

Lumen

Selected Proceedings from the Canadian Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies
Travaux choisis de la Société canadienne d'étude du dix-huitième siècle

LUMEN

Reading History in a Revolutionary Age: Strategies for Interpreting 1688 in Richard Price, James Mackintosh, and Edmund Burke

Morgan Rooney

Volume 27, 2008

North America at the Crossroads of European Cultures in the Eighteenth Century
L'Amérique du Nord au Carrefour des cultures au XVIII^e siècle

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1012048ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1012048ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies / Société canadienne d'étude du dix-huitième siècle

ISSN

1209-3696 (print)

1927-8284 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Rooney, M. (2008). Reading History in a Revolutionary Age: Strategies for Interpreting 1688 in Richard Price, James Mackintosh, and Edmund Burke. *Lumen*, 27, 27–40. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1012048ar>

3. Reading History in a Revolutionary Age: Strategies for Interpreting 1688 in Richard Price, James Mackintosh, and Edmund Burke

We do not draw the moral lessons we might from history. On the contrary, without care it may be used to vitiate our minds and to destroy our happiness. [...] It may, in the perversion, serve for a magazine, furnishing offensive and defensive weapons for parties in church and state, and supplying the means of keeping alive, or reviving dissensions and animosities, and adding fuel to civil fury.¹

Writing in the earliest stages of the Revolution debate, Edmund Burke intuitively recognised the centrality of history to reform-minded critiques of the established European order. In response, he attempted to discredit “perverted” strategies for reading history and, in turn, to claim history for his cause. This struggle to appropriate the authority of history for a particular reading of the French Revolution and its relationship to Europe’s *anciens régimes* manifests itself in a variety of ways in some of the most prominent political texts of the early 1790s, including Richard Price’s *Discourse on the Love of our Country* (1789), James Mackintosh’s *Vindiciæ Gallicæ* (1791), and Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). Perhaps the most significant battleground for this struggle was England’s “Glorious” Revolution of 1688. Price, Mackintosh, and Burke all return to 1688 in their responses to the French Revolution; each, in the process of doing so, claims and defines a “proper” way of reading history.

1 Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), in *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, ed. Paul Langford, 12 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981-), 8: 189.

The contrast between these opposing readings of 1688 illustrates some of the more significant differences in reformist and conservative orientations toward history. Employing a hermeneutics defined largely by inference and teleology, Price and, more explicitly, Mackintosh develop a reading of 1688 informed by the eighteenth-century concept of imaginative “imitation,” or what we would today call translation or adaptation. The Glorious Revolution, they argue, established principles and rights amenable to reason; those principles and rights were imperfectly realised at the moment of their articulation and are only now, at the eighteenth century, beginning to be understood. This position enables Mackintosh to argue that a “proper” reading of history, requires an imaginative translation of the encoded unrealised potential of the past. Burke, however, employs a hermeneutics defined largely by analogy and typology. For him, 1688 confirms the principle of inheritance; his reading of the Glorious Revolution, in turn, demands an imaginative figuration of history as an inheritance. To read history “properly,” in Burke’s conservative terms, we must read it sympathetically, in the light of an inheritance.

Price’s *Discourse on the Love of our Country* is, in part, a celebration of the rights he and his fellow Dissenters of the Revolution Society believed Englishmen had gained at the time of the Glorious Revolution. Because the analysis of 1688 in Price’s *Discourse* is short and allusive, especially when compared to Burke’s sprawling consideration in the *Reflections*, I read that work in tandem with Mackintosh’s more thorough consideration in *Vindiciæ Gallicæ*.² Mackintosh presents this work, as its full title announces, as a “Defence of the French Revolution and its English Admirers against the Accusations of the Right Hon. Edmund Burke.”³ His reading of 1688 in the fifth section of the work functions as a vindication and an elaboration of Price’s reading. For this reason, in

2 Although I limit my consideration of published defences of Price’s reading of 1688 to Mackintosh’s text, other examples exist. In fact, as Gregory Claeys argues, few responses to the *Reflections* failed to comment on Burke’s “apparent opposition to the principles of 1688” (46); see Claeys, “The *Reflections* Refracted: The Critical Reception of Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* during the Early 1790s,” in *Edmund Burke’s Reflections on the Revolution in France: New Interdisciplinary Essays*, ed. John Whale (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000), 40-59.

