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Cambridge beyond Cambridge: political thought and history

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This paper is intended to distinguish between two modes of thinking in and about politics. It is written in part autobiographically, because I have taken part in the recent recognition of this distinction, and do not know how to explicate it without recalling my own experience. In the latter part of the paper I shall try to elaborate it at a higher level of theory.

There is widely practised, for the most part among anglophone scholars, a method of studying political thought, theory and philosophy, as a succession of speech acts performed in linguistic and historical contexts. This description, while open to further elaboration and criticism, is offered as sufficient for the purpose of opening this paper. The method is often—though perhaps more often beyond Cambridge than within it—denominated "the Cambridge method" and those who practise it as "the Cambridge school"; monographs have been written and conferences held about its supposed character under that name. It was indeed—supposing as I do that "it" exists—formulated here at various times. It has been associated with various names, and mine has been one of them; but it is relevant to what I have to say that though I witnessed the shaping of this method—if "method" is the right word—in Cambridge at a time now remote, I have practised it mainly elsewhere and in other anglophone academies, finding in Cambridge a continuing city but not an abiding stay. This experience has for me been central to the history of the distinction I aim to speak about; whether it helps to explain its structure remains to be seen.

I first came to Cambridge nearly sixty years ago (October 1948) as a research student supervised by Herbert Butterfield. Of his writings—believe it or not—that which then mattered most to me was *The Englishman and His History*.[1] He pointed me towards the work of Robert Brady, Master of Caius from 1660 to 1700, and I had

[1] Cambridge, 1944. See *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law* (hereafter ACFL), ed. of 1987, pp. vii-ix.

begun reading and research on him and his adversaries and associates when I became aware of the edition of *Patriarcha and Other Works by Sir Robert Filmer* which Peter Laslett published in 1949.[2] To summarise a story probably familiar to us all, which I have already recounted more than once, Laslett pointed out that *Patriarcha* was written long before Filmer's other works—at a date which has been placed progressively earlier ever since—that Filmer died in 1654, and that the republication of his works in 1679, to which Locke, Sidney and others wrote replies, was instigated by others with intentions of their own, at a time in which his consciousness was never involved. This was the moment at which I became aware of the problems, and therefore the possibilities, of context and intention, which I certainly need not elaborate before this audience. I sought Laslett's acquaintance—he was in London at the time, helping to found the Third Programme of the BBC—and very soon became aware of his even more revolutionary distinction between the context and intentions of John Locke's writing of the *Treatises of Government* and those of their publication seven or so years later. If I have been speaking of what is now known as "the Cambridge method," 1949 was the moment, and Cambridge was the place, at which—to speak portentously—I witnessed its birth.[3]

In my own research about this time, I came upon evidence that cast a different but related light on Locke's composition of the *Treatises*. This was a letter from James Tyrrell to William Petyt, calling his attention to the presence among Filmer's republished works of a treatise called *The Freeholder's Grand Inquest*—it was

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[2] Oxford: Blackwell, 1949.

[3] See further "Quentin Skinner: the history of politics and the politics of history," *Common Knowledge*, 10, 3 (2004), pp. 523-50; "Present at the Creation: With Laslett to the Lost Worlds," *International Journal of Public Affairs* (Chiba University, Japan) 2 (2006), pp. 7-17; "Foundations and Moments," in Brett and Tully (eds.), *Rethinking the Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 37-49.

subsequently questioned whether Filmer was its author[4]—and urging Petyt to refute it as no less dangerous than *Patriarcha*. It claimed, we all know, that the House of Commons was not older than the Norman Conquest, but had been called into being by Edward I in 1265. Petyt replied to it with *The Ancient Right of the Commons Asserted*; Robert Brady replied to Petyt; and here I found the subject of my doctoral dissertation. But I had also found that the controversy provoked by Filmer in 1679-80 occurred on two levels of discourse (if I did not use this term in 1952 or 1957, I knew what it was used to mean when it appeared). One was the complex discourse—biblical, juristic, and as we say philosophical—in which Locke answered *Patriarcha* in terms of the origins of society, property and government; the other was the no less complex discourse—forensic, records-based, antiquarian and philological—in which Petyt and Brady disputed the history of law, tenure and institutional government in pre-Conquest and medieval England. It is the distinction between these two that I place at the foundations of this paper's distinction between "political thought" and "historiography." These are imprecise terms, however, and I shall have to tease out their meanings and the history of their emergence.

I use the word "discourse," as I came to use the word "language," to indicate that these were two very different modes of argument. They differed in their vocabulary, their justifying sources, their implications and assumptions, and their expertise; it is not usual to find any author versed in them both. James Tyrrell is an exception; he wrote *Patriarcha Non Monarcha* in reply to Filmer, and *Bibliotheca Politica* and a *General History of England* in reply to Brady. But it tells us something about the structures of discourse in late 17th-century England that he is an exception,

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[4] *ACFL*, p. 344. The question was raised by the late Corinne Comstock Weston; see Weston and Greenberg, *Subjects and Sovereigns: the grand controversy over legal sovereignty in Stuart England* (Cambridge, 1981).

as it tells us something about the same structures in late 20th-century scholarship that over fifty years went by between my Cambridge researches of 1949 and the publication of a full-length study of Tyrrell by Julia Rudolph.[5] Discourses and their historians tend to be monothematic.

