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HENRY CRUGER AND THE END OF EDMUND
BURKE'S CONNECTION WITH BRISTOL

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I

AT the general election of 1780, Edmund Burke was abruptly dismissed by the electors of Bristol. After six years of service as their representative, he was cast off, in a way which he felt to be deeply humiliating to himself and to his friends. The opposition against him was such that his candidature was defeated before the election had fairly begun: rather than put his supporters to fruitless expense, he withdrew on the first day of the poll. The purpose of this essay is to explain the extent to which his defeat was due to the desertion and the intrigues of Henry Cruger, his colleague in the previous parliament. In the course of the story, it will also appear how little concern with national politics was shown during the election by those leading participants who boasted of themselves as 'Whig' in name and principle.

The sudden ending of Burke's connection with Bristol has usually been explained as an expression of the electors' dissatisfaction with his political or his personal conduct. Burke himself did not accept this explanation. Indeed, he could see no good reasons for such discontent. According to his own lights, he had always served his constituents with zeal and good faith. 'I ran about wherever your affairs could call me,' he told a gathering of his supporters in 1780. 'And in acting for you I often appeared rather as a ship's broker than as a member of parliament'—an assertion which his published

correspondence amply confirms. None the less national as distinct from local interests always had first place in his mind. He firmly repudiated the idea that a member of Parliament should be merely a delegate. As he told the Bristol electors in 1774, he would not permit his judgment on great national issues to be bound by instructions from them. During the two years before the general election of 1780, he supported legislation freeing Irish trade from old restrictions, approved an act giving relief to Roman Catholics, and expressed agreement with the principle of Lord Beauchamp's bill for relaxing the harsh laws against debtors. In each case his action gave offence to some section of the Bristol electorate. At the same time he failed to win personal popularity, for he took no steps to cultivate the electors by the various methods then customary. A poor man, he could not lavish entertainment upon them. An opponent of the government of the day, he could not, and would not, solicit places and favours on their behalf. A hard-working politician, serving both country and constituents to the limit of his energies at Westminster, he would not live in, or visit frequently, the city which had done him honour by choosing him as its representative. The writer of Bristol's annals, John Latimer, commenting briefly on Burke's defeat, attributed it to these circumstances; and the same line of argument was presented in more detail by the historian of Burke's connection with Bristol, G. E. Weare.¹

All these circumstances doubtless contributed to Burke's rejection at Bristol in 1780, for certainly they were all exploited against him to secure that result. Yet Burke did not find in them the real reason for his defeat. He laid the blame squarely on Henry Cruger and his friends.² His published correspondence leaves this cardinal fact unexplained, but considerable light is cast upon it by hitherto unpublished letters in his own papers,

¹ John Latimer: *Annals of Bristol in the eighteenth century* (Frome ? 1893), 444; G. E. Weare: *Edmund Burke's connection with Bristol from 1774 till 1780; with a prefatory memoir of Burke* (Bristol, 1894), 140-163.

² *Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, edited by Earl Fitzwilliam and Sir Richard Bourke, four volumes, 1844 (cited hereafter as *Burke Correspondence*), II, 379-380.

and in those of his patron, the Marquis of Rockingham, and of Rockingham's associate, the Duke of Portland.¹ Particularly informative are the reports on Bristol election politics which were sent to both Rockingham and Portland by Richard Champion, the porcelain manufacturer who was one of Burke's leading supporters.

Three main conclusions stand out from this evidence. One is that although, at this time, the American War was the great issue of political debate, local factions and personal rivalries still did more to determine the result of the Bristol election than public divisions over questions of national policy. Another is that the opposition to the government in Bristol was split between two rival factions, and much as their leaders disliked the supporters of the ministry, they hated each other even more. Thirdly, the part played by Henry Cruger and his father-in-law, Samuel Peach, was a crucial one. In the weeks leading up to the general election, it was they who forced the pace and who shaped events. They were primarily responsible for the defeat of Burke and for the collapse of the Bristol 'Whigs' at the general election. The first of these effects was intended: the second was an unforeseen consequence of their scheming, and represented the temporary defeat of their ultimate aim, which was to secure the leadership of their party.

