

# British Political Thought in History, Literature and Theory

1500–1800

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David Armitage



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## BRITISH POLITICAL THOUGHT IN HISTORY, LITERATURE AND THEORY, 1500–1800

The history of British political thought has been one of the most fertile fields of Anglo-American historical writing in the last half-century. David Armitage brings together an interdisciplinary and international team of authors to consider the impact of this scholarship on the study of early modern British history, English literature and political theory. Leading historians survey the impact of the history of political thought on the ‘new’ histories of Britain and Ireland; eminent literary scholars offer novel critical methods attentive to literary form, genre and language; and distinguished political theorists treat the conceptual and material relationships between history and theory. The outstanding examples of critical practice collected here will encourage the emergence of new research on the historical, critical and theoretical study of the English-speaking world in the period *c.* 1500–1800. This volume celebrates the contribution of the Folger Institute to British studies over many years.

DAVID ARMITAGE is Professor of History at Harvard University. He is the author of *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (2000), *Greater Britain, 1516–1776: Essays in Atlantic History* (2004), and *The Declaration of Independence: A Global History* (2006), and editor of *Bolingbroke: Political Writings* for Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (1997), *Theories of Empire, 1450–1800* (1998), and *Hugo Grotius: The Free Sea* (2004). He is also co-editor of *Milton and Republicanism* (with Armand Himy and Quentin Skinner, 1995) and *The British Atlantic World, 1500–1800* (with Michael J. Braddick, 2002).



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# *Introduction*

*David Armitage*

The field of research and teaching known as the history of British political thought has been one of the most fertile areas in anglophone historical scholarship of the last half-century. Its practitioners can be found in universities across the English-speaking world and increasingly beyond it as well. Their writings have provided prescriptions of method as well as models of practice for students of political thought working in other languages and on other political traditions, even those which were founded on different philosophical principles and which have developed along quite distinct historical trajectories.<sup>1</sup> Over the past fifty years, students of British political thought have mapped its contours from the late fifteenth century to the early nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> In this enterprise, the term ‘British’ has been construed ever more broadly, to encompass the political reflections of any of the inhabitants of Britain and Ireland, of the migrants who left those islands, and of their descendants who settled around the globe. The history of British political thought is therefore becoming an enterprise almost as expansive in its subject-matter as it has been in its international impact.

For the last twenty years, the study of this history has been associated particularly with the Center for the History of British Political Thought at the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, DC. The Center was founded by J. G. A. Pocock and Gordon Schochet in 1985. In that year, Pocock laid out a vision for its work in a manifesto that was generous geographically, generically and methodologically: “The ‘great texts’ of English, Scottish, and American political thought are secure in their places within our program, but at the same time the ‘history of political thought’ we seek is a history of language, literature, publication,

<sup>1</sup> Castiglione and Hampsher-Monk 2001.    <sup>2</sup> Pocock, Schochet and Schwoerer 1993.

and audience. It embraces the ephemeral tracts and pamphlets as well as the great texts.<sup>3</sup> Since 1985, the Center has pursued this vision through over thirty seminars and conferences out of which more than fifteen books as well as numerous articles and essays have emerged.<sup>4</sup> The Center's twentieth anniversary in 2005 offered an occasion to review the field's achievements and its prospects from the perspective of the three disciplines where its work has so far had its greatest uptake: history, English literature and political theory. The chapters in this volume arose from that occasion but all aim to transcend a specific moment to reflect more broadly on the disciplinary dialogues that have so far shaped the history of British political thought and that will continue to inform it in future.

The last two decades have witnessed changes in the arguments within academic fields as great as the shifts in the relations among them. For example, at the moment of the Center's founding, the 'linguistic turn' was still a relatively novel (and, for some, anxiety-provoking) move for historians to undertake.<sup>5</sup> Twenty years later, most historians, especially those who term their interests cultural, social or intellectual history, have absorbed its lessons and can wield its tools without undue anxiety in their search for the meanings of past utterances, acts and events. Similarly, literary scholars who were taking up embattled positions during the so-called 'Theory Wars' of the mid-1980s have now moved on to calmer debates in a period self-consciously described as 'after Theory'.<sup>6</sup> The so-called 'New' Historicism is no longer quite so new and has become a familiar resource for scholars across a wide range of literatures.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, in the same period, the social sciences have become more hospitable to interpretive and hermeneutic approaches which complement, but more often counter, positivist models of research.<sup>8</sup> Historians have thus become more alert to questions of language and meaning at a time when scholars of literature have been more eager to write historically and when at least some social scientists have returned to history and to hermeneutics. Such a moment of convergences across

<sup>3</sup> Pocock 1985a, p. 284.