I do not claim to be an exception; this paper is largely an account of how I came to follow Brady rather than Locke, "political theory" less than "historiography." But the latter term is the less distinct in its meanings, and I have next to show how I came to elaborate it and what meanings came to be attached to it. Autobiographically speaking, this entails the period between 1952 and 1957, during which my doctoral dissertation became *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law.* During three of these years, I was at the University of Otago in New Zealand, returning to Cambridge in 1956 for another three years as a research fellow of St. John's. During the period as a whole, I elaborated the two concepts of which the book's title consists. Behind "the Ancient Constitution" there came to lie a further concept, that of "the common-law mind"; I argued that those trained or half-trained in the common law came to identify it with custom, and all institutions associated with it (including parliament) as existing in time beyond memory. This proposal has been much disputed, and I have left the debate to be conducted by others; though Alan Cromartie's recent *The Constitutionalist Revolution* seems to me so superb a restatement of the "common-law mind" and its history that the debate must now be conducted with him. What may be stated here is that "the common-law mind" and "immemorial antiquity" belong more in the field of historicism (dangerous as it is to use that overblown term) than in that of historiography; they entail questions of how societies live in history and how history comes to be a dimension of their existence, rather than questions of what

[5] Rudolph, *Revolution by Degrees: James Tyrrell and Whig political thought in the late seventeenth century* (New York, 2002).

happens when historians write histories. "Histories I know are written after another manner," observed Robert Brady when introducing his own *Introduction to the Old English History*, and both he and Tyrrell faced problems in relating the information culled from legal and governmental records to the information related by narrative historians and chroniclers. I seem to have been making a long journey through other manners of writing history, back to the history of historiography as a single subject.

While working on the Ancient Constitution, I also worked on the Feudal Law: that is, on the French legal humanists of the 16th century, who studied both Roman and barbarian law and moved from discovering the historicity of the former to debating the origins of dependent tenures in the latter; a complex reconstruction of legal history that lay behind the discovery that the *feudum* or fief in English law was Norman-French in origin. In the "common-law mind" I might have been studying historicism more than history, but here was a brutal intrusion of history: not only the history of actions and events, but the humanist philology that studied laws and languages to reveal that both had once been radically different from what they were now; the transformation of history from narrative of actions to archaeology of the past. There has been a process by which a unified history of early-modern historiography has been built up with this as its starting point; but it was some time after 1957 that my early work on the French legal humanists was overtaken by Donald R. Kelley and other American scholars, who located them at what Kelley called *The Foundations of Modern Historical Scholarship* (New York, 1970). When I came back to Cambridge in 1956 I found my fellow New Zealander J. H. M. Salmon working under Laslett's supervision at what became *The French Wars of Religion and English Political Thought* (Oxford, 1959). For reasons I do not know, this in dissertation form was dismissed with an M.Litt., and Salmon later obtained a doctorate from the Victoria

University of Wellington. Like me he followed an expatriate's pattern of movement from New Zealand to Cambridge and back (in my case twice) and then to the United States, where he ended his career at Bryn Mawr as I am ending mine at Johns Hopkins. By his death he had joined Kelley, Julian Franklin and Ralph Giesey as authorities on French intellectual history in the late Renaissance; but whether to class his work as an extension of the "Cambridge method" to America and the study of France I am not sure. John Salmon maintained a robust independence of all schools of theory, though here he may have done himself less than justice.

In 1956 Peter Laslett—in one of the bewildering metamorphoses that marked his extraordinary career—edited and published *Philosophy, Politics and Society*[6], the first volume of a series initially dominated by a positivist, analytical and linguistic approach to philosophy that came close to depriving that activity of the mind, especially political philosophy, of any coherence or history. (If I am describing it imprecisely, this is because my involvement with it was limited by my own concerns; its practitioners would surely not object to this.) There remained only the generalisation that no statement could mean more than its own means of validation permitted it to mean; and though very few means of validation were recognised as themselves valid, it was important that these few were plural and not to be reduced to one. During my second sojourn at Cambridge (1956-58) I was much exposed to these contentions and thought about them, with the result that I came to propose that many such modes of validation, and consequently many systems of meaning, might have existed in history from time to time, and that though they might be defined by the kinds of validity they claimed, their existence in, and as, history did not depend on the validity of that claim itself. The philosopher might ask the question "is this

[6] Oxford: Blackwell, 1956.

linguistically possible?" but the historian would ask "what was held to be linguistically possible and what happened in human discourse as a result?" Beyond that, in the philosophy of historical statements, I have never cared to go.

Re-reading some essays I wrote about this time and after[7], I have found the presence of Michael Oakeshott more salient than I remembered. This may have been because he encouraged us to think of "the conversation of mankind" as composed of very dense and allusive webs of discourse. What further philosophical steps he took I did not consider, and the histories of thought he sometimes provided seemed to me to be narrated successions of ideal types; perhaps I wronged him. When the second volume of *Philosophy, Politics and Society* appeared in 1962 (six years after the first) I was able to contribute an essay setting out the historicity of political languages, and the historicity of trying to understand them, as these matters appeared to me then. The same volume contained an essay by Isaiah Berlin, in which he replied to Laslett's 1956 assertion that "for the time being anyway, political philosophy is dead" by asserting that philosophy would always be called for when systems of human discourse collided in ways that no one language could cover. To me it appeared that precisely at such moments, it would be necessary to understand the histories of such languages and what they were severally doing; and when Berlin's biographers set this essay of 1962 in the context of his move from "analytical philosophy" to "the history of ideas," I am inclined to say that what I do is less "the history of ideas" than "the history of languages" or "discourses." I do not want to disengage "ideas" from the "languages" in which they are encased, though I will not say that Berlin wanted to do that. I was, and I suppose still am, governed by my 1949 discovery that the response

[7] Intended for collection in Pocock, *Political Thought and History: Essays 1962-2005* (Cambridge, forthcoming).

to Filmer occurred in two "languages" having different histories; I want to pursue the implications of those histories in directions increasingly divergent.