II

To explain the Bristol election of 1780, it is necessary to trace the beginnings of the story in the transformation of Bristol politics produced by the opening stages of the American crisis. For many years prior to 1774, the politics of the city

¹ The letters cited hereafter without other reference as written to the Duke of Portland, the Marquis of Rockingham and Edmund Burke are in the collections of their papers. I wish to acknowledge the kind permission of the Duke of Portland and the Trustees of the University of Nottingham to make use of material in the Portland MSS., and of the Earl Fitzwilliam and his Trustees of the Wentworth Woodhouse Estates, and the City Librarian of Sheffield, to consult and to quote extracts from the correspondence of the Marquis of Rockingham and of Edmund Burke in the Fitzwilliam MSS.

were dominated by two rival organizations, the Steadfast Society and the Union Club.¹ These headquarters managed the respective interests of 'Tories' and 'Whigs'—the terms 'Tory' and 'Whig' continued to be current in Bristol as political labels up into the seventeen-eighties, and they have therefore been adhered to in the following pages.² In 1756 these two political clubs had concluded an agreement which secured an amicable division of the representation between them. To keep the peace of the city and to eliminate the ruinous expense of contested elections, each side agreed to nominate one candidate only and to support the candidate put forward by the other.³ For a number of years this highly convenient compromise worked with success, until the development of the American crisis produced dissension within the ranks of the Union Club. From 1754, the leaders of the Club had supported the Irish place-hunter, Robert Craggs-Nugent (later Lord Clare and Earl Nugent), and had secured his return at six consecutive unopposed elections.⁴ As the quarrel with the colonies waxed hotter, Clare and his friends, in defiance of the wishes of a large part of their following, gave support to government policy. The result was a rebellion within the party. Among the leading Whig dissidents, Richard Champion, Henry Cruger, Joseph Harford and John Noble were all merchants or manufacturers directly or indirectly concerned with the American trade. They opposed governmental action which caused interruption to American commerce, and they entertained a certain degree of sympathy for the colonists' assertions of constitutional rights. Intent on securing a parliamentary spokesman for their views and interests, they began, from about 1769, to prepare an attack upon the old Whig caucus.⁵ The

¹ Sir Lewis Namier: *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III* (London, 1929), 110.

² 'Our grand division is of Whigs and Tories': Edmund Burke to Portland, Bristol, 3 Sept. 1780, forwarded at Burke's request to Rockingham, Fitzwilliam MSS.

³ Sir Lewis Namier: *op.cit.*, 112-13.

⁴ Earl Nugent to Burke, 18 Sept. 1780.

⁵ G. E. Weare: *op. cit.*, 14-15.

basis of the compromise of 1756 was thus undermined, and it was brought to an end altogether in 1774. The dissolution of that year gave the Whig dissidents their opportunity. Capturing control of the Union Club, they declared against both the old members, Lord Clare, and Matthew Brickdale (the Tory nominee), and triumphantly carried the two seats for Burke and Cruger.

Despite its success, this new Whig grouping carried within itself the seeds of disintegration. There was little in common between Champion and his friends, the dignified, conservative-minded Quaker merchants, who found their political ideal in Edmund Burke, and Henry Cruger, a demagogue who dabbled in radicalism.¹ Even during the election of 1774, there were signs that Cruger's forceful but erratic personality might prove a destructive influence within the new party. In turn, he made advances for a junction with Clare against Brickdale, and then accepted for a space the suggestion that Burke should be invited to stand as his colleague.² This last step was probably taken in order not to offend Champion and his friends. But three months later, at the nomination meeting before the election he had changed his mind, and, to Burke's disappointment, insisted upon standing alone.³ One may perhaps hazard the conclusion that Cruger still hoped for the support of Clare's interest, and did not wish to drive him into a junction with Brickdale. When, on the first polling day, Clare dropped out of the election, Cruger then acquiesced in the renewed demands of Champion and Noble, that Burke should be adopted as a second Whig candidate—but he did so without enthusiasm, for he refused to join Burke's nomination to his own, and the conclusion may be drawn that he would have preferred to be returned on a compromise with the Tory candidate, Matthew Brickdale.⁴ He had thus given more than one indication that he preferred to