3 James Mackintosh, *Vindiciæ Gallicæ: A Defence of the French Revolution and its English Admirers against the Accusations of the Right Hon. Edmund Burke; Including Some Strictures of the Late Production of Mons. De Callone* (London: Printed for G. G. J. and J. Robinson, 1791), *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*, Gale Group.

spite of the original order of publication, I consider Price's and Mackintosh's readings together and then contrast them with Burke's.

The rights established during the Glorious Revolution, Price argues in his *Discourse*, are "[t]he right to liberty of conscience in religious matters," "[t]he right to resist power when abused," and "[t]he right to chuse our own governors; to cashier them for misconduct; and to frame a government for ourselves."⁴ Price's argument relies on the unstated but controlling thesis of the *Discourse*: that 1688 established rights in theory which were imperfectly implemented in practice (because imperfectly understood) at the time. His historical method is defined, in part, by rational extrapolation and inference; for him, as Henri Laboucheix observes, "the lessons of history are illuminated by intellectual intuition."⁵ His reading of 1688 suggests that the achievement of the Glorious Revolution went unrealised: it articulated political principles agreeable to reason, especially about election and choice, which it could not or did not actualise.

This position allows Price to celebrate the supposed ideals of the Glorious Revolution even as he laments the practical consequences of the 1688 settlement. Thus, while celebrating "the happiness with which the Revolution has blest us," Price also voices a powerful two-pronged critique that draws significantly upon aspects of the mid-century discourse of parliamentary reform.⁶ "I would farther direct you to remember," he admonishes his audience, "that though the Revolution was a great work, it was by no means a perfect work; and that all was not then gained which was necessary to put the kingdom in the secure and complete possession of the blessings of liberty. — In particular, you should recollect, that the toleration then obtained was imperfect."⁷ The

4 Richard Price, *A Discourse on the Love of our Country Delivered on Nov 4, 1789, at the Meeting-House in the Old Jewry, to the Society for Commemorating the Revolution in Britain...* (London: Printed by George Stafford for T. Cadell, 1789), 34, *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*, Gale Group.

5 Henri Laboucheix, *Richard Price as Moral Philosopher and Political Theorist*, trans. Sylvia and David Raphael, vol. 207 *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* (1970; Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1982), 125.

6 *Discourse*, 33-34. For accounts of the origins and development of a mid-century ideology critical of the Revolution establishment on a number of grounds, including the two issues raised here, see H. T. Dickinson, *Liberty and Property: Political Ideology in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977), 195-205, and *British Radicalism and the French Revolution 1789-1815* (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 1-9.

7 *Discourse*, 35.

failure to achieve complete religious toleration, and the continuation of the Test and Corporation Acts, were, he argues, serious shortcomings. But “[t]he inadequateness of our representation,” he continues, “is, in truth, our fundamental grievance; and I do not think that any thing is much more our duty, as men who love their country, and are grateful for the Revolution, than to unite our zeal in endeavouring to get it addressed.”⁸ For Price, men who “are grateful for the Revolution” must unite to redress its essential failings; those who understand the true principles of 1688 understand the inadequacy of the religious toleration gained and the deficiency of the system of political representation established at the Revolution.⁹