In 1959, two years after *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law*, there appeared Caroline Robbins's *The Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthman*[8], furnishing the moment of my encounter with an American scholarship moving massively in directions with which what came to be known as "Cambridge" methods could fruitfully interact. She showed—followed by Douglass Adair, Bernard Bailyn and many others—the crisis producing American independence as growing out of a debate within the Hanoverian-British monarchy and empire over the form it had assumed after the Revolution of 1688-89. This debate—with and without its American connotations—became a theme in most of my future work, and is for instance a growth-point for the second half of *The Machiavellian Moment*. However, eighteen years went by between publication of *The Ancient Constitution* and that of *The Machiavellian Moment* in 1975, and only some things that happened during those years are worth rescuing from the *ignes fatui* of autobiography. I taught from 1959 to 1965 at the University of Canterbury, and from 1966 to 1973 at Washington University in St. Louis, before moving to Johns Hopkins in 1974. During these years Peter Laslett completed his work on Locke, while continuing to edit volumes of *Philosophy, Politics and Society* and abandoning political theory and its history for the study of demographics; Quentin Skinner's first essays began to appear, and reached revolutionary impact in 1969; and John Dunn's volume on Locke was published in the same year.[9] Here was what scholars in distant lands have called "the Cambridge moment" and "the foundation of the Cambridge School." I was myself in

[8] Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press.

[9] If Dunn is less visible in this paper than he might be, it is because I see him as reflecting on history in order to reflect upon politics. I have not taken part in this project, which nevertheless I admire.

lands distant from Cambridge, and was associated with what was happening here only through *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law*; and I was already interested less in Hobbes or even Locke than in James Harrington. I did not feel isolated, however, even less in Missouri than in New Zealand; and I was beginning to be connected with the work of younger scholars—some now reaching retirement age—who were studying political thought through its location in historical contexts. I list some of these and their published works in an appendix to this paper.

The Machiavellian Moment (Princeton, 1975) and *The Political Works of James Harrington* (Cambridge, 1977) took shape during these years and were published after I left Washington University for Johns Hopkins. Their genesis was slow and I doubt if I could recall it in detail, but the germ of both can be found in *The Ancient Constitution*, where I described *Oceana* as "a Machiavellian meditation on feudalism"[10]. Though I came to edit the whole corpus of Harrington's writings, I have always focussed most sharply on the "Second Part of the Preliminaries" to *Oceana*, where he sought to locate the crisis of his own times in a history of arms, property and citizenship running from Roman times through Gothic to his own. Historicism reasserts itself; I am interested in his study of politics in a historical process rather than in his political theory or philosophy (if he had one; Jonathan Scott thinks it was Hobbesian, but I think it was Platonist). The parting of the ways in 1680, discerned in 1949, remains valid, and the divorce between (history of) philosophy and other histories is as absolute as ever. Richard Tuck concluded his *Philosophy and Government* in 1651, the year of *Leviathan*, but I see 1656, the year of *Oceana*, as another kind of turning point in the intellectual history of the Interregnum. It depends on what you mean by philosophy, but also on what you think about history.

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[10] ACFL, p. 147.

Harrington's scheme of history, and what I have to say about it as itself a historical phenomenon, are held together by a Roman, and more distantly an Athenian, notion of citizenship as involving as direct as possible a participation of the personality in the acts of decision and deliberation. Here the normative and the historical do tend to converge. In my own ideas about contemporary politics, including the politics of history, I am concerned with the possible disintegration of the personality before the multiplication of choices and identities; and I see an ideological dimension to the works of those scholars who are so determined to maintain the primacy of rights over virtues that they deny the latter any autonomous presence in history. There is now a literature about Machiavelli as a "liberal republican" which, quite frankly, I am going to leave to the reading of others. All I need to maintain is that the two conceptualisations of citizenship existed in history to the point where debate between them, and movement from one to the other, can be said to have occurred. I am now writing about the history of historiography in the 18th century[11], at the close of an early-modern or neoclassical period, in which that debate is one of several on which west European and north American history are perceived as turning.

There is a normative and also heuristic dimension to *The Machiavellian Moment*, as well as the historicist dimension to which I shall return. Machiavelli was not recommending *virtù* in the sense of the unmediated engagement of the personality in political action; he had other things on his mind, and any who held by that ideal might want to argue with him. But I cannot make sense of the debates going on in Florence before and after 1494 without bringing that ideal into the picture, and in the latter part of my own book I was going to deal with its replacement by new concepts two centuries later. I therefore looked for ways of articulating it, and the one I found

[11] I.e., in the successive volumes of *Barbarism and Religion* (Cambridge, 1999 –).

appears in retrospect part heuristic and part historical. I isolated Aristotle's account of citizens who are one another's equals, in the sense that they rule and are ruled, accepting freely the decisions they impose on one another. I did this because it seemed (and seems) to me the best account going of how the personality may engage itself fully in political action; and I have never been quite happy with Quentin Skinner's subsequent re-statement of it as a "neo-roman" belief that if your will is subject to another's you are a slave, because that entirely valid proposition seems to me a precondition of citizenship, not a definition. If you want to be free you must have equals, and if there is not a republic of equals you must look around for one. This is not going to be easy.

I haven't been writing history in order to propound this norm, but I have been writing histories that contain turning-points in which this ideal is articulated, challenged, or modified. So, you might say, has Quentin Skinner, if you take as his turning-point the moment at which Hobbes challenged the neo-roman creed of the democratical gentlemen; but my crucial figure of the Interregnum years is not Hobbes but Harrington. To explain that, I must go back to the Florentines; in *The Machiavellian Moment* I had selected Aristotelian citizenship as a heuristic device, while holding that I was doing nothing anachronistic, since Aristotle's *Politics*, notably in the Latin translation by Leonardo Bruni (a major figure to Hans Baron and therefore to me), were well enough known in *quattrocento* Florence to be treated as active in its texts. But *The Machiavellian Moment* could certainly be read as saying that the Florentine exaltation of citizenship came out of a continuum of Aristotelian interpretation; and Skinner was perfectly right, in *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* three years later, in pointing out that the continuum from which

republican humanism emerged was Roman—Sallustian, Ciceronian, Plutarchan—rather than Athenian. Whether this means that it was neo-roman is another matter.