¹ In 1774 he undertook to vote for shorter parliaments (G. E. Weare: *op. cit.*, 30) and he later supported electoral reform.

² G. E. Weare: *op. cit.*, 21-2.

³ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 32-3.

play for his own hand, these manœuvres foreshadowing the conduct which greatly contributed to the humiliation of the Bristol Whigs in 1780. His inclination to go his own way was soon strengthened by the very unfavourable impression he formed of his parliamentary colleague, whom he condemned as double-faced in his dealings with American matters and 'so cursed *crafty* and selfish, no one can possibly receive the least benefit from a connection with him.'¹ This last failing—touching as it did Cruger's own position at Bristol—seems, from Champion's reports of 1780, to have been Cruger's chief reason for breaking with Burke.

By the spring of 1780, Cruger and his father-in-law, Samuel Peach, had already decided to dissociate themselves entirely from Burke. Burke did not know until June whether he himself would be invited to stand again for Bristol. But, as early as April, he learned that their preparations had been carried so far forward that Cruger regarded his own position as secure.² Two months later, when Burke's friends had made up their minds to nominate him again, he knew that he could expect no help from the Cruger faction: on 18 June, his friend, John Noble, informed him:

One Samuel Jones who I begged to attend all public or private meetings of freemen of Bristol in London has lately wrote to me that he met Cruger with Rev. Chas. Westley, he attacked him on his parliamentary conduct, and deserting his old interest and colleague. Mr C. replied it was not his fault, his friends would not suffer him to join Mr Burke, but was of opinion to join Mr Dunning with him, for that Mr Peach did not approve of Mr B.

Once Cruger had adopted this course of action, Burke's friends felt themselves obliged to follow suit. Whig unity could have been preserved had they been willing to abandon their protégé and give their support to Cruger, but their honour and personal feelings were involved, and in their view Burke was

¹ H. Cruger to Peter Van Schaak, 3 May 1775, H. C. Van Schaak: *Henry Cruger* (New York, 1859), 16-17.

² *Burke Correspondence*, II, 341.

the fittest man to represent the city. They believed, too, that their pretensions to lead the Whig party in Bristol were stronger than Cruger's, and they thought—incorrectly—that they could defeat his intrigues. The alacrity with which they took up the idea of a compromise with the Tories makes it permissible even to conclude that they were rather relieved by Cruger's defection, which absolved them from any obligation to shoulder a contest for both seats. Early in June their resolution was taken. On the 8th, John Noble wrote to Burke informing him that he would be put up as a separate candidate, and that his supporters nursed strong hopes of an electoral truce with the Tories which would secure his unopposed return. 'There was a private meeting at my house,' Noble wrote, '. . . the conclusion . . . was to support [you] solely, unconnected with any one, unless with one recommended by the opposite party by way of compromise. . . . Mr Brickdale has not yet declared . . . in short never was there so much doubt and uncertainty. . . . I am firmly of opinion chance will bring about a compromise. I have had several conversations with Ald. Smith and Sir Ab. Elton, and have pressed them very much to lead a party of neutrals, who shall be resolved to keep the peace of the town and support a compromise. They both relish the scheme, but have not spirits to put the same in execution.'

So, by the end of June 1780, with a possible year or more to run before the next dissolution, move and counter-move had committed the two Whig groups to independent action and open rivalry. The first stages of preparation for the future election saw the destruction of the essential prerequisite of success, the unity of the party.

