’ are a valuable part of making society work cohesively and enjoyably. It is just that liberals do not want to make membership of little platoons compulsory.

For Burke and Norman, a free society is the product of a well-ordered society, not as liberals would see it being the other way around. Given the number of well-ordered societies which have not had much liberty, history would hardly seem to support their case.
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Norman generally handles the interaction of the public and private Burke well. He is alert to some of Burke’s faults, such as his reputation as a bore, relating that he gained the nickname ‘dinner bell’ for his ability to clear the House of Commons when speaking. Only once do his writing standards slip, which occurs when explaining why Burke was not a catch for his wife, as he had few prospects just ‘warmth, energy and talent’ but, in a seeming attempt at chick-lit, comments that ‘the beautiful thing is that this was all she needed.’ However, he redeems himself for this soppy sentence by writing a brilliant line about one of the most famous Tories of all, Benjamin Disraeli of whom he observes that ‘faithful to the principles of a lifetime, Disraeli then reversed himself completely.’

While only having been an MP since 2010, Norman, who had previously worked in banking and academia, had already had a political impact with books such as *Compassionate Conservatism* (2006) and *The Big Society* (2010) earning him the description of ‘the preeminent intellectual theorist of Cameronism.’ Yet, in his parliamentary career, he has led the biggest backbench revolt against Prime Minister David Cameron over reform of the House of Lords, resulting in a spirited altercation between the two men which helped win Norman the award as *Spectator* Parliamentarian of the Year for 2012.

While liberals will take issue with many of Norman’s arguments, this is a well-written and thought-provoking book, highly recommended for anyone with an interest in the development of political ideas.