It was of course Professor Skinner who long ago suggested "the Machiavellian moment" to me as a title; as he recalls, he did me the kindness of reading the manuscript[12]. This does not make him responsible for what I have done with his suggestion, making of it a thoroughly historicist keyword that denotes a diversity of moments of historical instability, when systems of institutions, values, and the understandings of history that go with them are perceived as unstable, and may perish or be transformed. Hans Baron's moment of 1400-02, when the crisis of war impelled the Florentines to abandon "medieval" values for "modern," was such a moment, though not one I have chosen to endorse; I don't in fact fully believe in that one[13]. What is more important is that I came to see Machiavelli as overmasteringly concerned with the capacity of regimes and the practitioners of norms and actions to survive in history; this may well be the source of what has been found "machiavellian" about his thinking. In *The Machiavellian Moment*, the concept of "history"—Machiavelli of course formulated no concept by that name—consists merely of the confrontation between *virtù*, the capacity for military, political and moral action, with *fortuna*, the blind goddess symbolising the unending variety and treachery of contingencies ("events, dear boy," as a prince of the last generation is supposed to have put it). *Fortuna* was not dependent on, or a name for, any particular connotation of historical change or process, and her blindness was of value in exploring many things Machiavelli had to say; but twenty-eight years after *The Machiavellian Moment* (and twenty-five after *The Foundations of Modern Political*

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[12] Brett and Tully, pp. 39, 240.
[13] Baron, *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance* (Princeton, 1955, 1966). Skinner a little overstates the extent to which I have parted company with this great if debatable work (Brett and Tully, p. 239).

Thought) I published *The First Decline and Fall*, the third volume of *Barbarism and Religion*[14], in which I came back to Machiavelli and located him in a historical process he himself narrated.

As all know, he defined Rome as a commonwealth for expansion, which had armed its *popolo*, thus giving them voice in its government, combining turbulence with freedom; and had paid the price of glory in a shorter existence than might be enjoyed by a commonwealth that aimed at preservation. In writing *The First Decline and Fall*, I found this narrative enlarged in two ways. The first was by an account of the republic's decline that stressed the disappearance of an armed and landholding people, which the Gracchi had failed to prevent; Machiavelli repeats this at length in the *Discourses on Livy*. The second was by a more generalised narrative based on a combination of Sallust with Tacitus: the liberty that followed the expulsion of the kings had led to conquests achieved by military virtue, but the empire thus obtained had proved greater than the republic could govern, and the transfer of power to the emperors had proved fatal to both liberty and virtue. There were ways of combining these narratives. A century before Machiavelli, Leonardo Bruni, whose history was known to Machiavelli, had continued the story by claiming that Rome deprived of liberty lacked the *virtù* necessary to resist the western barbarians. There had followed the rise of the papacy and its conflicts with the emperors it had created; and the exhaustion of both in the 14th century had led to the independence of republics both free and unstable, lacking the opportunity of empire and blaming the papacy for their predicament. All this recurs in Machiavelli; and Guicciardini was to be historian of the next phase of Italian history.

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[14] Cambridge, 2003.

What we have here might be described as a move from a historicism to a historiography: that is, from a conception of what we should call history—Machiavelli of course never calls it by that name—as the domain of *fortuna* to a specific grand narrative of systemic change, written as part, but not yet the whole, of an activity self-described as writing history. In setting Machiavelli in this context, I was pursuing the bent my interests had taken as far back as 1949, away from "the history of political thought" towards "the history of historiography." I might maintain that the latter was part of the former, but it was not clear how far my colleagues might agree with me; theory and philosophy, the normative and the analytical, continue to dominate this field of study, and historians do something else. What was emerging, as I looked back from Machiavelli towards Bruni and again towards Machiavelli, was a historical grand narrative, fairly explicitly stated, and capable—perhaps suspiciously so—as I read it for the 2003 volume of *Barbarism and Religion,* of being connected with what I had called "the Enlightened narrative" in a volume of 1999[15]. To effect this link it was necessary to return to the figure of James Harrington, as I had studied him between 1957 and 1977; he had continued the history of the Roman armed republic through the Decline and Fall to the barbarian invasions, positing what he called "the Gothic balance," an unstable system of feudal tenures lasting in England through the fifteenth century. He had connected political power irrevocably with arms and the distribution of property, but the consequences of the decay of "the Gothic balance" had been revolutionary in quite another way than he had predicted. Harrington thought that England must now become an armed republic, since arms and those who bore them could be maintained in no other way than by being rooted in the land; Florence not being a tenurial polity, it had not been necessary for Machiavelli to

[15] *Barbarism and Religion, vol. 2: Narratives of Civil Government*.

think in this way. "A bank never paid an army, or paying one soon became no bank," but within fifty years of *Oceana*, a permanent professional army was coming into being, financed by a bank and a national debt. This I saw as the authentically revolutionary outcome of the Revolution of 1688-89, and precisely because Harrington had not foreseen it, I saw him as its prophet. I therefore bypass Thomas Hobbes—even as critic of the neo-roman concept of liberty—because he acts in the history of philosophy, not in that of historiography. The division of subject appearing in 1949 is still operative, and I am not sure it needs to be overcome, still less to be explained away. By 1698, and increasingly through the reign of Anne, it was beginning to be said that a radical change had occurred in what was beginning to be thought of as European history. Standing army and public credit ensured that success in war depended upon investor confidence in the stability of the state and the prosperity of the economy. This was no longer the world of Hobbes and Locke, where dissolution of the government was a possibility and the individual's involvement in civil war was another[16]. Instead, he found himself involved in a web of commercial relations, of which military power and civil government were the superstructure; and the social and political identity thus offered him could be criticised in the name of ancient or neo-roman values. A debate between ancient and modern liberty began[17], a century before Benjamin Constant, and interestingly at the same time as the historisation of literary models debated in the French and English *querelles des anciens et modernes*[18]. A philosophic history of human society began to

[16] "Standing Army and Public Credit: the institutions of Leviathan", in Dale Hoak and Mordechai Feingold (eds.), *The World of William and Mary: Anglo-Dutch perspectives on the Revolution of 1688-89* (Stanford, 1996), pp. 87-103.
[17] The debaters were John Trenchard, Andrew Fletcher and Daniel Defoe; *The Machiavellian Moment*, chs. XII, XIII.
[18] Joseph M. Levine, *The Battle of the Books: history and literature in the Augustan age* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

take shape, and with it a history of Europe in which the grand narrative developed by Bruni, Machiavelli and Harrington advanced to its next stage: a study of how the territorial state combined with the spread of commerce to create a commonwealth of governments that could conduct wars without collapsing into an anarchy of unpaid armies.

