Fire and Light, by James MacGregor Burns

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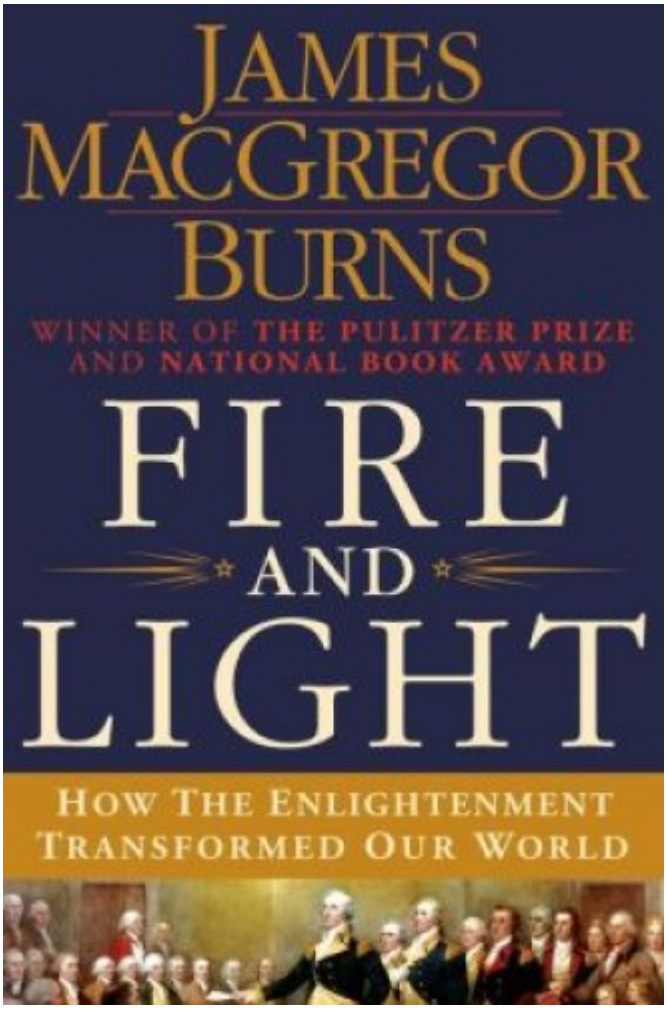
In Review



Fire and Light

By James MacGregor Burns
Thomas Dunne Books

James MacGregor Burns received a Pulitzer Prize for *Roosevelt: The Soldier of Freedom* way back in 1971. Now, at the fine age of 95, he has authored an eminently readable history of that elusive historical movement we call the

Enlightenment.

The Enlightenment did indeed transform our world, as the title of Burns's new book suggests, but its ideas were often contradictory. Thomas Hobbes held that humans are driven by "the restelesse desire of Power after power" and that life in the state of nature is "solitary, poore, nasty, brutish and short." Only the binding compact of the Leviathan state can relieve this gloomy prospect, he said. In contrast, the Scottish sage Francis Hutcheson celebrated the natural benevolence of humankind, positing a sociability prior to the state. And then there is Descartes, a supreme rationalist in Burns's Enlightenment pantheon, and David Hume, a consummate empiricist who disdained the abstractions of the French mathematical savant.

Although Enlightenment philosophy is contradictory, its slogans are consistent: "Freedom" and "Reason." Freedom from authority starts with liberation from the religious mindset of the Middle Ages. Burns begins his story with Luther, who freed Europe from authoritarian orthodoxy but doesn't quite make it as a figure of the Enlightenment; after all, he called reason "the Devil's greatest whore." Appeal to *sola scriptura* may have undermined the pope, but the wars of religion that accompanied the Reformation convinced philosophers that the Bible was not a guide to peace and political stability. Authority needed to be replaced by reason because freedom may be fire, but reason is light.

Burns focuses, therefore, on political history as it developed in Britain, France and America from the 17th century to the middle of the 19th, offering a perceptive account of the conflicts and personalities that shaped both political theory and day-to-day politics. He doesn't regard political history as just a dialogue between philosophes and prime ministers; he shows that scientific, industrial and economic developments deeply affected governance and theory.

Rejection of the medieval lords, both spiritual and temporal, eliminated the established social hierarchy, making it possible for the American Declaration of Independence to claim that it is "self-evident" that "all men are created equal." Given universal equality, political systems now had to rest on consent of the governed. Enlightenment thinkers of various stripes regarded government as a contract that individuals accept when doing so accrues to their rational self-interest. Complexity arose, however, as theorists and politicians differed about what constituted rational self-interest.

Hobbes held that because human beings were everlastingly self-aggrandizing, their rational choice was to transfer all power to the state. In this case, rationality chooses avoidance of the worst evil: anarchy and war. In contrast, John Locke, whom Burns characterizes as “the most consequential of Enlightenment philosophers,” was not so pessimistic about human nature. The empiricist Locke formed his ideas with the hurly-burly of actual politics mind. To him, human nature was neither rapacious nor benevolent; it originated as a tabula rasa—a blank slate. Because people differed in education and experience, in any society at any given time there would be a variety of virtues, vices and capacities.

Following Locke’s empirical realism about an inevitable mix of vice and virtue, Madison’s framing of the U.S. Constitution balanced popular contract with rational caution. All men are created equal and the people are sovereign, but humans are a mixed lot subject to fleeting passions and the creation of factions. To give stability to governance while preventing the formation of a Hobbesian totalitarian government, Madison championed the checks and balances of the Constitution.

The Enlightenment began in revolt against the authority of bishop and king, but having abandoned those worthies, modern Enlightenment politics had a continuing problem locating authority. While proclaiming equality, the tradition was highly selective in determining who would be authorized to vote: landowners, men of substance, certainly *men*. Jefferson posited a “natural aristocracy among men” grounded in “virtue and talents.” John Stuart Mill exemplified the paradox of democratic freedom and proper, rational authority: “What is right in politics is not the *will* of the people, but the *good* of the people”—individuals need guidance. Mill proposed a system in which the votes of the educated would be given greater weight.

Burns’s account of the Enlightenment contains no great surprises. One could call it the “authorized standard version” of the historical progress of liberal democracy through philosophical conflicts and revolutions over the centuries. He concludes that the Enlightenment leaves us with “a set of transcending ideas” and “a structure of conflict.”

In the advance to liberal democracy, religion can appear as the enemy, and Burns’s Enlightenment history focuses on politics rather than religion. In his final remarks, he writes that “the United States faces problems the Founders would sadly have recognized: irrational political extremism, the push of religion into government . . . [are] reminiscent of dark episodes of the past.” Biblical religion remains a

permanent problem for the Enlightenment because it rests not on contract, but on covenant. The bond of God and humanity transcends mutual self-interest. Contract may bind the polis, but it cannot found the beloved community.