Introduction

Locating John Toland

Toland was desperately ill. He had recurring ‘pains in my thighs, reins and stomach’ accompanied by ‘a total loss of appetite, hourly retchings, and very high colour’d water’. His hopes that this suffering was the symptom of ‘gravel’ that would pass with the stones were dashed. Confined to his chamber for weeks, he could keep down nothing but weak broth, and was scarcely able to walk. Reduced to relying on the kindnesses of others by disastrous investments in the fashionable speculations of South Sea Company, Toland was on his uppers. Only a few years previously his pen had been at the command of government ministers and European princes: he had written for German queens, Savoyard princes, Irish peers and English earls.¹

Despite his international celebrity, John Toland eventually died a slow, painful death in lowly circumstances, passing away in a rented back room of a carpenter’s cottage in March 1722. This was less than gentle scholarly poverty. Given the radical character of his reputation, perhaps it was no coincidence that the churchyard was that of St Mary’s Putney, which had entertained the political debates of the Levellers in the 1640s. Having suffered for months from a combination of the stone, severe rheumatism and ‘black-jaundice’, the final ‘violent indisposition’ that carried him away was a fever which ‘proved mortal to him about three of the clock on Sunday morning, the 11th instant, in the 53rd Year of his Age’.² Typically for a man steeped in the writings of classical antiquity, Toland, called in one obituary ‘the Lucian of our times’, approached death with a ‘philosophical patience’, although papers left scattered in his room indicated he blamed the incompetence and greed of physicians for much of his misery.³ He was bedridden for over a month but his friends and patrons did what they could to make him comfortable. Their concern was genuine.⁴

Even while confined to his bed he continued to write. He drafted a work against the incompetence of physicians and a political pamphlet for the
Introduction

coming election. Completion of the latter work, attacking the dangers of mercenary parliaments, was interrupted only by his demise. Even on his deathbed, Toland appeared more interested in books than his own health, after all it was books and ideas that had dominated his life. Crammed into his back room, books were his most precious belongings. Stacked on chairs, teetering in piles on chests, or packed into boxes, these works, and his intimacy with their contents, were the foundation of Toland’s reputation. A mixture of recondite theology, classical learning and political tracts, the eclecticism of his library underscores the range of his interests and erudition. Even the last letters he wrote, which as well as describing in harrowing detail his sickness, also included remarks about books. He would lend Lady ‘H’ a copy of the fine romance Zayde so that she could be freed from the drudgery of the ‘longwinded and unwieldy Cleopatra’. To Molesworth, he wrote of Cicero’s de republica and a projected volume on the ‘history of the late Wars from King William’s death to Queen Anne’s peace’.

Surrounded by close intimates, even in the moment of his death, Toland was an enigma. The day before he died, one of his friends noted that ‘upon his appearing somewhat more than ordinary cheerful [I said] … I hoped he was better’. Toland responded promptly, ‘Sir, I have no hopes but in God’. Even a few moments before he expired, ‘looking earnestly at some friends that were in the room, and being asked if he wanted anything, he answered with the greatest resolution, I want nothing but death’. In another account, his last words uttered with tranquillity bidding farewell to those about him, were ‘he was going to sleep’. Newspaper obituaries in the following days sanctimoniously reported the decease as a providential punishment for a man who had systematically attempted to ‘shock the faith of Christians in the glorious person and divinity of their redeemer, and to sap and undermine the principle and foundations of the orthodox faith’. Noting that the ‘anti-Christian’ Toland refused the ministrations of the Church on his deathbed the general opinion was that Toland had received his just deserts. As Hearne put it, he was no more than an ‘impious wretch’.

Some contemporaries did, however, mourn his death. According to his friends, the clamours against his reputation had been undeservedly prompted by ‘those Upstarts who envied his Learning’ and by ‘conceited priests’ who had neither read his works nor ‘could have understood them if they had’. In ‘An elegy on the death of the famous Mr J. Toland’, published later in his posthumous works, he was celebrated as a champion of British liberties. A man who stood firm against the torrent and ‘impetuous flood, of bigotted Enthusiasts, and tricks of pedantry, and priestly politicks!’ Toland’s genius for ‘reason’ worked like the morning sun to ‘dispel Dark clouds of Ignorance, and break the spell of Rome’s Inchantments, and the lesser frauds of Churches protestant, and English Lauds’. This achievement of defending liberty and
Locating John Toland

truth, breaking both political and intellectual chains, would inspire ‘noble emulation’ in the youth of the nation. Far from being an icon of impiety, Toland was a hero of liberty, who had ‘freed our minds of superstitious pains’. Typically, for a man sensitive to his reputation, Toland wrote his own epitaph. He was no man’s follower or dependent but maintained his status as ‘an assertor of liberty, a lover of all sorts of Learning, a speaker of truth’.7

Toland today is little known outside the world of academia. Born in Ireland in 1670 he escaped his ‘popish’ background under the sponsorship of the dissenting minister Dr Williams, being educated successively in Scotland, Holland and Oxford.8 Exploiting his intimacy with figures like John Locke in Oxford in the mid-1690s, Toland burst onto the intellectual firmament with his first major publication, *Christianity not mysterious* (1696), a work which antagonised the Anglican mainstream by its assertion that all fundamental doctrine was accessible to human reason unaided by the Church. Having secured public notoriety with this work (which was both prosecuted and burnt by official means) Toland spent the later 1690s producing an influential series of political works. This labour included an important collection of republished republican writings from the 1650s, as well as specific pamphlets contributed to controversial debates concerning issues like the standing army.

