

A SKETCH OF THE LIFE AND TIMES OF EDMUND BURKE.

LECTURE OF RICHARD O'GORMAN, ESQ.

WELL, they sent Edmund Burke to school; and it is to be hoped—although history says nothing about it—that he received a fair amount of flagellation, because that was a long time ago you know, and small boys had no rights which pedagogues were bound to respect. (Laughter.) Punishments then were “short, sharp, and decisive;” but now, of course, we have changed all that; we live in a progressive age, and the benefits of liberty will soon be given to babes and sucklings. (Laughter.) And the “ingenious youth” of the future will be taught to acknowledge and obey the restraints of the law, when he comes into manhood, by having no restraints at all when he was a child. That is all very well: and we will see what will come of it.

Well, Edmund Burke got through school, and went to Trinity College. He made no mark there of any kind; he simply, in a word, did not distinguish himself. He did not do anything very good, and he did not do anything very bad; unlike a fellow student of his, who was all the time getting into manifold difficulties—as unfortunate a little creature as ever was known—the son of a Protestant Minister of Ballymahon; and this unfortunate fellow's name was Oliver Goldsmith. (Applause.) The next step of Burke's was to go to London and enter his name in the Inns of Court. His father, a wise man, who was an attorney in Dublin, as I mentioned before, insisted that he should be a lawyer; so he became a member of the Inner Temple and found himself on the highway to the Woolsack; but the journey to the Woolsack is a long and wearisome journey, and Edmund Burke did not go very far upon it.

London, at that time, was in a very unsettled condition. The Stewarts had just fought out their last fight, in Scotland, for the throne of England and had been signally defeated. The Highlanders, with the immemorial gallantry of their race, had followed their chieftains into the jaws of death. The claymore against musketry often had done wonders; but it failed. Culloden was lost; and the heads of some of the Jacobite gentlemen that were taken prisoners, affixed on spikes above Temple Bar, grinn'd a sort of admonition to all who might wish to set up the exiled dynasty. Old women with spy-glasses used to let the spy-glasses out at “a penny a look,” to any loyal citizen who might desire a better view of that highly exhilarating spectacle. The wars in France, too, were over, and they disgorged upon England a number of gentlemen of the profession of arms, who, finding no congenial occupation for them in England, “took to the road,” as the saying is—became highwaymen and levied contributions on his Majesty's subjects, with such punctuality and dispatch, that a saunter up Piccadilly became as dangerous and expensive as a pilgrimage to Jerusalem (laughter). Men used to make their wills and load their blunderbusses before getting into his Majesty's mail coach for Highgate (renewed laughter). As to America, there were few men who knew anything at all about it. They knew that there was an unknown region, of vast extent of swamps and forests, and things of that kind, away beyond the Atlantic, where tobacco was raised, and Red Indians were perpetually tomahawking and scalping each other (laughter). Then there were in London riots of all kinds; and the people thought they could be saved by one man; and his name was John Wilkes. So they went about in large numbers, “for Wilkes and Liberty;” and got drunk and smashed windows, and did damage. “Wilkes and Liberty” became so much the talk of the day, that a respectable merchant, writing to a correspondent, about some matter of hides and tallow, says—“Sir—I take the Wilkes and Liberty to inform you;”—he could not get on without dragging in the name of Wilkes (laughter).

The lecturer then gave a rapid sketch of the career of the young Temple student, thrown into this scene of confusion. He did not like the study of the law, in spite of the expostulation of his father, and he resolved to live by his pen. His essay on “the Sublime and Beautiful,” gained him at once admission into the confraternity of the quill. Shortly after this important event happened. Burke fell ill and was recommended to visit Bristol, and drink the mineral waters. Here he made the acquaintance of an eminent physician, Dr. Nugent, an Irishman, whose daughter Burke married. Burke's father became somewhat mollified, and sent the young couple £100 to set them up in housekeeping. Subsequently Burke returned to London. Just then Lord Halifax, who was appointed Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, selected as Secretary a Member of Parliament named William Gerard Hamilton. Ireland was then in a very confused condition, and as (according to the English theory), the population was too large,—although it was only two millions and a half,—emigration was suggested as the proper remedy for the national troubles; and the land-lords made up their minds to till no more land, but keep it for sheep and cattle. The Irish people did not want to emigrate, for they are not an emigrating people. The Irish would rather have their little hut, with a few acres of land about it, than all the prairies in America. (Applause.) They could not be got to understand this theory of grazing; and the discussion was conducted in this way:—The land-lords with the lands and horses and ploughs, and the people had only their strong arms; so, the latter used to get up at night, put the horses to the ploughs, and plough the land as neatly as possible before morning. And, from the habit of wearing their shirts outside their clothing, for the purpose of ease, they were called “Whiteloaves.” (Applause.) As the Lord Lieutenant and Secretary, Hamilton, could not understand this, they offered to Burke, who was an Irishman, a position as Secretary at three hundred pounds a year; which he accepted; and he returned to Ireland as a kind of quasi member of the Government, and was let into all the secrets of the Castle. He saw the system of despotism and disorder known as the Penal Laws, and he determined—although not a Catholic—to help to relieve his fellow citizens. (Cheers.) The soul of Edmund Burke was too grand and too noble ever to have any feeling but that of reverence for the Catholic Church. (Cheers.) The first bill introduced into the Irish Parliament to relieve the Irish Catholics of their disabilities, was by the hand of