III

Three months later, when the unexpected dissolution was announced, the division between the two Whig factions proved irreconcilable. Cruger refused all support for Burke's candidature, not, it is clear, because of political disagreement, but because to stand alone would give him a better chance of

securing election.¹ 'The Whigs, . . . are entirely, and as I conceive, irretrievably divided,' Burke lamented.² His friends, therefore, went their separate way. In effect, each group was insisting that its nominee should be the party's sole candidate, and, from the first hint of a dissolution, each set about clearing the ground in characteristic fashion. The steps which they took show the fallacy of considering this election as simply a straight fight between Tory friends and Whig opponents of the government.

The manœuvres of Burke's friends were outlined in the long report which Richard Champion sent on 14th September to the Duke of Portland. Pursuing the scheme at which Noble had hinted in his letter of 8th June, they approached the Tories with the suggestion that they should nominate one candidate to run with Burke. At the same time, to smooth the way to such an agreement—and being ready to treat Cruger with greater fairness than he showed towards Burke—they offered Cruger a price for his withdrawal—the payment of any expenses he had so far incurred and a sum down sufficient to purchase a seat in parliament elsewhere. On both sides they were rebuffed. The Tories rejected the proposal for an electoral compromise, and Cruger scorned the suggestion that he should retire—as well he might, for certainly he had a greater stake and a greater interest in Bristol than Burke. However, to Burke's friends, the idea of a compromise was too alluring to be abandoned straightway. Calculating that the Tories would infinitely prefer Burke to Cruger, they next proposed a union of forces against him. Had an agreement on these lines been secured, Cruger would indeed have been excluded by *force majeure*. 'Had a compromise taken place,' Champion wrote, 'Mr Cruger must have sunk under its weight. This would have been the wisest step for the lasting peace of the town.' However, this scheme, like the last one, encountered a firm refusal. Moderates among the Tories would perhaps have preferred a resumption of the old compromise, in order to restore the peace of the city,³ but how much reliance could they place on

¹ See section V below.

² E. Burke to Portland and Rockingham, 3 Sept. 1780, Fitzwilliam MSS.

³ *Ibid.*; R. Champion to Rockingham, 11 Sept. 1780.

the promises of the very Whigs who in 1774 had broken the former agreement? Lord Nugent afterwards expressed the opinion, that 'this instance of Whig perfidy produced . . . the Tory absurdity of rejecting a compromise, for which, I dare say, those who bear the expence of a contest are now heartily sorry.'¹ In any case, the Tory leaders were forced on by their own extremists among the tradesmen, who had less concern with the burden of expense: 'all their indecisions were overruled by their party,' wrote Champion.²

Burke's party, having tried—and failed—to eliminate Cruger, either by buying him off or by securing a Tory alliance against him, had exhausted their power of manœuvre. They made one more hopeless attempt to reunite with Cruger's faction, but their approach to his friends disclosed, so Champion wrote, 'too much treachery apparent at the first meeting, not to put an almost immediate end to it.'

Cruger's plan was bold, simple, and unscrupulous. Burke, he considered, stood in his way. Burke, therefore, must be eliminated from the contest, and how better than by making it demonstrably impossible for him to succeed? From before the beginning of September, he was hard at work, attaching the Whig voters to himself, and undermining the influence of Burke's friends by every means at his disposal. 'No man can be more dextrous in convincing the world that he has no principle than Mr Cruger,' Champion wrote, 'for he is both Whig and Tory, American and anti-American, a strong supporter or a violent opponent of government, according to the sentiments of the voter he is canvassing.'³ With complete lack of scruple, he deliberately stirred up all the latent discontent against Burke. 'The friends of Mr Cruger,' wrote Champion, 'made use of the most treacherous means to destroy the interest of Mr Burke, and at first with success. The Irish, Lord Beauchamp's and the Popery Bill were all plaid off by them

¹ Earl Nugent to Burke, 18 Sept. 1780.

² R. Champion to Rockingham, 11 Sept. 1780.