Throughout the 1690s, and the early 1700s, working closely with powerful political figures like the third Earl of Shaftesbury, Robert Harley and Sir Robert Molesworth, Toland became one of the most consistent and vocal publicists for Protestant liberties and the Hanoverian succession. During the 1700s he continued this public role writing (amongst many contributions) detailed defences of the Act of Settlement and the rights of the Electress and Elector of Hanover, of the Toleration Act, as well as fierce attacks upon the ‘popery’ of the High Church party in Convocation and Parliament. Alongside this explicitly political writing, Toland was involved in the production of works of profound erudition and scholarship. Much of this material was circulated in clandestine form amongst a circle of elite figures that included Sophia of Hanover (the successor apparent to the British Crown), Prince Eugene of Savoy (leading military strategist of the Protestant cause), and English gentlemen like Anthony Collins. Ultimately this erudition, which was also published in print form, earned Toland a significant and contentious reputation in the European ‘republic of letters’.

From 1710, in the aftermath of the defeat of the Whig Party at the hands of an electorate smarting from the consequences of the Sacheverell Trial, Toland became explicitly associated with the cause of the Protestant succession against what he (and many contemporaries) saw as a resurgent Jacobite interest. To this end he published a series of increasingly virulent pamphlets exposing the High Church as crypto-popish and Tory politicians as pro-Stuart. Breaking completely with his former patron Robert Harley, whom he regarded as a
traitor to the cause of liberty, Toland became a leading propagandist for Sophia and George, commending their virtues and Protestant legitimacy. After the accession of George I in 1714, Toland reaped the benefits of his lifelong association with commonwealth politicians like Robert Molesworth. Between 1717 and 1720, at the height of his literary and scholarly powers, he produced a series of popular pamphlets and learned studies that acted as a platform for the reforms of the radical ministry of Stanhope and Sunderland.

Toland combined this public writing with a clandestine circulation of ideas amongst a more elite community. While his private commitments were highly heterodox, his public identity was devoted to the defence of what he called ‘Protestant Liberties’. Dedicated to reforming the Established Church by removing its residual popery, and keen to institute a radical form of civil toleration, Toland hoped to achieve profound political change through the agency of his writings. Ultimately these ambitions were defeated by the political triumph of Walpole in 1720. Walpole’s judgement that the Church of England was a powerful ally of the Whig establishment against the threat of Toryism, meant that the anticlerical project which was fundamental to Toland’s (and the commonwealth party’s) objectives was defeated. The political fallout from the disaster of the South Sea Bubble implicated many of those committed to the radical reforms of the earlier ministry. By 1722, Toland was a marginal figure, alienated from serious political circles, living in poverty in Putney, and suffering from a terminal illness.

This book has broader ambitions than a straightforward intellectual biography of Toland. By locating Toland’s writings within a wider intellectual, social and political culture, the ambition is to contribute to an understanding of the nature of political debate in the period of his life. Toland moved in a, at times, bewildering set of different circles and milieux; as previous historians have noted with a touch of understandable exasperation, his ‘identity’ is elusive. This mercurial ubiquity, while frustrating to those who might wish to capture Toland’s essence, makes him a fertile resource for exploring the dimensions of early eighteenth-century intellectual culture. Toland’s ambiguity was a reflection of the compound structure of political and religious culture after the Glorious Revolution.

Historians have debated for many years whether 1689 was a watershed in the creation of the modern world, or merely another ‘restoration’ of ancien régime constitutions in Church and State. Whether insisting that British culture stood on the brink of modernity, or that the nation was not so much transformed as secured, it is clear that one of the major issues of public and private life was the status and role of religion in political culture. Far from ending debates about the political power of the Church, or the role of Christianity in society, the consequences of ecclesiological reform in 1689 were a
blend of innovation and tradition. In the same breath as allowing a diversity of Protestant worship, the statutory reforms underscored the singular jurisdictional authority of the Church of England. By default these debates about the nature of religion were intimately bound up with questions about the legitimate character of political authority. Despite the catastrophe of the fall of James II it was still a broad cultural assumption that monarchy was authorised from divine sources. Continuing debates about whether the divine origins of monarchical authority were shaped more by dynastic lineage or Protestant identity dominated the political landscape between 1689 and the 1720s.

The period between the Revolution of 1688–89 and the ascendancy of Walpole in the early 1720s was dominated by the ‘rage of party’. Whether examining the conceptual dimensions of Whig and Tory ideologies, the development of the mechanics of ‘party’ politics at Westminster and in the localities, or the rise of the dominance of a propertied and landed ‘old corruption’, the centrality of religious controversy to politics is indisputable. It is clear that the development of rival party ideologies, and the consequent fractured and divided society, was driven by the ‘troubles’ that had dominated the crises of authority in the seventeenth century. Recent writing has underscored how the day-to-day battles of both national and local politics were fought out over a series of persisting issues. The security of the Protestant succession, the claims of tender conscience, the rights of the Christian Church, the privileges of Parliament, the corruption of the political administration were amongst the core issues of debate. Whether defending ‘revolution principles’ or the sacred memory of the martyred Charles I, politicians and pamphleteers exploited a deep reservoir of ideas, prejudices and convictions. In an age of repeatedly contested elections, and an explosion of print culture, these issues were debated furiously and repeatedly in public. Pamphlets, addresses and petitions spewed from the presses and the localities. Although it is difficult to be precise about the impact of this printed discourse, it is clear that the successive swings in electoral fortunes from the 1690s and 1700s were shaped by ideological convictions. As the political crises surrounding the issue of occasional conformity in the early 1700s, and the aftermath of the Sacheverell trial in 1710, illustrate, both parliamentary politics and the conduct of the nation ‘out of doors’ was volatile and potentially insurrectionary. Men like Toland, feeding this public controversy, were playing with fire but for high stakes.