<sup>4</sup> Schochet, Tatspaugh and Brobeck 1990–93; Peck 1991; Schworer 1992; Pocock, Schochet and Schworer 1993; Mason 1994a; Robertson 1995a; Burgess 1996; Smith 1998a; Morgan 1999a; Connolly 2000; Ohlmeyer 2000; Mendle 2001.

<sup>5</sup> Jay 1982; Toews 1987; Pagden 1987b.

<sup>6</sup> Kastan 1999.

<sup>7</sup> Gallagher and Greenblatt 2000.

<sup>8</sup> Skinner 1985; Winch 1990; Scott and Keates 2001.



disciplinary boundaries bodes well for the future of collaborative work in interdisciplinary fields such as the history of British political thought.

Many of the individual chapters in the volume engage directly with these broad disciplinary developments; taken together, they offer an array of models and methods for the future history of British political thought. Though they are collected in sections that acknowledge the primary disciplinary affiliations of their authors, they all address matters of common concern to students of British political thought. As J. G. A. Pocock, Gordon Schochet and Lois Schwoerer point out in their opening overview, the history of British political thought as it has been practised at the Folger Center and elsewhere arose originally from the concerns of historians but over the past half-century it has been in constant (if not always mutually comprehending) conversation with political theory and it has drawn increasingly on the methods of literary scholarship. It has done so within a broad but bounded chronology running from the decades before the Reformation to the generations after the French Revolution. That both these sets of events were pan-European in scope indicates the ample geography within which the field has developed. A series of exploratory workshops held at the Center in recent years on the networks of political exchange between Britain and Ireland on the one hand and continental Europe on the other has traced that geography; future efforts in this direction may expand the geography yet further. Studies will soon appear of British political thought in predominantly non-anglophone areas (such as South Asia).<sup>9</sup> Students of British political thought are thus testing the manifold possibilities for globalizing their subject, just as other intellectual historians are beginning to do.<sup>10</sup>

For the moment, though, historians of British political thought continue to pursue their work mostly within the lines set by the historiographies of early-modern Britain and Ireland. The four chapters by John Morrill, Colin Kidd, Nicholas Canny and Tim Harris each test the limits of historiographical models for understanding the thought and actions of historical agents, especially those in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Morrill's survey of recent developments in what was once called the 'New' British history offers an array of possible

<sup>9</sup> For example, Travers forthcoming.

<sup>10</sup> Bayly 2004, chs. 3, 6, 8; compare Schneewind 2005; Megill 2005; Armitage 2006; and Ivison, in this volume.

approaches, most of which he sees as 'reproduc[ing] distinctive frameworks of reference that can be found in the history itself', such as those he terms 'incorporative', 'federal' and 'perfect', according to the differing conceptions of political union debated during the seventeenth century. If Morrill is somewhat sceptical about much of the history that has been written within such frameworks, Colin Kidd has another solution to offer from within the period itself. He avoids the twin dangers of retrospection and teleology by focusing on what contemporaries themselves would have described as *British* political thought: that is, the so-called 'matter of Britain', 'a distinctive and long-running genre of political argument which debated the location of authority within the island of Britain, or sometimes the British Isles'. Kidd argues that attention to the matter of Britain demands interdisciplinary work but not necessarily the kind that arises when current disciplines adopt one another's questions and procedures. Serious students of early-modern conceptions of the matter of Britain may need to be equipped with a working knowledge of ecclesiology, feudal jurisprudence and heraldry but will be ill-furnished if they borrow tools too readily from toilers in other fields such as political theory.

The place of Ireland and Scotland within the matter of Britain was as vexed a question for contemporaries as it has proved to be for those who study their history. Nicholas Canny's chapter makes this point especially clearly. If *British* political thought is taken as the norm, political thinking conducted within (and about) Ireland comes to seem increasingly anomalous between the mid-sixteenth and the mid-seventeenth centuries: in the earlier period, 'political discourse in Ireland . . . was but a provincial echo of political culture in Britain' but 'that which flourished there a century later was radically different from British norms both in form and in ambition'. However, if placed in the broader context of pan-European political and religious thought, the course of Irish political thinking becomes more comprehensible, not least because Irish political actors were consciously engaged in cosmopolitan conversations that were not confined to Britain and Ireland alone.