The event Price has in mind while evaluating the achievements of 1688 is, as he announces at the end of the *Discourse*, the French Revolution. The events of 1789, he suggests, may in time enable a better understanding of the failures of 1688: “But all attention to the reformation of political representation in Britain,” he laments, “seems now lost, and the probability is, that this inattention will continue, and that nothing will be done towards gaining for us this essential blessing, till some great calamity again alarms our fears, or till some great abuse of power again provokes our resentment; or, perhaps, till the acquisition of a pure and equal representation by other countries (while we are mocked with the shadow) kindles our shame.”¹⁰ France’s recent achievement, Price argues allusively, may in time “shame” Britons by showing them they are “mocked with the shadow” of the rights gained but still imperfectly realised since the time of the Revolution. The rapturous conclusion of the *Discourse*, which so troubled Burke, reiterates this sentiment:

I have lived to see a diffusion of knowledge, which has undermined superstition and error — I have lived to see the rights of men better understood than ever; and nations panting for liberty, which seemed to have lost the idea of it. — I have lived to see THIRTY MILLIONS of people, indignant and resolute,

8 *Discourse*, 41.

9 D. O. Thomas argues convincingly that Price’s goals for British reform were limited to these two areas. Only Price’s occasion misstep — for example, his toast at the 4 November 1789 meeting of the Revolution Society, “The Parliament of Britain, may it become a National Assembly” (308) — and the (mis)representation of opponents such as Burke enabled a view of Price as a radical revolutionary who desired a complete revamping of the British constitution along the lines modelled by the French; see Thomas, *The Honest Mind: The Thought and Work of Richard Price* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977).

10 *Discourse*, 41-42.

spurning at slavery, and demanding liberty with an irresistible voice; their king led in triumph, and an arbitrary monarch surrendering himself to his subjects. — After sharing in the benefits of one Revolution, I have been spared to be a witness to two other Revolutions, both glorious. — And now, methinks I see the ardor for liberty catching and spreading; a general amendment beginning in human affairs; the dominion of kings changed for the dominion of laws, and the dominion of priests giving way to the dominion of reason and conscience.¹¹

The “glorious” French Revolution is figured here as the event that could actualise the unrealised rights of the Glorious Revolution. The shortcomings of 1688 — namely, the failure to establish the supremacy of the rule of law and of private religious conscience — may be rectified in the wake of 1789. “Price is not calling for the British to imitate the French Revolution,” as Tom Furniss observes of this passage, “but rather for British patriots to renew their efforts to complete the work begun in 1688 so that Britain might realize the full potential and promise of its own revolution.”¹² The reading of history Price elaborates here is emphatically progressive and teleological: “a diffusion of knowledge” is undermining “superstition and error”; the “ardor for liberty” is “catching and spreading”; the progress of law, reason, and conscience is indicative of a “general amendment beginning in human affairs.” “[T]he dominion of reason and conscience” — the latter being, for Price, a precondition for the former — is on the horizon.¹³

Mackintosh provides a parallel reading of the Glorious Revolution in *Vindiciæ Gallicæ*. Echoing Price’s arguments, Mackintosh also makes the distinction between the theoretical and practical achievements of 1688: “The Revolution of 1688 is confessed to have established principles by those who lament that it has not reformed institutions. It has sanctified the theory, if it has not insured the practice of a free Government. It established, by a memorable precedent, the right of the people of Eng-

11 *Discourse*, 49-50.

12 Tom Furniss, “Cementing the Nation: Burke’s *Reflections* on Nationalism and National Identity,” in *Edmund Burke’s Reflections*, ed. John Whale, 121.

13 Price’s commitment to the individual’s right to private judgment, as Gregory I. Molivas argues, informs his belief in the right to political self-determination. For Price, “obedience to a law to which an individual had not given his assent was regarded as a degradation of human nature. Since God had implanted reason and will in man, he had enabled him from the day of Creation onwards to be his own governor” (123); see Molivas, “Richard Price, the Debate on Free Will, and Natural Rights,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 58, no. 1 (1997): 105-23.

land to revoke abused power, to frame the Government, and bestow the Crown."¹⁴ For Mackintosh, the Revolution established, in theory, the political principles and rights Price claims as the legacy of 1688.