There is a parallel historiographical account of the same period. Eschewing the practical world of parliamentary and civic politics, a broader history of ideas has identified the period as initiating an ‘age of reason’. In this view the period is characterised by a general decay of religious sensibility. So for example the decline in magic and witchcraft, the fracturing of doctrinal orthodoxy and the critical attack upon the integrity of Revelation have been
Introduction

regarded as evidence of a general cultural crisis. The intellectual manifestations of this disenchantment of the world have been described with a variety of labels – deism, atheism, and a more diffuse heterodoxy. This loose cultural combination of ‘enlightenment’ and ‘secularisation’ produced what John Locke called the ‘reasonableness of Christianity’. This forward-looking account has been comprehensively refuted by historians of the eighteenth-century Church of England. From a variety of perspectives it has been shown how clerical institutions (pastoral, political and intellectual) were robust and adaptable in the period. Far from withering away into the foothills of the ‘Enlightenment’, theological culture and authority retained a persistent social power into the nineteenth century. While reinforcing the point of how deeply entrenched theological perspectives on the world were in the early eighteenth century, this work will also explore how it was possible to unpick some of the power of these discourses and institutions. To acknowledge the persistence of theological imperatives is not the same as claiming it was either unchangeable or uncontested. One of the central planks of Toland’s cultural project was to censure the political status of clergyman and the ‘Church’ as an independent institution. This was, by necessity, an assault on Christian ideas as much as on ecclesiastical men and tradition. For Toland corrupt ideas laid the foundations for a perverted civil polity.

Examining the life and works of John Toland will enable a reconsideration of the nature of English politics and society in the Augustan age. The early eighteenth century was an age when literary culture dominated the world of politics in the form of an explosion of printed materials ranging from the newsletter, the polemical pamphlet, the folio edition and the broadsheet. Public discourse in the period was made of a variety of competing, contested converging languages: popery and priestcraft, liberty and tyranny, virtue and corruption, politeness and barbarity, monarchy and commonwealth, interest and honour. Toland contributed to most, if not all of these forms. Toland’s writings throw deep shafts of light not only into these discursive complexities but also into the under-explored dimensions of elite political culture. Toland acts then as a prism that refracts light into a number of diverse spaces: high politics, clandestine literature and the European republic of letters.

John Toland was first and foremost a politician. His ambition was to replace the rule of tyranny with liberty. In order to achieve this objective he intended to alter the culture he lived in by changing the way people thought and behaved: to this end he wrote, talked and published a number of different sorts of intellectual discourse. Ranging from translations of obscure Italian treatises on coins to innovative research upon questions of biblical canonicity, all his works contributed in different ways to this single-minded project of a war against what he, and many of his contemporaries, called ‘priestcraft’.
Exploring what Toland thought he was doing, how contemporaries understood his objectives, and how effective he was in his conduct will be the simple objective of this book.

During the course of his life John Toland was beaten up in the street, prosecuted in civil and ecclesiastical courts, and snubbed by prime ministers. The same man, and at the same times, was entertained by dukes, earls and lords, collaborated with leading ministers and flirted with the potential successor to the British throne. Toland moved in a number of different social, political and intellectual spaces. He was certainly an habitué of the coffee-houses of London, Oxford and Edinburgh. Sometimes he was indiscreet in his conduct, trashing kings and scripture in an outrageous manner. At other times he was more circumspect, gathering opinions, listening, drawing out the convictions of his company. Toland was at home too in the spaces of learning; in the libraries and archives of the great European universities like Leiden, Oxford and Edinburgh, as well as the more intimate collections of private figures like Benjamin Furly, Eugene of Savoy and Anthony Collins. Just as his conduct in the coffee-houses brought him into contact with a variety of communities, so his intimacy with books enabled his participation in a different social world – if the coffee-house can be thought of as a public and political place, perhaps feeding the pulse of public opinion, then the libraries of the great and the good not only provided a series of powerful intellectual and cultural resources, but also an avenue of intimacy into the elite circles of political power.17

Public association with Toland after 1696 – as a consequence of both the dreadful reputation of his religious writings and his equally subversive editorial work upon the republican canon – became a dangerous thing. As will be discussed below, one man – John Locke – certainly thought better of his friendship and made it apparent he wanted no connection with him. Powerful political figures like Robert Harley, although keen to exploit Toland’s polemical abilities, only made contact under cover of darkness or the back doors of anonymous meeting places. It is so much more significant then (and perhaps a surprise too) to find Toland associating with powerful people like Sophia, Electress of Hanover, her philosophically inclined daughter Sophia Charlotte, Queen of Prussia, and Prince Eugene of Savoy. Although diplomatic advisors and court politicians like Leibniz counselled discretion in all public dealings with Toland, nevertheless, both women encouraged communication and intimacy with him. As his literary dedications and private correspondence suggests, Toland was comfortable with, and well regarded by, leading members of the Whig aristocracy. He was, it seems, as at ease in close collaboration with men like Shaftesbury, as he was in the more public context of the aristocratic drawing room. While there is little doubt that Toland was master of the political brief or philosophical disputation, it is also important to indicate that...
Introduction

he dabbled in the more frivolous activities of dancing, romancing and play-acting. The fragments of Toland’s romantic poetry do not establish with any certainty the merits of his abilities; sadly the plays he wrote for the polite female company he associated with in the early 1720s do not survive. The point to reinforce is, however, simple. Toland was ubiquitous, he was everywhere important, at the elbow of the great and good, in the coffee-house, in the precincts of parliaments and courts. He communicated simultaneously with a variety of audiences, a bespoke powerful elite and a semi-anonymous public, tuning his ideas and writings to the demands of these communities.