As the example of Ireland shows, historians of political thought must accommodate the scope of their inquiries to the scale at which their subjects conducted their arguments, whether that was local, regional, national or transnational. This question of scale is also the problem Tim Harris confronts in his chapter through an examination of political thinking in Britain and Ireland between the Exclusion Crisis of the late 1670s and the immediate aftermath of the Glorious Revolution in the

early 1690s. Like Kidd, he argues that the questions asked of the past largely determine the answers that come back in return. The 'Britannic turn' in early-modern historiography will only provide adequate answers to questions contemporaries themselves viewed in the terms of the Three Kingdoms of Britain and Ireland; such a perspective can reveal patterns otherwise hidden to historians who frame their inquiries nationally but, equally, in many cases the national scale may be a more appropriate level at which to work. 'Depending on the questions we ask,' Harris concludes, 'sometimes the Three-Kingdoms perspective is going to come into sharp focus, at other times the national (or local, or continental) will.'

Scholars of early-modern literature have not confronted such matters of the appropriate geographical scale for their research, at least until recently.<sup>11</sup> For many purposes, they have not needed to, because nationally-defined canons of literature have been investigated and interpreted within frameworks of genre, trope, technique and form that have rarely been circumscribed by specific national contexts. Andrew Hadfield's study of republicanism in early-modern English (meaning 'English-language') literature illustrates this point well. He firmly reminds those historians and political theorists who have been interested in recovering the heritage of republicanism that, for most English writers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, republicanism was neither an autonomous political language nor a practical political programme but rather 'a literary phenomenon . . . because it consisted of a series of stories', such as the rape of Lucretia, the assassination of Julius Caesar and the rise of Augustus.

All these republican narratives found their way into the work of William Shakespeare, of course, but that does not mean that we should therefore deem him a 'republican writer'. As Jean Howard shows in her chapter, the dramas which made up the bulk of Shakespeare's oeuvre did not 'elaborate a consistent political position'. Indeed, the very fact that many of the techniques of early-modern English drama used dramaturgical principles inherited from the morality plays and were also closely akin to the widely-shared Renaissance rhetorical procedure of arguing *in utramque partem* (on both sides of a question) meant that Shakespeare's plays could only be vehicles for testing political thinking through what Howard calls 'embodied representation'. Embodying ideas

<sup>11</sup> E.g., Baker and Maley 2002.

in this way could also have radical implications, as when persons who may generally have lacked political agency within their own society were represented on stage as taking political initiatives, as in *The First Part of the Contention* (2 *Henry VI*). However, such representations do not allow us to call Shakespeare a 'democratic' writer, any more than *Henry V* made him an aggressive monarchist, for example.

Historians who study British political thought may also need to be reminded that texts not usually canonized as literary may nonetheless deploy literary techniques. That is the central message of Steven Zwicker's chapter on the overlapping literary strategies of irony, disguise and deceit found in a wide array of texts including the pungent histories of Tacitus, the elusive poetry of Dryden and the comic drama of Congreve. He argues that historians, interested as they mostly are in discursive and argumentative works, have tended to study the 'horizontal dimension' at the expense of the 'vertical dimension of political languages, their performance at specific moments and under particular strain'. One might restate this by saying that historians of all kinds, and not just historians of political thought, are generally more concerned with the diachronic than with the synchronic dimensions of their subjects. Zwicker argues that greater patience with the seeming instability of literary language and genre can reveal that vertical, synchronic, dimension usually hidden to history.

Conversely, it might seem, Karen O'Brien argues in her study of ideas of imperial liberty and benevolence in the poetry of the long eighteenth century, the diachronic study of literary texts (particularly poetry) may itself uncover not just forms of political thinking but even novel political thoughts that conventional materials of historical research do not contain. She proposes that such ideas emerged from an 'inter-generic conversation' in which poets sometimes took the lead. In particular, she shows that conceptions of imperial trusteeship and benevolence, especially as directed towards indigenous peoples around the globe, can be found earlier in the poetry than in the formal prose or much of the political practice of the period. In light of this, historians may need to follow her advice to seek new archives (such as those comprising poetry), while also heeding Zwicker's counsel to be more aware of – and even to revel in – the very literariness of the materials that make up the richest of those archives.

As we have seen, the diachronic and the synchronic dimensions of political thinking have parallels in differing geographical scales (local or national, national or transnational) on which the history

of British political thought might be conducted. At the risk of inducing intellectual vertigo, we might add to these intersecting dimensions those of political thought as past action and political theory as a present resource. Here we enter the domain of our third and last suite of chapters, those by students of political theory. Duncan Ivison's experiment in globalizing the history of political thought picks up where Karen O'Brien's study of imperial benevolence leaves off, by implicitly treating the question why such benevolence might have been necessary at all, and what part a seemingly benign language, such as that of subjective (or individual) rights, played in the malevolent spread of empire around the globe. By placing one specifically British manifestation of that language – John Locke's – into histories at once local to the early-modern period and global in extent, Ivison shows that 'history provides a critical resource for surveying the uses of various concepts and theories over time, and especially the conflicts and choices that were made around the concepts and values we now take for granted', such as rights themselves.