³ R. Champion to Portland, 1 Sept. 1780.

with art and virulence.’¹ In this work Cruger had the support of the more violently anti-Catholic sects—the Quakers and Presbyterians favoured Burke, but he had on his side the Baptists and Anabaptists,² and also the Methodists, who would, so Champion declared, ‘do nothing without the orders of their pope, John Wesley, who is a friend to Cruger.’ Wesley had condemned the revolution in America, but somehow he found his opinion on that subject no bar to supporting Cruger’s pretensions at Bristol. ‘In what point of view he has taken up his cause,’ wrote Champion, ‘it would be difficult to say, was not his whole life a life of inconsistency, and he views this part of his own portrait, so realised in his friend, that it induces him to grant his protection.’³ In addition to this pulpit influence, Cruger relied upon his own personal popularity among the poorer folk, and upon the power of the employer over those he employed. Champion afterwards explained to the Duke of Portland, ‘We had some ground of apprehension from the common people who were very much under the personal influence of Mr Cruger, living almost wholly with and whose manners were very much suited to them. Our experience of his friends gave us the worst opinion of them, and we knew, that many of these people must be in a great measure in their hands.’⁴

In consequence, by September 1780, the forces of the Whigs in Bristol were to some extent split along the coincidental lines of class and religion. ‘The most opulent, the most sober, the most understanding part are for me,’ Burke informed his patron, the Marquis of Rockingham. But he also noted that the ‘middling tradesmen’ were inclined to be more for Cruger, ‘as they think that he contributes far more to their importance than I do.’⁵ Amongst the lower class Cruger’s hold was still firmer. Champion was far too optimistic when he wrote, on receiving news of the dissolution: ‘We shall have, I hope, a

¹ Same to same, 14 Sept. 1780.

² E. Burke to Portland and Rockingham, 3 Sept. 1780, Fitzwilliam MSS.

³ R. Champion to Portland, 1 Sept. 1780.

⁴ R. Champion to Portland, 14 Sept. 1780.

⁵ E. Burke to Portland and Rockingham, 3 Sept. 1780, Fitzwilliam MSS.

good body of officers to collect our scattered troops.'¹ As a result of Cruger's intrigues, the leaders of the Burke faction were a body of officers without an army, for a great part of their rank and file had been stolen away. It was the discovery of this fact which led to the final withdrawal of Burke's candidature on the first day of the poll.²

Thus, by the opening day of the election, Cruger, by unscrupulous manipulation and intrigue, had so arranged matters that Burke had no chance of success. He could, and he did, force his retirement. The letters in the Fitzwilliam and Portland collections contain no direct evidence regarding his motives, but it seems probable that he, too, like the leaders of the Burke faction, hoped to conclude a compromise with the Tories. Provided he could eliminate Burke from the contest he would be in a position to offer a bargain, and the partiality of leading Tories for an agreement must have been as well known to him as it was to Burke's friends. The death of one of the Tory candidates on the eve of the poll probably gave him encouragement, for he may well have concluded, as the friends of Burke certainly did, that the sudden decease of Combe would destroy Tory hopes of carrying both seats. This judgment of Cruger's motives can only be tentative. But the events of the first day's polling did, in fact, suggest to one observer, that he hoped for some understanding with the Tories: on 8 September, Richard Burke wrote to Rockingham:

Since my brother wrote and sealed the inclosed letter, the high party have declared Sir Henry Lippincott a candidate in the place of Mr Combe. At the instant I am writing the poll is going on, under indeed most unfavourable appearances for my brother. Mr Cruger's committee have persevered in their former conduct, and have opened their poll with two tallies, out of which Mr Burke had seven votes. Mr Cruger paid Mr Brickdale the compliment of two or three votes out of these tallies. I by no means think that this is at all decisive on the election, but it is beginning with a bad game. I suppose the compliment to Mr Brickdale is with a view to catch the favour of the Tories and recommend himself to their protection when Sir Henry declines the poll, it being the general opinion that he has little or no chance.