Mackintosh draws upon the multiplicity of Whig revolutionary discourse to strengthen aspects of Price's reading.¹⁵ He introduces, for example, the possibility of a radical disjunction between the actions and the words of the Whigs who oversaw the Revolution, a manoeuvre deeply subversive of Burke's account of the various parliamentary acts and royal declarations of the period. While the "conduct" of those Whigs "was manly and systematic," Mackintosh writes,

[t]heir language was conciliating and equivocal. They kept measures with prejudice which they deemed necessary to the order of society. They imposed on the grossness of the popular understanding, by a sort of compromise between the Constitution and the abdicated family. "They drew a politic well-wrought veil," to use the expressions of Mr. Burke, over the glorious scene which they had acted. They affected to preserve a semblance of succession, to recur for the objects of their election to the posterity of Charles and James, that respect and loyalty might with less violence to Public sentiment attach to the new Sovereign.¹⁶

His reading of 1688, he claims, penetrates the Whigs' obfuscating language; he lifts the deceptive "'politic well-wrought veil'" to reveal that the principles and rights which he and Price claim as the unrealised

14 *Vindiciæ Gallicæ*, 294.

15 The range of opinions among the Whigs of 1688 was more heterogeneous than Burke's reading in the *Reflections* suggests. Given Mackintosh's interest in the subject (he later attempted but never completed a history of the Glorious Revolution), it seems likely he was well aware of this fact. James Conniff argues that "[b]y concentrating his attention solely on the compromise wording of the official documents and on the formal explanations of them, Burke robbed them of much of their force and gave them a meaning that not all of their originators would have accepted" (81); see Conniff, *The Useful Cobbler: Edmund Burke and the Politics of Progress* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994). J. P. Kenyon and J. G. A. Pocock, however, maintain that the contractarian interpretation of 1688 was held only by a minority; see Pocock, "Edmund Burke and the Redefinition of Enthusiasm: The Context as Counter-Revolution," in *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture. Vol. 3: The Transformation of Political Culture 1789-1848*, ed. François Furet and Mona Ozouf (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1987), 19-36, and J. P. Kenyon, *Revolution Principles: The Politics of Party 1689-1720* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), *in passim*.

16 *Vindiciæ Gallicæ*, 298-99.

ideals of the Revolution are, in fact, precisely those the Whigs of the period aimed to enshrine. The Glorious Revolution, he concludes, “was a *deposition* and an *election*,” as Price had argued; “all language of a contrary tendency, which is to be found in their acts, arose from the remnant of their own prejudice, or from concession to the prejudice of others, or from the superficial and presumptuous policy of imposing august illusions on mankind.”¹⁷

Mackintosh’s approach is most notable, however, for the explicitness with which he articulates his interpretative methods over the course of his analysis.¹⁸ He justifies, for instance, his distinction between the principles that supposedly fuelled the Revolution and the practical achievements of 1688. “[O]ur ancestors,” Mackintosh argues,

deserve veneration for their achievements, and the most ample amnesty for their defects, for the first were their own, and the last are imputable to the age in which they lived. — The true admirers of the Revolution will pardon it for having spared abusive establishments, only because they revere it for having established grand principles. [...] Reverence for the principles, and pardon to the defects of civil changes, which arise in ages partially enlightened, are the plain dictates of common-sense. [...] The true admirers of Revolution principles cannot venerate institutions as sage and effectual protection of freedom, which experience has proved to be nerveless and illusive.¹⁹

In this passage, Mackintosh outlines a significant aspect of his hermeneutics. The importance of 1688, he suggests, lies not so much in the realised actions or written words of ancestors — the progressive nature

17 *Vindiciæ Gallicæ*, 323.