A similar concept that can likewise be taken for granted is the separation between public and private on which our conception of rights largely depends. Joanne Wright's chapter shows how misleading it would be – both historically and conceptually – to read back contemporary distinctions between public and private into the past. As Wright acknowledges, the impetus behind inquiries into historical conceptions of the public and the private arose initially from late twentieth-century feminist theory: without present pressures, then, we would not be animated by study past problems. However, as many other chapters in the volume illustrate, the shape and scale of current concerns can only be imposed on the past at the cost of misunderstanding, at best, and conceptual violence, at worst. Yet the gulf between past and present is not unbridgeable. In the case of a writer as acute as Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, the distance between her concerns and ours can in fact be theoretically salutary: 'we neither share her precise concerns, nor see public and private from her perspective, but her language is not so different from our own that we cannot gain some insight from her analysis'. The fact that Wright's prime example of this is drawn from a literary work – Cavendish's closet-drama, *The Convent of Pleasure* – only affirms the interdisciplinary implications of such an insight.

The gulf between past and present is spanned historically by the transmission of texts and hermeneutically by the analysis of those texts: or, so our last two chapters, by Kirstie McClure and Richard Flathman,

lead us to conclude. McClure consciously draws methodological inspiration from literary theory (in particular, the work of Mikhail Bakhtin on 'speech-genres') and from cultural historians who have investigated the material transmission of texts to investigate the manifold meanings accumulated, and sometimes shed, by texts as they travel through many hands across time and space. Meaning, she argues, cannot be divorced from form, especially the material form in which ideas are transmitted. Every reader selects and recombines the apparent (and not so apparent) meanings within a specific text; however, some readers have more power to affect meaning by virtue of their roles as editors, annotators, excerpters or anthologists. The works that make up pillars of the canon, among intellectual historians and political theorists (and, we should add, among literary scholars), are not quite as solid and imposing as they might seem, at least if our aim is to comprehend the full range of meanings they have acquired over time. Examples like the *Vindiciae Contra Tyrannos*, John Locke's *Two Treatises* and Edmund Burke's *Vindication of Natural Society* amply affirm a point that could be made with a host of other works: 'To the extent that political theorizing consists in offering not simply a perspective on the political world but also an orientation to action within it, its containment within conventional genre distinctions looks more like a matter of academic convenience than a characteristic of historical expressions'.

The question of what might count within political theory as either 'orientation[s] to action' or 'historical expressions', and what might be the relation between the two, is the subject of Richard Flathman's concluding chapter. Just as the volume begins with an historian's scepticism about historical categories, in John Morrill's chapter, so it ends with a political theorist's doubts concerning history's relevance for the manifold possibilities for studying and writing political thought. Precisely because past utterances were so varied in their forms, and also because present concerns will differ from theorist to theorist and from context to context, Flathman does not find it possible – let alone necessary – to choose between what he calls 'the canonical and conceptual conceptions of the study/writing of political thought'. Either will have its value, but only depending upon the question at hand to be studied or the problem to be resolved. Often we may not need to make the choice because more than one possibility will have to be in play simultaneously. In such cases we will find ourselves, in the teasing words of Ludwig Wittgenstein, 'between the games' of different disciplines.

Quentin Skinner reminds us in his Afterword that the study of past thought never ceases to reveal aspects of our own ways of thinking that might otherwise remain obscure to us: 'As our world revolves, it catches light from the past in ever-changing ways'. Conversely, we might recall that because the objects from the past that we study are themselves multifaceted we may only be able to examine one of their faces while simultaneously obscuring others from our view. To comprehend all the features of complex forms, like those of political thought, demands that we adopt multiple perspectives upon them. But we can only do this in collaboration with others who view those same objects in rather different lights. The chapters in this volume have been written in just such a spirit, to open up new perspectives on the multiple histories that might yet be written of British political thought.

*The History of British Political Thought: A Field  
and its Futures*

*J. G. A. Pocock, Gordon Schochet and Lois G. Schworer*

The 'history of British political thought' as a field of research has its own history which is now more than half a century old. Two impulses drove its early development. The first, British in origin, arose from the work of scholars active at Cambridge University since about 1950: among them Peter Laslett, J. G. A. Pocock, J. H. M. Salmon, Quentin Skinner, John Dunn, Gordon Schochet and others too numerous to list, to whom the term 'Cambridge School' has been applied. The other, American in origin, arose from the work of Caroline Robbins, Douglass Adair, Bernard Bailyn and their associates who explored English and British political thought in the late-seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – notably the 'commonwealth' critique of the Hanoverian regime – so as to lead towards American rebellion and independence, republicanism and federalism.<sup>1</sup> These two impulses have continued to operate within the history of British political thought and have served largely to shape the problems it has encountered and discovered.