If it is difficult to penetrate the membrane of Toland’s personal identity, it is easier to establish his contributions to, and criticisms of, the broader culture from the evidence of his books and other writings. Drawing together the remnants of scribal and printed materials it is possible to reconstruct an archive of Toland’s various transactions with a variety of political, economic, social and intellectual communities. These papers, whether letters to nobles, diplomats and princes, or more intimate communications with patrons, potential lovers and friends, tell us something about Toland the man and his associates as well as describing some of the structures of sociability in the period. Other fragments in this archive – the contracts with printers, the draft works, book-lists and working notes – allow us to enter cautiously (perhaps uninvited) deeper into the sanctum of Toland’s working life.

In the absence of a diary or journal, reconstructing Toland’s social life has to be done from the miscellany of material preserved in his correspondence and the reports of others in his company. We get glimpses of him, indiscreet in his attacks on monarchy and Church in coffee-houses in Edinburgh and London. Others reported him upsetting noble compatriots with his bad manners in Holland (for which he was given a good beating). Being hissed out of lecture rooms in Leiden University, or promising to write Sophia Charlotte, Queen of Prussia, a novel that never materialised. Hounded out of Dublin unable to pay either for food or fresh linen and wigs, or playing music and acting out parlour-room games with well-off women. A frequent house-guest of men like Anthony Collins and Molesworth, Toland was easeful in the gentlemanly environment of the country house. Indeed he idealised the benefits of such a rural retreat from the bustling commerce and conflict of the city in classical terms as places of reflection and philosophical contemplation. A very well-travelled man, one of the consistent themes of his itinerant life was the presence of books and libraries. Whether examining the heterodox holdings of Benjamin Furly’s library in Rotterdam, or the no less irreligious collections of Prince Eugene or Baron d’Hohendorf in Vienna, or Collins’s remarkable collection in Great Baddow, or more respectable locations such as the Bodleian in Oxford, or the University Library at Glasgow, Toland, it could be argued, measured his life in books and manuscripts. Toland was not only a
Locating John Toland

politician, but a scholar too. His perceived learning was one of his distinctive qualities and certainly a factor in making his public status.

The Toland that haunts the following chapters is, I think, a very different figure from the man most historians (if they have heard of him at all) may have encountered. Although Edmund Burke, writing in the 1790s, insisted that no one read him any more (and indeed no one ought to), Toland’s afterlife and reputation was still vigorous into the nineteenth century. The clearest testimony to the significance of Toland’s intellectual and political contribution to eighteenth-century history is the monumental labour of Giancarlo Carabelli’s bibliography *Tolandiana* which is the starting point not only for the contextual study of Toland’s ideas, but also for the development of the historiographical reception of his work. Since the 1720s Toland has been the persistent subject of a widespread European historical account. German, French, but especially Italian scholars have devoted considerable efforts to investigating the significance of Toland’s contribution. In the twentieth century this story continued with the most serious examinations of his thought being undertaken by distinguished historians like the Frenchman Paul Hazard and the Italian Franco Venturi. In Anglophone writing, perhaps suffering from Burke’s distaste, and the more hostile dismissal of Leslie Stephen, who regarded Toland as both an inconsequential thinker and a thoroughly reprehensible character, no major study of Toland was made until the 1970s and 1980s. The work, first of Margaret Jacob and then of Blair Worden, Robert Sullivan and Stephen Daniel, brought Toland to the attention of a more mainstream historiography.

Yet Toland came to the mainstream as a maverick, a man on the radical margins, involved in clandestine counter-cultural sodalities, disseminating an esoteric materialism derived from the dark occultism of Renaissance texts composed by men like Giordano Bruno. Privileging the significance of Toland’s natural philosophy, and his intimacy with the libertin circle of men like Rousset de Missy and Prosper Marchand, the writings of Margaret Jacob described a radical democratic tradition that drew its sap from the commonwealth traditions of the 1650s, and ultimately saw fruition in revolutions of the later eighteenth century. Toland was thus an important transmitter of a radical secular and materialist ideology to the revolutionary traditions embodied in the work of men like Baron de Holbach. Self-consciously distinct from the respectable liberal tradition of political ideology represented by the Lockean defence of the Glorious Revolution of 1689, Toland and his fellow-travellers of the ‘Radical Enlightenment’ become significant by their difference and uniqueness. In a mirror image of the celebratory interpretation advanced by Jacob, the historical understanding of the durability of traditional theological structures of institutional and ideological authority described by Jonathan Clark has also underscored the ‘radical’ (and by default unsuccessful) qualities of Toland’s contribution. In contrast to Jacob’s emphasis upon the importance
of natural philosophy, and especially pantheistic materialism, to Toland’s project, Clark is insistent that the characteristic quality of the polemic was a variety of religious heterodoxy. Far from ushering a new age of secular modernity, Toland and his ilk were a submerged and defeated interest, always outweighed (in the account of Brian Young) and out-thought by the overwhelming orthodoxy of traditional Christian theology.  