18 My consideration of Mackintosh here is limited to the *Vindiciæ Gallicæ*. He later recanted the views he expressed in his youthful publication, privately seeking out Burke in late 1796 and (his detractors insinuated) “converting” to the elderly statesman’s way of thinking. Drawing predominantly on his later writings, Mark Salber Phillips argues that he demanded of the historian a sympathetic engagement with his subject. For Mackintosh, Enlightenment historians such as Gibbon and Hume are too detached; Gibbon, he finds, is “unsympathetic in imagination” (Phillips, 201) and Hume, whom he most admired, lacks “a great power of throwing back his mind into former ages” (Mackintosh qtd. in Phillips, 201). In the *Vindiciæ Gallicæ*, however, Mackintosh is more interested in history as a means of promoting change, suggesting that his views of history, like his politics, shifted over the course of the 1790s. See Phillips, *Society and Sentiment: Genres of Historical Writing in Britain, 1740-1820* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), chapter 8.

19 *Vindiciæ Gallicæ*, 330-32.

of history, in fact, forces an eventual awareness of their radical defects — but rather in their (perhaps unintentional, and certainly obfuscated) articulation of principles and rights confirmed by reason. Those unrealised principles and rights, and not the testimonies of what their ancestors thought or claimed they were doing, motivate political change in the present:

Blind admirers of Revolutions take them for implicit models. Thus Mr. Burke admires that of 1688; but we, who conceive that we pay the purest homage to the authors of that Revolution, not in contending for what they *then* DID, but for what they *now* WOULD DO, can feel no inconsistency in looking on France, not to model our conduct, but to invigorate the spirit of freedom, we permit ourselves to imagine how Lord Somers, in the light and knowledge of the eighteenth century, how the patriots of France, in the tranquillity and opulence of England, would have acted. [...] Exact imitation is not necessary to reverence. We venerate the principles which presided in both events, and we adapt to political admiration the maxim that has long been received in polite letters, that the only manly and liberal imitation is to speak as a great man would have spoken, had he lived in our times, and been placed in our circumstances.²⁰

Invoking a notion of literary imitation familiar to contemporary readers, Mackintosh contends that the “purest” engagement with history is imaginative. Because the venerated principles are, encoded in history, the past requires an imaginative translation or adaptation. A right reading of history, in Mackintosh’s terms, translates or adapts the unrealised potential of the past for its readers.

Burke recognised the subversive tendencies of these readings of 1688, and, accordingly, devoted much of the *Reflections* to refuting Price’s account. He employs a number of strategies to do so, but I limit my focus here to two that demonstrate the nature of his use of and orientation toward history.²¹ First, he disparages the French Revolution and its sup-

20 *Vindiciæ Gallicæ*, 346-47.

21 As his critics have established, Burke pursues a number of strategies to discredit his opponents throughout the 1790s. For studies that examine Burke’s use of various discourses drawn from British history, see Frans De Bruyn, “Anti-Semitism, Milleniarism, and Radical Dissent in Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France*,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 34, no. 4 (2001): 577-600, and *The Literary Genres of Edmund Burke: The Political Uses of Literary Form* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); and Iain McCalman, “Mad Lord George and Madam La Motte: Riot and Sexuality in the Genesis of Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France*,” *Journal of British Studies* 35, no. 3 (1996): 343-67.

porters by connecting them not to the Glorious Revolution, but to the regicide and disorder of the Civil War. Second, he offers an orthodox reading of 1688 based on surviving historical documents in order, as he writes, to “recall their [the Revolution Society’s] erring fancies to the *acts* of the Revolution which we revere, for the discovery of its true *principles*.”²²

In figuring 1789 as a typological manifestation of England in the 1640s and 1650s, Burke suggests that the French Revolution and its supporters derive a radical, regicidal inheritance from their spiritual ancestors, the Parliamentarians of the English Civil War.²³ “[H]e saw the revolution,” as Steven Blakemore notes, “ironically reproducing the ‘past’ it was supposedly burying.”²⁴ Most passages to this effect occur in the opening pages of the *Reflections*, where Burke responds to Price’s *Discourse*. “That sermon,” he writes of Price’s text,

is in a strain which I believe has not been heard in this kingdom, in any of the pulpits which are tolerated or encouraged in it, since the year 1648, when a predecessor of Dr. Price, the Reverend Hugh Peters, made the vault of the king’s own chapel at St. James’s ring with the honour and privilege of the Saints, who, with the “high praises of God in their mouths, and a *two*-edged sword in their hands, were to execute judgment on the heathen, and punishments upon the *people*; to bind their *kings* with chains, and their *nobles* with fetters of iron.”²⁵