This anarchy was further perceived as the product of religious war, in which the competing authority of papacy, presbytery and sect made confessional allegiance destructive of civil society. There arose histories of both kinds I have mentioned, which carried the narrative through the medieval papacy to 1500, and less confidently through the wars of religion to 1713—English and French writers saw no reason to make the Treaties of Westphalia their turning point—after which the stable monarchies began to assert control. Here I found it necessary to make a giant theological leap. The supremacy of civil society over Christian confession entailed at least an equality between law and grace, if not the superiority of the former over the latter; and there occurred, perhaps as early as the first quarter of the 17th century, a willingness to reconsider the equality of Christ with his Father, which by the 1680s was to move Pierre Bayle to remark that all the princes of Europe would make Socinianism their religion of state if only they dared[19]. I am entering here on matters I hope to discuss further in seminars later this week; but there arose, for a variety of reasons, Catholic, Protestant and freethinking, a willingness to re-inspect the formation of theology in the first four Christian centuries, and in several cases to resolve it into a history of human actors struggling with the historical character of human language. In work yet to appear[20], I have been moved to describe Jean Le

[19] Bayle, *Dictionnaire*, art. "Socinus".
[20] *Barbarism and Religion, vol. 5: Religion: The First Triumph* (Cambridge, in preparation).

Clerc as the Quentin Skinner of the close of the 17th century. In conjunction with, but never replacing, the detailed and erudite textual histories this entailed, there arose—or rather, continued to be—philosophical histories presenting religious belief and authority as phenomena of the history of society.

These and older forms of history converge in the third quarter of the 18th century to provide what I have elsewhere termed "the Enlightened narrative", and the processes behind them would provide my own grand narrative of Enlightenment if I did not hold that no one narrative or combination of narratives deserves to be characterised as The Enlightenment. The narrative I relate is not a direct consequence of that related in *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law*, but it was directly entailed from the moment I began constructing the post-Florentine chapters of *The Machiavellian Moment*, and is carried on through *Virtue, Commerce and History* (1985) into the successive volumes of *Barbarism and Religion* (1999 –). This is the point at which I claim to be pursuing one branch of the fork in the road that appeared to me in 1949, and to have chosen the history of civil society and historiography where others have chosen that of the state and political theory/philosophy. As I study the work of Quentin Skinner, I am conscious that I am not sure what happened in history after Thomas Hobbes, whereas I do know what happened in history after James Harrington; so that I think we are dealing with two distinguishable histories, which may have interacted but did not become one.

The narrative that I know about has been powerfully continued in this Cambridge and indeed in this College, where I look beyond Istvan Hont's *Jealousy of Trade*[21] and Michael Sonenscher's *Beyond the Deluge*[22] to the works of Emma Rothschild; the world of the eighteenth century is clearly in good hands. If I turn to

[21] Harvard, 2005.
[22] Princeton, 2007.

the "Cambridge beyond Cambridge" of my paper title, I should obviously begin at the other Cambridge itself, where Richard Tuck and David Armitage have journeyed beyond Hobbes, and Grotius with him, to a point where the history of political theory is focussed on that arising from the relations between political systems in competition instead of that arising from the relations between individuals that make each system what it is. I have more to say about that change of focus, but it is only one of the many contexts in which the history of political thought is being studied. At the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, where a Centre for the History of British Political Thought has been active for nearly twenty-five years, we have pursued that literature into a diversity of contexts, as displayed in a volume edited by David Armitage and published in this Cambridge. I list this and other publications in an appendix, by way of showing the varieties of directions in which the contextualised history of political thought is developing. Its parameters remain, however, early modern and more anglophone than cosmopolitan; have we begun asking how it might be carried beyond the first of these limits in particular?

The purpose of this paper, however, has been to propose that the history of historiography—that is, of the diverse ways in which what we call and has been called history has been written—may be considered part of the history of political thought, while remaining distinguishable from political theory and philosophy. It has had its own languages as they have, and there have been times when these were so far apart from one another that "it" was not yet a unified mode of thinking; but they and it have had their own histories and have constituted distinctive ways of thinking about politics with consequences for the politics being thought about. To develop and organise this field of study, I conclude by suggesting, we need two programmes

which need to be further systematised and theorised: a history of historiography, and a political theory of history, each aimed at becoming a sub-discipline and practice.