¹ R. Champion to Portland, 1 Sept. 1780.

² R. Champion to Portland, 14 Sept. 1780.

However, if Cruger counted on Tory assistance to secure his election, he was doomed to disappointment. The Tories remained firm in their intention to carry both seats, and he was obliged to have his father-in-law nominated as his colleague, to draw the second votes of his supporters away from their candidates.

Burke withdrew from the election on 8 September. The Whig collapse followed almost as a matter of course. Cruger had schemed boldly, but he had overlooked one thing—the pride and temper of his old associates. Whilst creating the situation which enabled him to force Burke's retirement, he apparently did not foresee the likelihood that he might be subject to a riposte in kind. His position was just as vulnerable as Burke's, for the forces of the two Whig factions were almost even,¹ but with brazen impudence he demanded the full support of the Burke party, in order to carry at least one seat (for himself) against the Tories. It was, as Burke observed, 'like desiring a woman to marry you, on the credit of having murdered her husband,'² and the demand aroused a comparable feeling of repugnance among Burke's friends. Cruger was now regarded by them with contempt and frustrated rage, and they faced the gloomy alternatives of either acquiescing in his triumph, which would spell the end of their own positions as political leaders in the city, or else of trying to break him at the certain cost of a Tory victory. This last was the course they chose. It is clear from Champion's letters, that the issue at the election ceased, so far as they were concerned, to be the defeat of the friends of the government. Their sole object, after Burke's withdrawal, was vengeance on Cruger for the humiliation he had inflicted upon them and upon their candidate. They resolved almost immediately to found a new Whig society for the purpose of destroying his party:³ and, Burke having

¹ Cruger polled 1,271 by the end of the election. The number of Burke's followers who refused to vote for Cruger has been estimated at over 1,000 (J. Latimer: *Annals of Bristol in the eighteenth century*, 445), a figure which is supported by the poll in the by-election of 1781.

² *Burke Correspondence*, II, 380.

³ R. Champion to Portland, 14 Sept. 1780.

retired from the contest, they boycotted the hustings and withheld the votes without which Cruger could have no prospect of success. At the end of the election, in a letter to Portland, Champion dilated with grim satisfaction upon Cruger's defeat:¹

. . . Mr Cruger has declined this morning. The neutrality of our friends must now convince him, how little he ought to have depended upon that vain security, which made him act so treacherous a part. He has since been as despicably mean in his apologies and offers to us to assist and support him. But they were at once rejected. He has dug a pit for Mr Burke, into which he has fallen himself, and has the folly to think that we would help him out. Some of our friends, from hatred to the Tories, could not be kept back, but with every assistance, he has polled only 1271. Our friends have in general been steady, which has left a great number unpolled.

No wonder the Tories had triumphed! But their victory marked merely the weakness and confusion of their opponents, not an overwhelming anti-American feeling among the electors of Bristol. For this result no one was more to blame than the pro-American, Cruger, whose schemes thus recoiled with poetic justice upon himself.

IV

If this were a moral tale, the downfall of the transgressor would be the proper place for the ending; but, as a matter of historical fact, we must record the transgressor's ultimate success. However righteous the indignation of Burke and his friends, they could not fail to acknowledge the fact that Cruger had now achieved one part of his object. He had removed the rival within the gates. He had demonstrated that his hold upon the Whigs in Bristol was such that he could ban the adoption of any other candidate. It now remained for him to rally them behind him against the Tories. This too was done, and in far too short a space for the peace of mind of Champion and Noble who saw the leadership of the party snatched away from them.

¹ Same to same, 19 Sept. 1780.