Edmund Burke. (Renewed cheers.) Shortly after he threw up his position in disgust, left Ireland, and through the friendship of Lord Rockingham, was made member of Parliament for Wendover, in England. The Stamp Act was then talked of for America. The Americans did not like it; but, as a general thing their leading men advised obedience. But at length a Virginian took the ground that taxation without representation was in direct violation of the British Constitution, and in direct violation of all the principles of law and justice. He said the colony of Virginia would not obey any laws that were not made by itself, and that the man that would say differently was a traitor to Virginia. (Cheers.) That man's name was Patrick Henry. (Loud cheers.) Then it was that Edmund Burke stood up in the English House of Commons, in defence of the American colonies, saying that the petition of the Confederate Colonies should be received and treated with respect. He argued nobly and eloquently in behalf of America; he was followed by Pitt, who took the same ground, and took the occasion to compliment the member for Wendover on the great speech he had made. (Applause.) And it is the pride of Burke's countrymen, ever since, that the first time his voice was ever heard in public, was in defence of American legislative independence. (Loud cheers.) Public opinion was against him, but public opinion was—as it often is—in the wrong; and before the Rockingham Ministry resigned, Burke succeeded in repealing the American Stamp Act. (Loud cheers.) The moment the news got to America, the people got in a fever of loyalty; and they erected an equestrian statue of his Majesty George III. in Bowling-green, New York. But somebody, more wise than the others, suggested that instead of marble they should build it of lead; and you will find out that shortly afterwards his observation turned out to be useful. (Laughter and applause.) But the colonies mistook England's meaning altogether. The American's didn't understand the British lion,—they thought he would continue in good temper, and they made a mistake. One fine morning they got news that an act was passed imposing duty upon various articles, and, amongst the rest, on tea. Americans did not like that; they liked tea; but they didn't like the idea of paying duty on tea. The duty was not much,—only three pence in the pound; but there was the principle of the thing. Taxed teas did not taste so good; and the women made up their minds that they would not take any tea, and, when the women made up their minds, the men gave in at once, put the cups and saucers aside, and took to cold water instead. So they got angry about it; and, in Boston, one hundred years ago this very night, the people made up their minds that they would allow no tea to land; so they went on board the ships in the harbor, broke open the chests, and threw it into the river. The old fashion used to be to pour the water on the tea, but they poured the tea into the water (laughter). This is the scene that they are now celebrating in Boston, with much music and applause (loud cheers). They are having what they call a historic revival; and it is right that we should wish them a pleasant night of it (applause). But it is a remarkable fact, that they are having now a historical revival in Congress, for they are actually going to put a tax on our tea, as I find by the papers this morning; and that shows you that when a thing is to be done, the way in which we look at it depends altogether upon who does it (great merriment). The moment the news reached England about this tea affair in Boston harbor, the English lashed themselves into fury. The King sent an indignant remonstrance to the Commons, and the Commons sent an indignant reply to the King. “War meetings” were held, from end to end of the land. Burke spoke in Parliament, and endeavoured to stem the tide. He stood right up against public opinion, but was assailed on every side as a traitor who wanted the dismemberment of the Empire. War came, and you know the result. You know of the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia, on which is inscribed this legend, “Proclaim liberty throughout the land to all the dwellers thereof.” You know how the mandate was obeyed, when in July, 1776, that old bell rang out that, here on this western continent, a new nation was born whose vital principle was the freedom of man (great cheering). You know how the “Liberty Boys” of New York took down the statue of his Most Gracious Majesty King George, melted him down into forty-two thousand bullets, and, in that shape, sent him back to his loyal friends. [At this point the most tremendous cheers interrupted the speaker for several moments]. Mr O'Gorman then continued his panegyric of Edmund Burke, and referred at considerable length to his career in Parliament, to the fact that he was officially elected to represent the Colony of New York, and did represent it till the war began. He also quoted his memorable speech on the death of Marie Antoinette, and his action on the trial of Warren Hastings. The lecturer concluded as follows:—

And so set this star that had long shone in the troubled sky English politics. It set as it rose, not suddenly, but with a gradual, gentle decline, full of beauty to the last. (Loud Applause.) I sometimes think that I have not done justice to this story of the life of Edmund Burke. I have told so little of it, and so much remains to be told of his efforts for the liberty of the press, of his efforts for complete liberty of Irish commerce, of his noble liberal sentiments, of the grace and eloquence of his manner, of the charm of all his character;—of this I can say nothing to-night. But, if there be any man within reach of my voice,—any young man who feels within him a noble aspiration to attain eminence among his fellow-men,—who thinks that he will do and dare, and seek to rule the destinies of his country, and lead her to a higher position in the world,—let him read the story of Edmund Burke's life, and he will learn many useful lessons. He will know what the statesman should be, and by what principles he should be guided. He will learn that duplicity is not statesmanship, that cunning is not wisdom, that intolerance is not religion, that subjugation is not union, that honesty, at least, is the best policy. (Applause.) And he will learn this, too, that, above and beyond all the ordinary rewards of public life,—above wealth, above power, above reputation and honor and popularity,—there is this last and best reward, which the public servant may cherish in his heart of hearts,—that, through good report and ill report he has striven at least to do his duty. (Great applause.)