Burke uses historical analogy here to associate support for the French Revolution with the social and political instabilities — the confiscation of property, the murder of a king, and the violence of civil war — created by English revolutionaries in the 1640s and 1650s. His shrewd discursive strategy enables an imaginatively powerful (if not logically convincing) attack on Price’s reading of 1688.

22 *Reflections*, 67.

23 In his study of Burke’s use of anti-Semitic discourse, De Bruyn notes “Burke’s habit, especially pronounced in the *Reflections*, of reading the events of his time typologically” (580); see De Bruyn, “Anti-Semitism, Millennialism, and Radical Dissent.” For a study of this widespread practice in the eighteenth century, see Paul Korskin, *Typologies in England, 1650-1820* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), *in passim*.

24 Steven Blakemore, “Rereading the French Revolution: Burke and the Paradoxes of History,” in *Edmund Burke: His Life and Legacy*, ed. Ian Crowe, (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1997), 48.

25 *Reflections*, 61-62.

Price and those who adhere to his interpretation, Burke further claims, have confused their revolutions, invoking the sanction of one (1688) while actually mimicking the language and re-playing the actions of those that came before (1648) and after (1789). "These gentlemen of the Old Jewry," he asserts, "in all their reasonings on the Revolution of 1688, have a revolution which happened in England about forty years before, and the late French revolution, so much before their eyes, and in their hearts, that they are constantly confounding all the three together."²⁶ Those who subscribe to Price's reading of 1688 are, Burke charges, confused readers of history; they cannot keep simple historical facts straight, facts such as the dates of revolutions or the principles those revolutions established. At one point in the *Reflections*, Burke explicitly connects his enemies' muddled interpretative techniques with the macabre practices of their regicidal counterparts: "Do these theorists mean to imitate some of their predecessors, who dragged the bodies of our antient sovereigns out of the quiet of their tombs? Do they mean to at-taint and disable backwards all the kings that have reigned before the Revolution, and consequently to stain the throne of England with the blot of a continual usurpation?"²⁷ In their confusion, Burke argues, these new Parliamentarians replicate, on the level of historical interpretation, the atrocities of their seventeenth-century predecessors. The radical reading of history practised by Price and his ilk "disable[s] backwards" the legitimacy of every monarch before 1688, sacrilegiously digging up and "slander[ing] [...] the authority of the noble dead."²⁸

By aligning the Revolution of 1789 with that of the Parliamentarians of the Interregnum instead of the Whigs of the Glorious Revolution, Burke does more than score a rhetorical point. His strategy of damning the French Revolution by historical analogy effectively denies 1789 any status as a culmination of historical processes set in motion at the Glorious Revolution. Instead, he limits and contains the French Revolution by figuring it, typologically, as another manifestation of the regicidal forces unleashed during the English Civil War. By drawing on historical precedents, Burke employs the idea and the language of inheritance to forestall and then ironically invert his opponents' attempts to trace the "political pedigree" of the French Revolution back to the Glorious

26 *Reflections*, 66.

27 *Reflections*, 73.

28 David Bromwich, *A Choice of Inheritance: Self and Community from Edmund Burke to Robert Frost* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1989), 53.