Two days before the end of the year, a seat at Bristol was vacated by the death of Sir Henry Lippincott. Burke's friends immediately began to explore the possibility of securing his return by means of an electoral agreement with the Tories. The first steps in the negotiation were described by Champion in a letter to Rockingham of 10 January 1781:

The first compromise which the Whigs offered was for each party to send a member, the present nomination by them; which they designed to fill up with the name of Mr Burke. This was refused by the Tories. They then (the principal men of their party being little inclined to contests, and hoping from the professions in private conversation, of some of the Tories, that a compromise of some sort might be effected) proposed to give up the first nomination, and accept the second. This, my Lord, is yet in agitation. Indeed some of the principal Tories did in fact accede to it, though some little altercation has passed whether it shall extend to any vacancy whatever or only by death. Many of these gentlemen are really desirous of a compromise, but are so much under the control of a club of tradesmen, whom they associated for the support of the cause and who from their strength and numbers are in fact become their masters, that they thought it not prudent to produce their second proposal in a general meeting of their party on Monday, when they nominated a Mr Daubeny as their candidate.

Apart from the opposition of the Tory rank and file, this scheme was speedily torpedoed from two other quarters. Cruger insisted upon standing, unless he were provided with the seat at Malton to be vacated by Burke; but, as Burke explained, this expedient was quite out of the question.¹ As Cruger's candidature would make a contest inevitable in any circumstances, it destroyed the main advantage that the Tories could expect from an agreement with Burke's friends. Also, for his part, Burke urged that the opponents of the government in Bristol should unite behind any candidate on whom they could agree, either Cruger or anyone else, and he wished no personal loyalty to himself to stand in the way.² This counsel was by no means agreeable to his chief supporters. A letter to him from Harford, written towards the end of the contested by-election

¹ *Burke Correspondence*, II, 399-401.

² *Ibid.*, 398-9, 401-2.

between Cruger and Daubeny, makes it clear that they would have preferred to maintain the vendetta against Cruger; but their hands were forced. In the end they followed the course Burke advised—but from expediency, not conviction: to have held back would have been to risk the loss of their remaining influence. Harford wrote:¹

I have been much embarrassed since I became active in the busy scene now exhibiting here to know in what light you viewed our conduct; the motives, and circumstances which impelled us, are so complicated and momentary, that I was unable to state them to you in writing with such precision, and clearness, as to satisfy myself, or enable you to judge. It was impossible from the short time we had to determine, for us to consult you upon it. Noble and myself, stood hesitating on the brink until we saw all our friends determined to plunge in and then we thought it most advisable to be foremost.

Our forces, brave, but undisciplined, would have deserted almost to a man, if we had refused the combat and though I am apprehensive we shall be defeated, yet from the spirit our people shew, I am persuaded we shall gain firmness, and be convinced of the necessity of system and regularity, by the event of the contest.

The voting at the election showed that the full strength of both Whig groups was exerted in support of Cruger, who finished the poll less than 400 votes behind his Tory opponent. The wounds within the Whig party had been healed—at Burke's expense—and the contest of 1781 was a straightforward trial of strength between it and the Tories.

V

The story of Bristol election politics in 1780 illustrates the pitfalls that exist in interpreting the results of eighteenth century parliamentary elections. Bristol was a populous and politically-minded constituency. Many of its leading men thought and felt deeply about the great political issue of the day, the American War. Thus on the one side, Champion, in lengthy letters, kept Rockingham informed of American news,

¹ Joseph Harford to Burke, 18 Feb. 1781.

and entered into political arguments in defence of his policies;¹ and, commenting upon the Gordon riots, John Noble observed with feeling, 'Alas, how much more commendable would such zeal appear to force our ministers to a peace with America.'² And, on the other side, between 1774 and 1780, the Tories in Bristol advanced £2,600 for wounded soldiers in America and gave £6,250 in bounties for recruits—nearly £9,000 all raised by private subscription: there was at least an element of truth behind George Daubeney's assertion in 1781, that the citizens were 'willing to sacrifice half their fortunes' in the prosecution of the American War.³ Keenly divided as the men of Bristol were on this great question, the general election of 1780 was not a straightforward struggle between the two sides, nor did the result indicate the balance of opinion within the city. Cruger certainly wilfully misrepresented the nature of his defeat when he attributed it simply to disapproval of his American sympathies.⁴ The election provides a perfect example of the way in which, in a great popular constituency, personal rivalries and personal interests might, in that age, obscure the conflict over national politics. The friends of Burke and of Cruger were far more bitterly opposed to each other than they were to the Tories. Although the political principles of the Tories—support for the North government and for the policy of reconquering America—were odious to them, both Whig groups were prepared, in the interests of their respective candidates, to do a deal with the Tories and divide with them the representation of the city.