'The Cambridge method', as it has become known, consists in the assignment of texts to their contexts. These 'contexts' are of many kinds and need to be carefully defined, but if one is the context of historical and political circumstances, another is the context of political language. In early-modern England, Britain and Europe, 'political thought' was expressed (a) in Latin and in a number of vernaculars; (b) in a diversity of specialized discourses constructed by distinct if intersecting clerisies, among whom ecclesiastics, jurists and humanists may serve as an initial classification; and (c), in England at least, in an imperfectly controlled print culture, where 'broadsides', which are ephemeral and usually directed to the less learned, contributed significantly to the context of political language. Since the beginning of the Cambridge enterprise,

<sup>1</sup> Robbins 1959; Bailyn 1967; Adair 1974.



it has been important to determine not only in what circumstances and with what intentions a given author wrote, but also in terms of what 'language' he (if male) chose to conduct his argument; cases are on record where authors were offered a choice of languages and knew what choices they were taking.

The work of historians of British political thought has therefore consisted largely in discovering the 'languages' in which that thought was from time to time conducted and in tracing their histories, particularly within the period from roughly 1500 to 1800 which might be defined as early-modern.<sup>2</sup> There has been a consequence. The 'thought' of a given author, whether he were polemicist or philosopher, has been increasingly presented as a series of speech acts performed in linguistic and circumstantial contexts, which revealed his intentions and set limits to his ability to perform them, but which may also be used by a historian to recover what they were.

However, this tendency to contextualize may have widened the gap which has long been opening between 'the history of political thought' and 'political theory'. The historian is interested in what the author meant to say, succeeded in saying, and was understood to have said, in a succession of historical contexts now distant in time. The theorist wishes to use the author's text in contexts set by the theorist's own enterprise of enquiry, which has no guaranteed identity with the enterprise the author was pursuing. Though the theorist is not a historian, the activity in which he or she is engaged has been going on a long time and has a history which the theorist may need to reconstitute, but will do so in terms set by the theoretical enterprise. These terms will not be those the historian of political thought will use in reconstituting a history of language and discourse. Of the three authors of this chapter, one has been both political scientist and historian in his day, one continues to teach political theory in a department of political science and the third has spent her whole working life as an historian. None expects to see a time when the two disciplines will not find it easy to fall into misunderstandings.

There are signs that the old canon-based 'history of political thought' – formed by selecting great texts and drawing lines to connect them – may be coming back into fashion. However, the canon constructed by political theorists will never look quite the same as the canon

<sup>2</sup> Schochet, Tatzpaugh and Brobeck 1990–93; Pocock, Schochet and Schwoerer 1993.

recognized by historians of political thought. There are reasons at once generic, chronological and even geographical for this failure to converge. Historians of political thought will insist that the work of political theorists said to be of canonical importance looks somewhat different when read in the context of more popular and vernacular literature, as in the case of Milton's prose works and poetry and the ephemera that poured from the presses in the 1640s.<sup>3</sup> Or Hobbes's *Leviathan* may be juxtaposed with the literature of the controversies over *de facto* authority and allegiance.<sup>4</sup> Comparisons of the languages of these two genres hold their own fascination and illumination, both historical and (we should insist) theoretical, but such studies of genre continue to be largely the work of historians rather than of political theorists.

As the examples of Milton and Hobbes indicate, what we have here called 'Cambridge' scholarship has tended to focus on the period of Renaissance, Reformation and English civil wars. It may be at some risk of becoming a research project limited to the cultural conditions then obtaining. Closer to the concerns of the early-modern historian and scholar, it has not proved easy to advance beyond the age of Hobbes and Locke into the huge changes that came over English, Scottish and American political thought between the revolutions of 1688–1689 and 1776, despite the inspirational part (already noted) that studies of the latter crisis played in the field half a century ago. We might still ask what would happen if it were carried beyond the age of the early-modern clerisies and their print culture, into the nineteenth century or the twentieth. Illuminating findings would surely emerge, but even they would only partly close the gap between the historians of political thought and their neighbours, the political theorists, whose canon extends from Plato (though rarely before) to Rawls (and occasionally after).

There have also been geographical boundaries to much of the history of British political thought as it has been generally practised. Its work has been largely coincident with the ambit of the field once called the 'new' British history – that is, the Three Kingdoms of England, Scotland and Ireland and their extensions into the Atlantic world – whose own history of research and teaching now extends back over thirty years.<sup>5</sup> A central problem raised by the coincidence of these fields is the

<sup>3</sup> Armitage, Himy and Skinner 1995.