The former is the more developed, but is in need of more attention to its pre-modern or early-modern formation. In the nineteenth century and after, it underwent revolutionary changes too numerous to enumerate—professionalisation in universities connected with the state being one of them, and another the growth of a philosophy of history which has tended to dominate the subject and its study—and these may be said to constitute the modern history of historiography. But all the premises on which this paper is composed unite to focus attention on its early-modern history, from the fifteenth century to the eighteenth, during which it was not a recognised faculty of the academy or the intellect, but a collection of increasingly associated pursuits, so that it could always be said to have begun with Arnaldo Momigliano, who in 1955 wrote that Edward Gibbon's contribution to historical method consisted of his successful combination of critical erudition with philosophical history in the 18th century sense of the term[23]; since Momigliano's dictum many developments and refinements have of course occurred. "Erudition"—a better term than "antiquarianism," though Gibbon himself disliked it—consisted largely of "philology" or "grammar," the study of ancient texts for the non-narrative information they might yield. This in turn consisted largely of language itself; the search for the pure Latin of Cicero or the Attic Greek of Demosthenes yielded the discovery, first, that such languages existed only in the texts but gave access to a state of society and culture in which neo-Latin humanists no longer lived but which they might by the exercise of criticism reconstruct; second, that all languages, including those held to be of classical purity, were historically specific, and that there had been, as there now were, times of which

[23] Momigliano, *Contributo alla storia degli studi classici* (Rome, 1955).

they could not be spoken. When this discovery was applied to the study of law—as it was tentatively by me in 1957 and systematically by Kelley in 1970—there emerged a huge wealth of interconnected information about the practices and government of Roman and post-Roman society; and a similar wealth was uncovered by the deliberately unsystematic and often infuriatingly serendipitous researches of antiquarians[24]. The study of monuments, roads, buildings and even landscapes joined in supplying non-narrative contexts in which narratives might be read, and historiography—assuming this word to be applicable to such researches—began being not only the narrative of human actions, but an archaeology of past states of society and culture, entailing macro-narratives of its own, as well as techniques and discourses of criticism such as that recently examined by Anthony Grafton under the names of *ars historica* and *ars critica*[25]. The humanist gave way to the baroque, the baroque to the philosophical; and here Momigliano had evoked the figure of Gibbon.

At this point, however, it was clear that Momigliano's dyad had to be enlarged. Long before any encounter with the philosophical, erudition had interacted, not always harmoniously, with narrative, the latter meaning the actions of a leading figure, related by witnesses to a historian who had cast them in narrative form for exemplary and homiletic purposes. The *ars historica* was the art of reading such narratives; they had been written already, for the most part in antiquity, and the chance that the reader would himself be a historian was remote. Erudition supplied means of authenticating and criticising such narratives and—it was realised by degrees—new ways of reading, contextualising and understanding them; but history in the classical sense was extremely persistent. It is important not to exaggerate its limitation to the acts of

[24] See most recently Peter Miller, *Peiresc's Europe: learning and virtue in the seventeenth century* (Yale, 2000).
[25] Grafton, *What Was History? The art of history in early modern Europe* (Cambridge, 2007).

individuals; the hero was typically the king, magistrate and even citizen of a political society with whose norms and fortunes his doings interacted, and the mutability and mortality of political systems was not exactly unknown to ancient thought. The history of actions became the history of the systems they were performed in, and became exponentially more sophisticated as this happened. In *The First Decline and Fall*—which I have elsewhere suggested might be called *Gibbon's Machiavellian Moment*—I found a theme of Roman historiography which explained how republican liberty achieved an empire which republican liberty could not sustain; and Tacitus narrating how humans behaved when there was no longer a republic in whose history they might perform actions worth narrating. The politics of history began to declare themselves. Voltaire and Emilie du Chatelet began writing the history of Christian and barbaric Europe precisely because its actions seemed too contemptible to be worth recording; they wished to know how this had happened and how history had become again worth reading and writing. A philosophical history began to appear from that point.

This was a complicated matter, and we face the possibility of an oxymoron. A philosophical history, strictly speaking, was one constructed by identifying the laws of human nature and human society, and showing how they operated to produce human experience. One might believe implicitly that these laws were absolute and unvarying, and still face the problem of showing how they interacted with the bodies of information about that experience available from independent sources. What happened if that information revealed behaviour incompatible with the laws of nature, or worse still, behaviour to which they were inadequate as explanation? The possible sources of such information were many and various. There was the massive weight of erudition, by now consisting of research into medieval as well as ancient sources,

which had survived the pyrrhonist assault of Cartesian philosophers, who said you could know nothing reported to you by another in a text, by developing critical techniques that extracted from a text information no author had intended to convey; the context, in short, that conditioned the text. The young Edward Gibbon wrote a critique of d'Alembert's *Discours Prèliminaire à l'Encyclopèdie* for suggesting that erudition could satisfy only the memory's appetite for facts, but discovered that d'Alembert had also written the article on *Erudition*, and there made Gibbon's point that the study of antiquities called for imagination and judgment—as the older Gibbon called them—and revealed states of society and culture only these faculties of mind could comprehend. And in the *Discours Prèliminaire* itself, d'Alembert had outlined the ways in which the human mind would generate society and culture if its faculties were free to operate of themselves, but had added that this did not provide the history of European culture, if only because of the mind's engagement with the huge weight of ancient letters, with which, of course, erudition was a means of engagement[26]. And the study of Roman antiquities included that of Roman histories, and of Roman history as a narrative requiring interpretation; we found ourselves (as d'Alembert was well aware) at the outset of the grand narrative of republic and empire, barbarism and religion, ancient and modern, which historians from Bruni to Gibbon were concerned to relate. There were the histories of the French and English kingdoms and the bodies of historiographical discourse built up around them; there was the history of the Church and ecclesiastical authority, and the histories of theology and philosophy that asked whether these pursuits of the mind could ever be more than their own histories. All these sources provided information which the philosophy of nature might illustrate but did not exhaust, and which sometimes produced problems for it.

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[26] For all this, see *Barbarism and Religion*, *vol. 1: The Enlightenments of Edward Gibbon*, chs. 8, 9.