In the correspondence of the Burke circle during 1780, Cruger's name was a scorn and a hissing, and his conduct the target of vigorous moral condemnation. These letters, of course, present only one side of the case. Probably Cruger and his friends thought in much the same terms of Champion, Harford,

¹ Fitzwilliam MSS.; *Burke Correspondence*, II, 95–6.

² J. Noble to Burke, 8 June 1780.

³ *Correspondence of George III*, edited by Sir John Fortescue, v, 470; Debrett: *The Parliamentary Register*, v (1781), 44.

⁴ *Dictionary of American Biography* (1930), volume IV, 581.

Noble, and all their associates, whose conduct had wrecked Cruger's chances of election. Cruger had some right on his side initially. His home, family, connections, and business were all closely associated with Bristol, whereas Burke was virtually a stranger to the city. Believing that Burke's recent political conduct made him more of a liability than an asset to his party at the election, he was well within his rights in keeping his candidature separate. But his deliberate undermining of Burke's position was another matter entirely. This showed a peculiarly revolting disloyalty to the great parliamentary figure who for six years had been his colleague, and disloyalty also to the other leading Bristol merchants whose help had secured his election in 1774. Had his action been a result of political conviction, it might be defended: but this was not the case. As Champion pointed out, Cruger had professed whatever principles he thought would win the voters he was canvassing: he adhered to none.¹ Burke himself observed, that Cruger had never, until the approach of the general election, expressed any disapproval of the Catholic Relief Act of 1778, though his friends, in 1780, denounced Burke for supporting it.² He had no motive but his own political advantage. One cannot but sympathize with the opinions of Champion and his friends, and conclude that Cruger in 1780 pursued a course which was unscrupulous, disreputable, and dishonourable.

Whilst Cruger made a fatal mistake in his assessment of the situation in thinking he would gain the votes of Burke's friends after destroying the chances of their candidate, it is probable that he also erred in assuming that Burke and he would not carry the election. Champion believed that the two groups acting wholeheartedly together would have won.³ Here one can do little more than speculate. But if we add to Cruger's poll of 1271 in 1780 a thousand votes withheld by Burke's supporters, the total is less than 300 behind the number of votes polled by Lippincott. Burke was thought to have many

¹ R. Champion to Portland, 1 Sept. 1780.

² *Burke Correspondence*, II, 373-4.

³ R. Champion to Portland, 14 Sept. 1780.

admirers among the Tories,¹ and it seems not impossible that, had he stood with Cruger, he might at least have attracted enough votes from Lippincott to have put Cruger second on the poll, though perhaps not enough to secure his own election.

However, if the tortuous course of action pursued by Cruger brought him to disaster in 1780, in the long run he triumphed, for he emerged undisputed head of the Whig interest in Bristol. The rank and file of the party rallied to him at the by-election of 1781, and their united forces were sufficient to secure his election, even in his absence in America, at the general election of 1784. 'Presumption, and weak, crooked politics' had brought him to his goal.² In politics the way of the transgressor is by no means always a hard one!

¹ 'I am firmly of opinion you rise higher in the opinion of the opposite party than you did,' John Noble wrote to Burke on 8 June 1780, and Champion, in his letter of 14 September to Portland, wrote of 'the votes for Mr Burke and Mr Brickdale, of which we had many promises.'

² The phrase was Burke's (*Burke Correspondence*, II, 382).