<sup>4</sup> Wallace 1968; Skinner 2002c, pp. 287–307.

<sup>5</sup> Pocock 1974; Pocock 2005.

question: In what sense is it possible to speak of ‘*British* political thought’? Is this simply a portmanteau term, denoting whatever political literature may have taken shape in any of the cultures contained by ‘British history’? Does it denote their aggregate or rather their interactions? Is there a time – probably modern rather than early-modern – when there is the political thought of a self-aware and self-perpetuating ‘British’ community, or does it remain a conversation as to how and how far such a community does or should exist? These are questions only a programme of enquiry extended beyond the late eighteenth century can hope to resolve. They are also questions few political theorists are likely to attempt to answer, or even to be impelled to ask, even when studying the canonical texts of early-modern British political thought. There is little sign that Thomas Hobbes knew Leviathan had three kingdoms to deal with, though James Harrington clearly did. English political thought thus goes on being about England and English history, even when it is about Britain. This Anglocentricity cannot be eliminated; it is part of the history we are seeking to understand.

The history of British political thought has perhaps diverged farthest from the concerns of the canonical political theorists in its investigations to date of the political thought of Scotland and Ireland. Yet it is also here that the field has achieved some of its most notable advances. It has established that there is a canon of major Scottish political thinkers, at least from John Mair to James VI, and that a ‘history of Scottish political thought’ can be perhaps written through the centuries of early-modern history.<sup>6</sup> Questions about the existence of ‘British’ political thought become vastly more complicated when asked of the kingdom of Ireland during the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries.<sup>7</sup> Here one has to deal with three languages (Gaelic as well as Latin and English), four ethnic groups (after the arrival of Scottish as well as English settlers in Ulster), and above all three churches (those of Rome, England and Scotland). For reasons of which the continued existence of a Catholic majority would appear to be chief, the attempt to organize Ireland as a third kingdom on the Tudor-Stuart model was unsuccessful,<sup>8</sup> and the presence of Ireland within British history is the presence of an antithesis

<sup>6</sup> Mason 1994a; Robertson 1995a; Burns 1996; Mason 1998.

<sup>7</sup> Morgan 1999b; Ohlmeyer 2000; Connolly 2000.

<sup>8</sup> Canny 2001.

and paradox: its role in British history is precisely that it refuses to be part of British history. Irish historians rightly look for an Irish history that lies outside British history, and point out that Ireland's Catholicism made it part of the debate within the Catholic world in ways in which the British kingdoms refused to be. All this is true; nevertheless, it can still be said that Irish history cannot be understood without British history or British history without Irish history; and there is besides, especially in the eighteenth century, a Protestant Ireland (perhaps two) whose debates with England and itself are debates over its place in a British world, to the point where settler and indigenous nationalisms begin to converge or merge. There are respects in which eighteenth-century Ireland and America are cases of the same order.

One way to recognize such similarities is to situate England, and the British kingdom after it, in a series of contexts each composed of a society of states – the multiple monarchy of the Three Kingdoms itself, Atlantic and Indian empire, or the European republic of the *ius gentium*, for examples. Richard Tuck and David Armitage are developing a new historical narrative,<sup>9</sup> with Grotius rather than Hobbes as its pivotal figure, which studies thought and discourse less about the internal structure and problems of the political community than about its relations with other states and communities – some of them, in an age of empire, not organized as states at all. This approach is not ideologically neutral; it has to beware of a market-driven post-modernism which denies human autonomy by rendering it contingent, but it is historiographically valuable and promising.

We now need to examine, with reference to different periods, with what centres of cultural production writers in the British Kingdoms exchanged texts and ideas about church, state and history; of what other European political societies they were aware and what they knew about them; of what writers in these societies knew in their turn about them. This is to ask that the idea of 'Europe' be rendered specific instead of being used to deny specificity. It also opens up the field of a European *respublica litterarum* in which political discourse was conducted both nationally and transnationally. It invites attention to how literati responded to war, which was endemic and persistent throughout the period; not surprisingly, Suárez, Grotius, Pufendorf, and Vattel wrote variously on war and peace, just war theory, the law of nations, the right

<sup>9</sup> Tuck 1978; Tuck 1993; Tuck 1999; Armitage 2000; Armitage 2004a.

of self defence, the conduct of war, and what came to be called international law. The idea of 'Europe', like that of 'empire', changed greatly during the eighteenth century. The ways in which it changed will be the source of a valuable inquiry, but one to be conducted both within and well beyond the conventional boundaries assigned to the history of 'British' political thought.<sup>10</sup>