This is a point from which the history of historiography may be seen to diverge from that of history as a form of political thought. From the premise that historical information may contain much that the laws of human nature do not sufficiently explain, we may look towards Burke's insistence that political reason must operate within the historical context, or towards Kant's observation that reason can never straighten out the crooked timber that grows out of history. From the premise that civil history generates results that human nature would not produce if left to itself, we may look towards Rousseau's or Diderot's paradox that human nature must generate civil society but always distorts itself in doing so. Here is philosophy of history as paradox and contradiction, and no doubt a growth-point of the historicism of the next century; but if we are historians of historiography, we want to know how the great histories of the middle to late 18th century came to be written, and—except perhaps Diderot's contributions to Raynal's *Histoire des Deux Indes*[27]—they were not written in pursuit of this paradox, or of an Enlightenment in need of a Counter-Enlightenment, but as a series of pursuits of what Oakeshott called the practical past, meaning all of the pasts with which writers and actors were engaged for whatever reasons. To find out what these historians, in the phrase now classical, "were doing," we need to find out what these pasts were, how involvement in them was perceived, and also who our actors were, and how they went about relating the histories they needed to write.

The answers to such questions will no doubt be many and various, simultaneously valid and without theoretical limit; it's a characteristic of contextualist historiography that the contexts go on multiplying and one comes to a stop only for practical reasons. But the formation of a research programme is built on assumptions

[27] *Barbarism and Religion, vol. 4: Barbarians, Savages and Empires*, chs. 14, 15.

and choices that lead us in selected directions. These historians wrote as they did because they wrote where and why they did, but they shared patterns and situations. I have been isolating a macro-narrative long in the formation, which by the 18th century can be called "the Enlightened narrative," and arguing that a succession of historians knew they shared it and wrote it in various ways. The history of this narrative might be pursued until it shoots Niagara in the decades after 1789 and emerges how much changed? There is a road leading from Gibbon to Guizot which I think would be worth following. If, however, we proceed according to the post-Momiglianan model I have been proposing, in which erudition and philosophy were in constant dialogue, we shall not readily adopt the conventional narrative in which a grandly naturalist Enlightenment gives way to a grandly romantic historicism; histories, it would seem, were written after another manner—though this may not prevent the romantic Behemoth resurfacing in waters he did swim in. But that will be down-river from Niagara; upstream, we may be still considering how far the three components of the post-Momiglianan model had come together while Enlightenment was still late-humanist, neo-classical and early-modern.

I have begun using a broad brush; but the model and the narrative leave us asking how far historiography can be expected to escape from its neo-Latin and "western" presuppositions. We should all like to see a global historiography, in which the Western narrative shares the tribune with others; but what other monotheist civilisation has there been which remained obsessed with its polytheist past, and developed historiography as a multiplication of contexts and narratives designed to contain and transform the sacred? These procedures have provided a narrative that dominates our notion of what narrative and history are; what narratives and notions of

history may we learn from other civilisations? We need to ask them and they should need to tell us; if this is the wrong question, the sooner we know it the better.

Let me turn in conclusion from the history to the political theory of historiography[28]. It seems useful to our understanding of both politics and history to develop a theory of how a political society comes to have histories written about it, and what the system and the history do to one another. To set up such a theory, I will begin by supposing a political system and asking how it will generate a historiography. To do this favours supposing a system that is fairly stable and has institutions that have existed over time; without them, we may find it hard to imagine a narrative of the society's existence coming into being at all. This assumption may be oversimple, and it will be necessary to imagine histories generated by instability, anomie or external domination; but there are good reasons—if only because my narrative begins with the Ancient Constitution—for premising a historiography generated by assumptions of stability and continuity. These assumptions need not be complacent or utopian; if they legitimate the political system and its authority, there will be narratives of how legitimacy was threatened or misused to the point of failure, and Machiavelli's history of Florence and Giannone's of Naples explicitly declare that these systems were never autonomous enough to legislate themselves. It is a mistake to assume that all histories are, or ever were, self-enclosed or self-reassuring. Nevertheless, Florence and Naples possessed—or rather, were—institutional structures continuous enough to be displayed, even in struggles they continually lost.

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[28] To be included in *Political Thought and History*: "The historian as political actor in polity, society and academy," *Journal of Pacific Studies*, XX (1997), pp. 89-112; "The politics of history: the subaltern and the subversive," *Journal of Political Philosophy*, VI (1998), 3, pp. 219-34; "The politics of historiography: the Creighton Lecture for 2003," *Historical Research*, 78, 199 (2005), pp. 1-14.

Our hypothetical system possesses narratives of the past actions of rulers, praised or condemned as they succeeded in maintaining or expanding the systems they ruled or sought to rule; but these systems are capable of providing the context in which the histories are to be read. The society generates languages, vocabularies and discourses which (in a different sense of the word) narrate the ways in which the institutions maintain themselves as norms; and these narratives furnish contexts in which the actions of rulers and other actors are narrated and evaluated. (This is perhaps the moment to remark that the "Cambridge method" has so far dealt with early-modern societies in which there were several accredited clerisies—jurists, ecclesiastics, humanists, philosophers—and several languages distinct but interacting; it has not yet explored periods and cultures in which this may not have been the case.) It may further be presumed that the ruling institutions have laid down archives and records, and have been conducted in specialised languages that have isolated themselves in time and usage; this will permit our model to include the interactions of narrative and erudition, of such importance in systematising the history of historiography. The multiplication of contexts, narratives and languages promotes, and indeed necessitates the discovery that every sequence of actions occurred in more than one simultaneous context; and classical narrative was rooted in classical rhetoric, and its discovery that every story could be told in more than one way.

Let us now feed in the further assumption that political action is inherently contested, contestable and contestatory, and that the speech by and in which it is conducted shares these characteristics. The political system seeks to contain all these contestations, but is sometimes disrupted and more frequently changed by them; and the historical narratives of how it has acted and been acted upon in this experience,

being necessarily written in languages partly continuous with those in which the contestations were conducted, are themselves contestable and contestatory.