If Jacob’s Toland turned God into matter, Clark’s version advanced a picture of a rather unadventurous heretic. In contrast to these works of bold brush strokes, painting Toland either into the pantheon of Enlightenment or into the *chiaroscuro* of dissenting tradition, the work of Worden and Sullivan devoted more detail to locating the man and his thought into the context of his own times. In his fine edition of Toland’s version of Edmund Ludlow’s *Voyce from the watchtower*, Worden, concentrating upon Toland’s relationship with the Commonwealthsmen of the 1690s, established the literary credentials of his subject. Meshing the heterodox account of Toland’s religious convictions with his remodelling of the republican heritage of the 1650s, Worden argues that Toland performed an important role in adapting the languages of a political ideology drenched in biblical vocabulary to the exigencies of a more civil context. Toland’s achievements were those of the pen rather than the intellect, employing high literary skill to manufacture ideological legitimation of the eighteenth-century constitution. If Worden’s focus dealt with political languages, then Sullivan applied considerable energy to locating Toland’s religious identity within the broad carapace of reformed Protestantism. Accepting Toland’s self-presentation as a sincere and convinced Christian, the picture that emerges in Sullivan’s account is of a man concerned to reform religion to its primitive verities. Absorbing these arguments, Sullivan’s Toland is conceived as blending civil and religious ambitions into a latitudinarian conception of organised religion that emphasised the moral dimensions of theology at the expense of the sacramental. Toland was then on the radical fringes of orthodoxy but still within the fold. There are then, it seems, almost as many Tolands as there are books about Toland.

It would be wrong and arrogant to suggest that this present work is any more than a development of the historiography discussed above. Although this author has a distinct view of each of the contributions so crudely epitomised here, each of them brings important and critical elements to this portrait of Toland. There are many versions of his life – Toland the radical, the religious thinker, the paid writer, the marginal and clandestine figure, the editor of texts. Toland was all of these. While one account pays attention to Toland’s skills as an author, another underlines the philosophical or theological innovation of his ideas. For all these facets and accomplishments Toland still remains peripheral to the arterial routes of mainstream eighteenth-century history. This marginalisation of Toland’s importance is a conse-
Locating John Toland

quence not simply of his historical role, but of the broader attitude to the practice of the history of ideas in the period.

Toland’s work is a useful starting point for engaging with the complex relationship between cultural diffusion and political agency, between the articulation of ideas and political action. So for example, one of the reasons for discussing with precision Toland’s transactions with Harley and other politicians is to reinforce the argument that his writings played a significant role in the dynamics of early eighteenth-century political culture. Toland was part of the mainstream. This is not to suggest that he determined the nature of national politics, but that he was a participant in the community of the powerful elite that governed and managed that process. Although Toland was a man of relatively low social status, his education, learning and personal charisma advanced him to places of social power all over Europe. Whether in Berlin, Vienna, Amsterdam, Dublin or London, Toland managed to intrude himself into courts, salons, conversations and polite company. The interplay between his reputation for learning, the broader republic of letters that conferred status and credit on this learning, and the diverse political communities that employed and used this credit, meant that Toland acted as a mediator and intermediary between, and across, a number of social, geographical and political spaces. One moment he might be flirting with Sophia Charlotte in Berlin, while another he can be seen defending his reputation from frontal assault by Convocation. In another context he can be observed in clandestine communication with Eugene of Savoy, while writing diplomatic reports for Harley.

In all of these moments Toland was communicating with a number of audiences. When he debated the nature of the canon with continental clergymen in front of German princesses he was clearly engaged in a distinct form of intellectual activity than when he published works such as Christianity not mysterious. Toland was both a source and a conduit of ideas, opinions, beliefs and ideologies. As he put it, again, he could both ‘draw’ and ‘diffuse’ information. Simply because Toland moved in these diverse and powerful circles, he is an important subject to examine. Although it is not possible to recover the full dimension of his interaction with many of these elite people (in particular the recapture of his oral communication is, with some singular exceptions, elusive), we do have a large textual archive to examine as a starting point for exploring the purpose of his life. Toland’s writings are the textual sediments of his attempts to communicate with a number of audiences. These texts are not only carriers of ideas but are also testimonies of his attempts to change established cultural convictions by intellectual persuasion. To understand the purpose of these texts we need to examine not simply their intellectual content, but also the material form and concomitant relationship with a readership or interpretative community. Whether a text was composed
Introduction

in French, Latin or English, distributed in scribal, printed or oral format, reprinted, published or simply proposed, shaped the function of the act of intellectual meaning. Toland’s lifetime project was an engagement with the politics of cultural authority: his ambition was to challenge, overturn and reconstruct what he regarded as a corrupt rule of priestcraft. The major weapons in this engagement were ideas. As Toland was very well aware ideas became powerful when communicated effectively.

Toland, however, wrote in an age of censorship. Although the strict legal mechanisms for policing print material had lapsed in 1695, in a broader and more culturally diffuse sense, censorship was still an overwhelming and determining force in the realm of public communication. As the example of *Christianity not mysterious* indicates, there were still institutional means, civil and spiritual, for enacting legal prosecution of texts, authors and printers. Even beyond these acts of physical repression there was a form of powerful discursive restriction: the hegemonic authority of Christian culture meant that there was a defined structure for the production of orthodox discourse and knowledge. Conformity to that set of speech-codes was the process whereby legitimate (and therefore potentially successful) discourses became authorised. Strategies for the subversion of this cultural hegemony had to engage with the linguistic commonplaces in order to gain a foothold in the debate. Cultural criticism was necessarily dialogic: in order to compromise authority, the language that defined the legitimacy of that authority had to be appropriated to the act of censure. Transgressive projects were then both conceived and articulated within the idiom of orthodoxy: performing cultural criticism was to make a claim to power.