Revolution, a manoeuvre consistent, as we shall now see, with his defence of that principle throughout the *Reflections*.²⁹

The other, less abstract strategy Burke employs to discredit Price's reading is to present a "whiggish" interpretation of the Glorious Revolution informed by a reading of a number of acts and declarations written primarily in the late seventeenth century. By focusing on the language of the available historical documents (language which Mackintosh subversively interprets as a "veil" that masks the principles to which he and Price lay claim), Burke develops a narrative in which the Glorious Revolution marks a rejection of election and choice as modes of succeeding to the crown and becomes instead an affirmation of "the inheritable principle."³⁰ He acknowledges the undeniable fact that there was indeed "a small and a temporary deviation from the strict order of a regular hereditary succession" — namely, that the Protestant Mary and her husband William (and subsequently, in the event they should be without issue, the Protestant offspring of Sophia of Hanover) succeeded to the "abdicated" throne of James II in spite of the obvious claims of his legitimate Roman Catholic children — but he does so without drawing Price's conclusions about choosing, electing, and cashiering kings.³¹ For Burke, "[t]he gentlemen of the Society for Revolutions see nothing in that of 1688 but the deviation from the constitution; and they take the deviation from the principle for the principle."³² They read against the grain of their ancestors' explicit declarations in order to establish their rights. The Whigs of 1688, he contends attended to the principle of inheritance as scrupulously as circumstances would allow:

At no time, perhaps, did the sovereign legislature manifest a more tender regard to that fundamental principle of British constitutional policy, than at the time of the Revolution, when it deviated from the direct line of hereditary succession. The crown was carried somewhat out of the line in which it had before moved; but the new line was derived from the same stock. It was still a line of hereditary descent; still an hereditary descent in the same blood, though an he-

29 Blakemore, "Rereading the French Revolution," 61. See also "Burke and the French Revolution: Bicentennial Reflections," in *Burke and the French Revolution: Bicentennial Essays*, ed. Blakemore (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1992), 144-67.

30 *Reflections*, 73.

31 *Reflections*, 68.

32 *Reflections*, 73.

editary descent qualified with protestantism. When the legislature altered the direction, but kept the principle, they shewed that they held it inviolable.³³

The Glorious Revolution, Burke argues, confirms “the inheritable principle” — that principle which, tested by experience and long usage, has “survived with a sort of immortality through all transmigrations” of English history — and not abstract principles and rights which some men in the eighteenth century call the laws of reason.³⁴ He denies, too, that history is a process in which political principles agreeable to reason are realised. “In Burke’s view,” as Ian Crowe argues,

neither 1215 nor 1688 was a step in the gradual perfection of political life. Each was, in itself, complete and self-contained. Only an unimaginative reliance upon the written word or positive law, or upon a rationalization of motivations, could create the illusion that each was just one stage in the unfolding discovery of “true” liberty, part of a chain of events forming a history of inevitable progress. If the episodes in the history of liberty mark a tradition, it is a tradition that has been built up by accident, through unrehearsed acts of resistance against unprecedented impositions.³⁵

The failure of Price and other supporters of the French Revolution to understand that the Glorious Revolution affirms the principle of inheritance, Burke argues, mirrors the fundamental defect of their historical imagination — their refusal to look back upon their past sympathetically, and to imagine that past in the light of an inheritance. “You began ill,” he writes of the early leaders of the French Revolution, “because you began by despising every thing that belonged to you. [...] Respecting your forefathers, you would have been taught to respect yourselves. You would not have chosen to consider the French as a people of yes-

33 *Reflections*, 72.

34 *Reflections*, 73. Burke believed (erroneously, Thomas argues) “Price to be asserting in company with the other radical reformers of his day that a man’s rights, whether moral, civil or political, can be determined completely independently of practical and historical experience, that the sum of moral and political wisdom is contained in a relatively small number of principles whose truth can be immediately apprehended by all rational men, and that all social and political institutions that do not accord with these self-evident *a priori* principles should be reformed” (326).