Those boundaries are being further expanded, in rather different directions, by the increasing recognition of a problem of general importance to the historian: that of the literary genres in which the activities termed 'political thought' have been conducted, and of the disciplines by which their history is to be studied. In the last two decades, the study of English literature has been increasingly historicized and has become increasingly aware of its subject's political character and context. The approach assumes no chasm between literature, conventionally understood as poetry, plays and, later, novels, and the 'literature' of political thought. Still, the assumptions and objectives of the two disciplines have not (and should not) become identical, and perhaps this is why the methodologies of the 'Cambridge school' and 'the new historicism' (if this terminology may still be used) have yet to be brought into close confrontation or collaboration. The problem might be approached by stating it as one of genre. The literary forms in which 'political thought' was conducted were typically – or so we have chosen to suppose – the pamphlet, the tract and the treatise, to which documents of a more public character, such as statutes, proclamations, confessions, sermons and articles, must on occasion be added. We enlarge this category by taking account of a print culture in which 'pamphlet' literature at times exploded uncontrollably; the radicalism of the unlicensed press in George Thomason's London is currently out of fashion,<sup>11</sup> but will surely not long remain so.

What may be said of all these literary forms is that they are intensely and immediately disputatious; they rebut the positions of others and expect rebuttal in their turn (even when the anticipation takes the form of censorship and prohibition). If we now turn to the classic categories of 'literature' as an art form – the poem, the play and later the novel – we may find that these are no less political. For example, the plays of Shakespeare are particularly rich explorations of the nature of political

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Hay 1968; Pagden 2002.

<sup>11</sup> Reasons for this are explored in Mendle 2001.

power, resistance, counsel and republican thought. Also drenched with political ideas is the poetry of Donne, Milton, Marvell and Dryden. Such literature may even employ the same political languages as the pamphlet, tract and treatise, but the patterns of disputation are not so obvious. It is not impossible to write a poem or play in response to another – are there instances here of counter-rebuttal? – but the patterns of response will be, in every sense, less immediate. It may be that at this point the literary scholar focuses on the ‘literary’ techniques – irony, narrative, dramatization – to be found in the tract or treatise no less than in the poem or play, and the two disciplines begin to merge in a study of rhetoric. This is a field of methodological enquiry in which a great deal of progress has been made but in which a great deal yet remains to be done.

As we understand that language is conscious art as well as political message, found equally in the tract, the poem and the play, there appears the possibility of material arts conveying such messages by means that are not verbal at all, though they may be converted into discourse. This approach assumes that the object, whatever it may be, is a ‘text’ situated in a ‘context’ which is to be read, in ways different from a verbal text, to be sure, but to the same end of discovering meaning. That meaning often includes political ideas and messages, which may be conveyed by tapestry, portrait, sculpture, painting, or architecture. For example, the emblem-panels of Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots, are deeply imbued with political ideas. The portraits of such sixteenth-century figures as Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, are also saturated with political meaning. In these cases, however, there remains (as it did in that of poetry) the question of where the conversation initiated by the message is to be found, and how we are to validate the statements we make about it. It would seem that we need to retain the presence of highly organized speech, writing and typography, capable of both criticism and disputation, if we are to have histories of intellectual activity at all. It is at this point that historians of British political thought may use the perspective and methodology of cultural historians to enhance understanding of intellectual history, and vice versa.

Law, both as a means of maintaining social and political order and as a vehicle that carries political values and represents the polity, was a hallmark of politics in the early-modern period. England and then Britain was transformed from a polity in which the humanistic perspective of counsellors was gradually replaced by the more specifically lawyerly understandings of politics that went back at least to Fortescue

in the fifteenth century. The growing domination of politics by lawyers led to an increasing tendency to look to the law and its principles to solve political problems. That was the peculiarly English common law, an historically rooted, evolving, and unmodified mixture of legislation, practice, and judicial interpretation. This common law, as the embodiment of the historical wisdom and constitutional practice of England, with the natural rights of liberty and property that were already part of the English constitution, was asserted time and again as the nation's primary defence against what were seen as governmental and especially monarchical excesses. Once an issue between the crown and the nobility, by the late sixteenth century, conflicts about the proper reach of political power were between the crown and its supporters and parliament, the latter increasingly seeing itself as the representative of the 'people'. 'The law' and its history thus run unbroken through the history of early-modern British political thought; but as important as it was, the law alone was incapable of resolving constitutional conflicts about the nature of political power, for those conflicts often called in question the very possession of the law and the legitimate ability to interpret it.