When Toland circulated his ideas (in scribal, printed or oral form) he was distributing information through social space: the point of this communication was political. The power of Toland’s discourses was made, not purely by the intellectual coherence or elegance of their arguments, but in the negotiation between the reader’s mind and the residual authority of contextual languages. In Toland’s case it is important to think about how, and to whom, he was talking, rather than simply about what he was saying. It is almost certainly true that Toland very rarely meant what he actually said: this was not simply because he subscribed to a complex epistemological understanding of esoteric and exoteric truth (which he indeed did), but because the work of making meaning was done in the reception rather than the utterance of speech-acts. This relationship between textual utterance, reader reception and the generation of meaning and belief, was rendered even more complex by the bibliocentric nature of Christian theology in the period. In a political culture defined by Protestant orthodoxy, the institutions of Church and State were the most powerful forgers of authority when supported by the ‘truth’ of revelation. The pervasive authority of Scripture, and its availability to those with com-
petent literacy, meant that there was a powerful textual resource for the legitimation of ideas and beliefs. The authority of different religious polemics was built upon an ability to capture the meaning of Scripture. Scriptural interpretation was a ‘public’ means for making true ideas, and a source by which many readers could authenticate or deconstruct the value of the works they examined. Little wonder then that Toland devoted considerable energies to developing an erudition in matters of biblical criticism and textual scholarship, because these would be powerful instruments for establishing the authority of his own writing.

The cultural system of early modern England was based upon the connection between Christian knowledge and institutions that made that knowledge. Ideas were then intimately related to the distribution of social authority and power. This nexus between knowledge and institutional power was the one at which Toland worried. He hoped to reform corrupt Christian society by compromising the commonplace codes and vocabularies of orthodox language. The specifically Christian dimensions of early modern culture underscored the powerful relationship between ideas and institutions: the power of the monarchy and church was premised upon a true understanding of religion. Episcopacy as a political institution was right, because it conformed to the ‘true’ idea of the primitive Church. Obedience to the monarch was right because it was authorised by the divine injunctions of Christian belief, and the repeated vocal and print reiteration of the Church. The clergyman was right because he spoke in the divinely ordained language of Scripture. Toland’s attack upon the cultural components of this system of power (the textual integrity of Scripture, the *de jure divino* status of clergymen, the doctrinal accounts of the soul) was ultimately a political act, although articulated in the language of theology, learning and history. This attack upon the ideological and institutional basis of clerical authority took a cultural form but had a political objective. Certainly, as the reception of his works indicates, contemporaries (whether hostile or supportive) acknowledged the power and danger of his labours. In undertaking this war of ideas against a prevailing cultural system that made monarchs and priests divine, Toland developed a series of cultural tools and practices that could replace the compromised system.

These acts of discrediting the conventional ‘knowledges’ of Christian culture allow a route into the debate about the relationship between ideas and historical change raised in the pertinent phrase of Roger Chartier, ‘Do books make revolutions?’ Toland, as will be discussed below, engaged in a series of challenges to a number of authorities (Biblical, sacerdotal, political). The complex intellectual components of authority provided the cultural frameworks for the generation of public truth, or at least providing the grounds for making the institutions, texts and convictions of the status quo ‘believable’. ‘Truth’ was made by men and institutions. It was forged by routine proce-
Introduction

dures of credibility, textual hermeneutics and public communication. Rupturing, capturing and transforming the logic of such cultural procedures was a discursive manoeuvre that had profound and explicit social and political consequences. As will be examined at length, Toland conducted a sustained and public assault upon the clerical cultural system for making authority. By embroiling his priestly opponents in public debate he dislodged the mortar that bound the stones of Christian order.

Toland’s strategy for cultural subversion was a subtle and sophisticated matter. Unlike contemporary ‘heretics’ like Arthur Bury or William Whiston who articulated their objections as a full-frontal rebuttal of orthodox conceptions of religious truth, and were consequently met with the powerful forces of persecution and destruction, Toland adopted a more dialogic method, adapting, expanding and appropriating the commonplace routines of cultural authority to his own purposes. Exploiting the growing cultural authority of the way of print and especially the ambiguity of reader reception and response, Toland consistently presented himself as a man of learning and theological erudition. Rather than trash the claims of Scripture, the Church Fathers and ecclesiastical tradition, Toland became expert in the knowledge of these discourses. By learning the trade he was able to engage more effectively in deconstructive ambitions, teasing readers and audiences with a variety of ruses and ambiguities. Although, as the example of the execution of Thomas Aikenhead establishes, the consequences of heterodoxy could be fatal, it is clear that the orthodox state was only capable of exercising rudimentary control over the circulation of ideas in the printed and spoken form. Toland’s adoption of the authorial personae of ‘sincere’ Christian, or devout ‘scholar’, was a simple but effective way of bypassing censorship, if not of avoiding public censure and hostile rebuttal.

This book then will attempt to probe the relationship between discursive performance and political action. Despite doubt about whether the world of ideas can ever affect anything beyond the text itself, it will be a premise here that ideas were powerful instruments in the transactions of cultural politics in the period. Whether by manipulation of conventional languages, thereby altering the perceptions, values, attitudes and understandings of audiences and readers, Toland’s writings and communications affected the durability of some Christian configurations of power and authority. By effective capture of the languages of orthodox discourses (in politics and theology) he developed a repertoire of discursive ruses that deconstructed commonplaces, exposed contradictions, and appropriated the affective power of key vocabularies to his own purposes. As will be established in detail below, because Toland disseminated his ideas in a variety of forms to a variety of audiences, both elite and popular, it is possible to relate the articulation of his ideas to precise social and political communities. In the broadest possible sense then this work takes its...
lead from the speech act arguments advanced by the Cambridge School. Central to this position is the assertion that there is a relationship between saying and doing: by recovering the historical context and performance of a text it is possible to retrieve the historical meaning of a set of discourses beyond the purely lexical content of the writing. In an age when issues of belief and conviction were fundamental to questions of religious identity, the simple existence of Toland’s contributions made an impact.