35 Ian Crowe, Introduction to *An Imaginative Whig: Reassessing the Life and Thought of Edmund Burke*, ed. Crowe (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2005), 16.

terday, as a nation of low-born servile wretches until the emancipating year of 1789."³⁶ He levels this same charge against British supporters of the French Revolution who read 1688 in Price's terms. Price's reading, he asserts, destabilises the accomplishments of their English ancestors, as his series of rhetorical questions makes clear:

Do they [the gentlemen of the Society for Revolutions] mean to invalidate, annul, or to call into question, together with the titles of the whole line of our kings, that great body of our statute law which passed under those whom they treat as usurpers? to annul laws of inestimable value to our liberties — of as great value at least as any which have passed at or since the period of the Revolution? If kings, who did not owe their crown to the choice of their people, had no title to make laws, what will become of the statute *de tallagio non concedeno*? — of the *petition of right*? — of the act of *habeas corpus*?³⁷

Had Price and his supporters been desirous of maintaining, improving upon, and transmitting to posterity the advantages the British have gained over their long history, Burke argues, they would have realised "the obvious consequences of their doctrine."³⁸ The inevitable result of a hermeneutics informed by what Burke thinks of as Price's hostile historical imagination is, he suggests, a disinheritance of every historically accrued advantage enjoyed by Britons — every right, law, privilege, even the constitution itself. Fuelled by such interpretative principles, Price's reading of the Glorious Revolution "disable[s] backwards" every inheritance. In Burke's reading of history, the principle of inheritance provides a "right" disposition towards the past which, in turn, enables a "right" reading of history. To read history "properly," in Burkean terms, the accomplishments of our ancestors ought to be interpreted sympathetically; the best method to ensure a sympathetic disposition towards those accomplishments is, he suggests, to figure them, imaginatively, as an inheritance.

The divergent models for reading history that Burke, Price, and Mackintosh propose are symptomatic of a larger struggle to appropriate the authority of history for a particular reading of the French Revolution. Although Mackintosh's invocation of imitation is not a strategy employed by other prominent reformers in the early 1790s, his desire to situate the

36 *Reflections*, 86-87.

37 *Reflections*, 73-74.

38 *Reflections*, 73.

French Revolution historically, to understand and interpret it through comparison, is one many share. Thomas Paine, it is true, dismissed 1688 with contempt: "In less than another century," he wrote, "[m]ankind will [...] scarcely believe that a country calling itself free, would send to Holland for a man, and cloth him with power on purpose to put themselves in fear of him, and give him almost a million sterling a-year for leave to *submit* themselves and their posterity, like bond-men and bond-women, forever."³⁹ Paine, however, saw the efficacy of building his arguments upon historical comparison, as is evident from his consistent strategy of contrasting the "unenlightened" ancestors who supported hierarchical order with the "enlightened" men of 1776 and 1789 who know "the rights of man." Neither Price nor Mackintosh is so supremely dismissive of the past as Paine. For both writers, the ideals that fuelled 1688 have finally been realised in the events of 1789 — and both make this argument in spite of the fact that the practical achievements of the 1688 settlement are, as they admit, at odds with those ideals. A "proper" reading of history is achieved, in Mackintosh's terms, by translating the encoded past. Burke, on the other hand, enlists history in the service of his cause through a different set of tactics. First, he assigns the reformist reading a notorious genealogy by aligning Price and his supporters with the Puritans of the Civil War period. In doing so, Burke denies that 1789 is in any way a completion or culmination of 1688. Second, he lays claim to the authority of history by providing a reading model of his own: by figuratively imagining our past as an inheritance, he argues, Britons cultivate a disposition to read the achievements of their ancestors sympathetically; they foster a desire to preserve, improve upon, and bequeath those achievements. For Burke, readings such as Price's threaten the integrity of that great British inheritance; if the past must be perpetually re-evaluated in light of present reason, he suggests, history will become subject to the kind of fluctuations that define the market. The reformist approach to history exemplified in Price's *Discourse*, Burke ultimately fears, will render historical knowledge permanently unstable.

Morgan Rooney
University of Ottawa

39 Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man* [part one] (1791), in *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, ed. Philip S. Foner, 2 vols. (New York: Citadel Press, 1945), 1: 296.