Study of the law as central to early-modernity long preceded (and in part inspired) the history of British political thought as a field. Other major fields of inquiry have grown up alongside and in tandem with this field, perhaps most fruitful among them the history of women and gender. An enormous amount of work has been done in the last decade by feminist historians and literature specialists in identifying early-modern European and English women political thinkers, uncovering their writings (much of it still in manuscript form), presenting their views and assessing their significance. At a level of theory, we have begun looking beyond what women had to say about the distinction between private and public, which is central to the political theory of gender throughout most of its history. In fact women wrote in sophisticated and complex terms about the political issues that pervaded the early-modern era, such as the separation of church and state, toleration, different constitutional forms and the contract theory of government.<sup>12</sup> In the historical narrative, a sequence of phenomena seems to be emerging throughout the era. One rich and well-documented debate is about queenship, imposed upon the English and Scottish monarchies during the half-century when the reigns of a series of female sovereigns gave

<sup>12</sup> Smith 1998a.

rise to the derogatory phrase ‘the monstrous regiment of women’. Elizabeth’s reign is evaluated, as it was by contemporaries, in these terms, and it can be asked whether the restoration of masculine rule by James VI and I returned either monarchy to what it had previously been.<sup>13</sup>

There were, moreover, the women prophets of the English Interregnum, whose history carries on into that of Quakerism,<sup>14</sup> and after them the remarkable group of philosophers – Anne Conway, Mary Astell, Damaris Cudworth Masham – whose Platonism and anti-Platonism bear on the changing relations of church and state at the end of the seventeenth century.<sup>15</sup> As we move into the politeness and sociability of the eighteenth century, it may be that ‘the rise of the social’ offered women a new level of visibility, no longer rigidly domestic if it was not yet political;<sup>16</sup> but at the end of the age stands the figure of Mary Wollstonecraft, warning in post-Rousseauian terms that this was not going to be enough.<sup>17</sup> It will be increasingly important to see what happens to the history of political thought when we deepen our attention to what such women had to say within and about it.

The ‘Cambridge method’ as applied to the various fields we have described does not always lead to the construction of sequential narratives but rather to the recovery of past contexts in which texts are situated and their character or intention and performance reconstructed; to this extent its procedure has been archaeological. Much of the work of historians of British political thought could not unfairly be summarized as the unending pursuit of contexts and texts to place in them, to which no theoretical limit is discerned. This is to enrich the past in its diversity, and to enhance our understanding of an activity, ‘political thought’, by revealing in how many ways it has been conducted and how many things it has been. But the synchronic needs to point the way into the diachronic, and we should continue to pursue the afterlife of texts: their reception, interpretation, and passage from expressing the intentions of their authors – which they may perpetuate – to articulating the understandings of their readers. It is here that have been built up the more or less mythic histories of ‘great texts’ and their ‘influence’ that the ‘Cambridge method’ came into being to replace; but the creation and persistence of those myths are part of the history we are studying.

The possibility of narrative increases as the history under study becomes less one of acts and more one of ‘languages’. The existence

<sup>13</sup> McLaren 2000.

<sup>14</sup> Mack 1992.

<sup>15</sup> Broad 2002; Springborg 2005.

<sup>16</sup> Taylor and Knott 2005.

<sup>17</sup> Taylor 2003.



of a 'language of political thought', changing as it is used by authors over time, can in principle be validated, and there comes into view the possibility of a history – going on in how many concurrent contexts? – in which languages change and affect one another, come into use and pass out of it, and it is possible to look through them to the political experience that at least claims to justify them. There should in principle be a subjective history of English or British politics consisting less of what the historian holds to have happened than of what contemporaries thought was happening and how they organized their articulation of experience at various discursive and theoretic levels. Such a history might be followed across the whole early-modern period: what narrative sequence it contained might prove to be a narrative of historical change. The possibility of long-term processes, taking place in a *moyenne durée*, is currently unfashionable but should not be dismissed.

There remains the dwindling but probably not vanishing band of political theorists who make use of historically surviving or reconstituted materials – texts, languages, philosophical positions – in pursuit of investigations of their own, by definition not those of the history but of the 'theorist'. They act in history and should be conscious of doing so; like most actors in history they do not act as historians, but change history by acting upon it in other ways. Since they are aware of history, the investigations of theory they construct will generate histories of their own activity, and will also lead to new reassessments of the history they share with others. Though they will never write histories in the 'Cambridge' manner, it is possible to suppose a philosopher – an Arendt or a Foucault, for example – who changes our perception of history by pointing to changes which 'philosophy' has brought to light, but historians now perceive to be validatable. After some decades practising the history of British political thought, we can report that while this description has become increasingly independent of political theory and philosophy, its relation with these modes of enquiry has been greatly changed and questioned, but has not disappeared.