The example of Toland and his social relationships provides ample material for making a model of cultural and intellectual change. Writing, reading and conversations were forms both of intellectual interaction and sociability. Toland’s ideas did not float free-form in the ether of the public sphere, but were read and discussed in coffee-houses, aristocratic salons, scholars’ libraries, political meetings and royal courts. These places and moments of communication did have an effect: perhaps the most obvious evidence of his influence on the public culture of his time can be seen in the thousands of pages written against his arguments. These hostile works were not simply counter-arguments, but material evidence of the way his books were read. Robert Darnton has repeatedly made enquiry into the question of how ideas penetrated into society in the eighteenth century. His account of the relationship between forbidden books and intellectual change has made a bridge between what has been identified as ‘diffusion studies’ and ‘discourse studies’. Arguing for an understanding of the history of ideas that involves not simply the study of conceptual propositions but also the material and social dimensions of the production of books rather than texts, he has insisted that the matter of ‘how the diffusion of books affects public opinion and how public opinion inflects political action’ remains largely unresolved. The communicative network made by the serial transactions of writing, selling, buying and reading a book is the place to start thinking about the dynamics of change.25

Darnton’s work has focused in detail upon the functional role of ‘forbidden’ books in eighteenth-century French society: in such subversive works the transformative intentions were explicit. The focus on the heterodox, the marginal and the polemic writings, while admirable and important, has tended to obscure the same processes in the reading and production of ‘orthodox’ discourses. Recovering the cultural procedure that authorised and made convincing the commonplace Christian and monarchical discourses is as critical as exploring the radical and controversial. The relationship between the two sorts of texts (and the two sorts of readers) is central to understanding the dialogic process of cultural change. How readers might accept, reject, misunderstand, and censor what they examined is key to thinking about how the power of ideas worked. In the case of Toland, his literary skill at exploiting the different authorities of printed and scribal formats of writing, as well as his successful mimicking of the literary styles of orthodox discourses, meant...
that the relationship between reading and conviction was dynamic rather than passive. Although the trend of recent historical approaches to the book has stressed the important role reader-reception played in making meaning from textual sources, it is also important to note that some writers were facile in exploiting the diversity of some of the predictable responses particular audiences might have to certain sorts of book. Toland’s self-presentation as a man of erudition and biblical learning in works like *Amyntor* and *Nazarenus* was calculated to make a text suitable for, or conformable to, the expectations of an identifiable clerical readership. Readers of texts were neither passive sponges, nor were books indeterminate collections of meanings awaiting definition by readers. Making meaning was a social activity that involved a negotiation with the specific text, the full range of cultural and discursive conventions about both the content and the form of the work, as well as social and communal dimensions of where the book was bought, read and discussed. The book then, was both a material and cultural artefact, as well as a collection of literary codes: meaning was made in specific sites and by specific ways of reading. The same work might very well mean different things to different people at the same time: the function of the work was thus determined by a complex and changing mixture of the material, the cultural and the social.

Without doubt, books, manuscripts and writings of a more ephemeral quality were central in the making of belief in the period. These texts were closely related to the social authority of their authors and the community that produced them. The model of biblical interpretation is the most evident example of the relationship between the truth of a text and the authority of those that explained the text. How readers formed these beliefs was a complex psychological and epistemological process: knowledge was made credible by a cultural technology that combined the social and political power of institutions like the Church, with literary conventions that reinforced the social credit of the authors as well as the ‘truth’ of the texts. What Toland achieved was the intrusion of his dissident and disaffected discourses into this cultural procedure. We know he convinced some people (powerful ones like Sophia, Molesworth, Shaftesbury and Harley) at the same time as alienating others (in particular those clerical men who wrote repeatedly against his works and their reputation). While it is clear that Toland’s writings did not prompt a revolution, a close examination of the relationships between his ideas and the political activities of the cadre of radical Whigs in the period indicates an intimacy between his anticlerical discourse and attacks upon the *de jure divino* constitution of the status quo.

This is a book about how books were used to fight a war of ideas against political and cultural corruption. It is also about the readers and audiences for those books. It sets out to examine how the ideas in the books Toland wrote...
Locating John Toland

became beliefs and convictions. Not only is it a study of the construction and meaning of a series of political and religious discourses, it is an examination of the cultural dimensions of power in the period. Ultimately it is a case study of the relationship between words and deeds. Its subject, a coiner of neologisms, articulator of impieties, and forger of scholarship, lived in a world of ideas. By invoking the different intellectual contexts, the range of institutional relationships, and Toland’s membership of a number of communal networks, the intention is to attempt to examine not only the intimacies between the world of ideas and the world of power, but also to explore the nature of discursive power in the period: in other words, how and why ideas made convictions. This book is not a biography. Neither is it a narrow study of the philosophical or political dimensions of his writings and ideas. It is an examination of how Toland attempted to neutralise the authority of established Christian values and to challenge the hegemony of the Church. By necessity then it is also a story about the limits of that process of cultural transformation. The book then will approach the history of ideas not simply in a philosophical way: that is, it is not only concerned with the matter of intellectual coherence or conceptual sophistication, but with the ‘use’ made of such ideas. It will then be explicitly concerned with the nature of the ‘circulation’ of ideas, as much as their content. Thinking about the textual productions of Toland and his contemporaries as acts of communication rather than purely as repositories of intellectual propositions allows a consideration of not only the ideas themselves, but also the different media of transmission, the various social spaces involved in the reception of such ideas, and the implicit purposes of their production. As will be suggested, Toland acted as a cultural broker making connections between different social networks, transforming the function of key cultural resources by skilful appropriation and ‘publishing’ them in a variety of public forms.

The book is built around three connected parts – the first part will place Toland in his social and intellectual milieu; the second will explore his engagement with what might be called public writing; while the third part will explore his involvement in a pan-European scribal community focused around the exchange and circulation of clandestine literature. The common theme of the chapters will be how Toland used his facility with the written word and a variety of literary forms to unpick the commonplace values of orthodoxy. This was as much a political as intellectual project. Toland’s achievement was to exploit his erudition and literary skills as a means for establishing an intimacy with a number of very powerful elite figures. This meant he was communicating corrosive ideas to an influential audience who as the concluding chapters suggest had direction of national government in the years immediately after the accession of George I. A central theme of the book will be then that the war of ideas in which Toland campaigned was not
an intellectual side-show, but intimately related to the practical tasks and problems of contemporary politics. The fact that the after-life of Toland’s textual production projected him onto a canvas of ‘Enlightenment’ thought, a stepping-stone on the incremental progress of public reason to ‘modernity’, is another story that has often obscured his significance in the day-to-day turbulence of early eighteenth-century politics.

The first part of the book then will deal with what we might call the material and social infrastructure for Toland’s ‘life of the mind’. To many readers, Toland is encountered as a maverick figure on the margins of the mainstream, a hack writer constantly short of money, desperate for any income and social purchase to advance his cause. As the chapters will argue, Toland, on the contrary, was intimate with a powerful elite throughout his career – importantly this intimacy brought access to the most crucial resource (at least in Toland’s view) for his project – libraries and books. Toland did most of his dangerous work in ‘the library’. Establishing which libraries, and perhaps more significantly, whose libraries, Toland had access to will lay the foundations for exploring the ‘content’ of the works he composed and circulated. Importantly, these chapters will reinforce Toland’s role as a connector between different social networks in England and on the continent – he was one of the links between men in the radical republic of letters such as Benjamin Furly, Anthony Collins, the third earl of Shaftesbury, Robert Harley and Viscount Molesworth. In this sense if the traffic in books made revolutions, their exchange also made communities of revolutionaries. In essence Toland engaged in a series of intellectual and social transactions that turned ‘knowledge’ into politics.

The second part of the book will explore the dimensions of Toland’s political arguments. Toland was an effective and controversial author from the days of the mid-1690s when his first work *Christianity not mysterious* (1696) shattered the complacent ‘reasonableness’ of mainstream Anglican theology, to the period after 1714 when Toland wrote as a mouthpiece of the radical Whig ministry led by Stanhope and Sunderland. Whether composing pamphlets defending specific ministerial objectives, or compiling and editing more detached accounts of political philosophy, Toland pursued a common core of political and religious objectives identified in the defence of Protestant liberties and the Hanoverian succession. Central to Toland’s public writings was the insistence that ‘liberty’ in matters of religion was an essential foundation for ‘freedom’ in politics. Fundamental to his thinking was a powerful redefinition of classical republican ideas as a means for establishing the government of reason, rather than as simply an anti-monarchical discourse. Elemental to these political writings was a practical agenda of legislating against the primary agencies of irrational corruption identified most readily in the ‘popery’ of the Church.
If the theme of the second part of the book is to explore how Toland used printed work to communicate with a public audience in an attempt to convince them of the best strategy for compromising the tyranny of clerical politics, the final part examines the arguments he advanced in more intimate circumstances. By scrutinising the ideas advanced in the diverse scribal works he circulated it is possible to see how he set about making conviction in the salon. Here, rather than communicating with a political public, Toland was intent upon persuading politicians, ministers and princes. As will be shown, there was a profound connection between the public writings, and these rather more privileged and exclusive forms of work.

NOTES

1 Collections 2 pp. 484–495 reproduces the correspondence that covers the final weeks of Toland’s life: see p. 491 for his own description of his pain.

2 Anon The life of Mr. John Toland (1722) p. 90.

3 Collections 2 p. 487.

4 Collections 2 p. 484.

5 Collections 2 pp. 487–489.

6 The life of Mr. John Toland p. 91; Collections 1 p. lxxviii; See Tolandiana pp. 243–245; T. Hearne Remarks and collections (Oxford, 1886) volume 7, p. 343.

7 The life of Mr. John Toland p. 92; Collections 1 pp. xiii–xiv. See Collections 1 pp. lxxviii–lxxix, for the Latin text, and BL Add Mss 4295 fos. 76–77 for a contemporary translation, cited here.


10 For the most recent statement, see D. Hayton The House of Commons, 1690–1715: introductory survey volume 1 (Cambridge, 2002).


12 For a useful overview, see B. Worden ‘The question of secularisation’ in Houston and Pincus (eds) A nation transformed pp. 20–40.


14 See J. G. A. Pocock ‘Religious freedom and the desacralisation of politics: from the English civil wars to the Virginia Statute’ in Merrill D. Petersen and Robert C. Vaughan
Introduction


20 J. C. D. Clark *English Society 1660–1832*: Religion, ideology and politics during the ancien régime (Cambridge, 2000); Young *Religion and Enlightenment in eighteenth century England*.

21 This argument has been developed further in B. Worden *Roundhead reputations: the English civil war and the passions of posterity* (2001) and ‘Whig history and puritan politics: the Memoirs of Edmund Ludlow revisited’ *Historical Research* 75 (2002) pp. 209–237.

22 See J. A. I. Champion ‘“To govern is to make subjects believe”: anticlericalism, politics and power c. 1680–1717’ and Champion ‘“Religion’s safe, with priestcraft is the war”’.


Locating John Toland


26 See M. de Certeau *The capture of speech and other political writings* (Minnesota, 1997).