It is this, I suggest, that historians will increasingly bring to light, once they appear in our model as critical intellectuals obeying no other imperative than that of following their method of enquiry wherever it may lead (I have looked for a historian who archetypically suffers the fate of Socrates and been led to the figure of Ssuma Ch'ien). In the post holistic and post-revolutionary climate we presently live in, we do not reduce the multiplicities of historical experience to single master patterns, and prefer to go on indefinitely finding new dimensions to any process or event, and new contexts in which to re-interpret or explode familiar narratives. If then we ask what a historiography written by historians does to the political system that has generated the history they study and rewrite, the first answer would seem to be that it serves the liberal-conservative purpose familiar to us all: liberal in the sense that it tells the state, conservative in the sense that it tells the revolutionary, that there is always more going on than either can understand or control, and that to believe otherwise may have consequences that are terrible because totalising. We know this lesson by heart.

There is more to be said, however, once we define the role of the historian in politics as the multiplication without end of the contexts in which human action may be seen as going on. There is a politics of contextualisation; it may multiply the meanings of an action so far beyond anything that was or could have been meant that meaning and action disappear, and with them the actor and even the historian. The political system offers to constrain action within the structures of meaning known to it, and within these constraints to enact a future whose narrative continues the narrative of the past; if there is no narrative there is no enactment. The political individual sees himself as involved, if not as actor then as critic, in a society not devoid of capacity to

declare its past and future; if this capacity is enlarged to vanishing point the society disappears and he with it. In the 18th century there was a project of enlarging the capacities of the ancient citizen, constrained within an archaic polity and economy, by offering him and even her the opportunity to act in the multiple relations of commerce and politeness; it led to Sainte-Palaye's dictum that "le vrai histoire d'un peuple consiste non dans le récit de ce qu'il a fait, mais dans la peinture de ce qu'il a été," and Hannah Arendt's dictum that action was being replaced by behaviour[29]. The same multiplication of contexts was deployed to reduce the terrible capacities of God by making him act within the various histories of civil society, with the result that he ceased to be God at all. If the First Enlightenment and the First Globalisation set out to deconstruct the republic and the church, the Second phase of both may be aiming to deconstruct the autonomy of the historical community and the political self[30]. To be unduly apocalyptic about these tendencies would be historicist, and in the open contexts of history they are probably going to fail; but they need their share of attention.

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[29] For Sainte-Palaye see Lionel Gossman, *Medievalism and the Ideologies of Enlightenment: the world and work of Lacurne de Sainte Palaye* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins, 1968), p. 169; For Arendt, *The Human Condition*, ch. 6.

[30] For more on this theme see "The Treaty between histories," in Sharp and McHugh (eds.) *Histories, Power and Loss: uses of the past—a New Zealand commentary* (Wellington, 2001) and Julia Rudolph (ed.) *History and Nation* (Lewisburg, Pa: Bucknell University Press, 2006); and at large, *The Discovery of Islands; essays in British history* (Cambridge, 2005), chs. 14, 17.

Appendix: Publications

1. From the University of Canterbury:

Andrew Sharp (retired as Professor of Political Studies, University of Auckland): *Political Ideas of the English Civil Wars* (London, 1983); *Justice and the Maori; Maori Claims in New Zealand Political Argument in the 1980s* (Auckland, 1990, 1998); (ed.), *The English Levellers* (Cambridge, 1999); (co. ed.) *Histories, Power and Loss: uses of the past—a New Zealand commentary* (Wellington, 2001).

Patricia M. Springborg (formerly Professor of Government, University of Sydney; now Professoressa contrattata, Free University of Bolzano): *The Problem of Human Needs and the Critique of Civilisation* (London, 1981); *Royal Persons: Patriarchal Monarchy and the Feminine Principle* (London, 1990); *Western Republicanism and the Oriental Prince* (Cambridge, 1992); (ed.) *Mary Astell: Political Writings* (1996) and *Mary Astell: A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1997); *Mary Astell: theorist of freedom from domination* (Cambridge, 2005); (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Hobbes's Leviathan* (Cambridge, 2007); *Thomas Hobbes: Historia Ecclesiastica* (forthcoming).

2. From Washington University in St. Louis:

Harold A. Ellis: *Boulainvilliers and the French Monarchy* (Cornell, 1988).

Michael J. Mendle (University of Alabama): *Dangerous Positions: Mixed Government, Estates and the Answer to the XIX Proposition* (Alabama,

1985); *Henry Parker and the English Civil War: the political thought of the public's "*privado*"* (Cambridge, 1995); (ed.) *The Putney Debates of 1647: the army, the Levellers and the English state* (Cambridge, 2001).

Arthur H. Williamson (California State University at Sacramento): *Scottish National Consciousness in the Age of James VI* (Edinburgh, 1979); (co-ed.) *George Buchanan: the Political Poetry* (East Linton, 1995), *The British Union: a critical edition and translation of David Hume of Godscroft's* De Unione Britannica (East Linton, 2002).

3. From Johns Hopkins University:

Katherine P. Clark (University of Kansas): *Daniel Defoe: the Whole Frame of Nature, Time and Providence* (Houndmills, 2007).

Jack G. Fruchtman (Towson University, Maryland): *The Apocalyptic Politics of Richard Price and Joseph Priestley* (Philadelphia, 1983); *Thomas Paine and the Religion of Nature* (1993); *Thomas Paine: Apostle of Freedom* (1994); (ed.) *An Eyewitness Account of the French Revolution by Helen Maria Williams* (1997); *Atlantic Cousins: Benjamin Franklin and his visionary friends* (2005).

Eliga H. Gould (University of New Hampshire): *The Persistence of Empire: British political culture in the age of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, 2000).

Philip Hicks (St. Mary's College, Indiana): *Neo-Classical History and English Culture: from Clarendon to Hume* (New York, 1996).

Lawrence E. Klein (Cambridge University): *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness; moral discourse and cultural politics in eighteenth-century England* (Cambridge, 1994).

John C. Laursen (Political Science University of California, Riverside): *The Politics of Skepticism in the Ancients, Montaigne and Hume* (Leiden, 1992); (ed.) *New Essays in the Political Thought of the Huguenots of the Refuge* (Leiden, 1994); (ed.) *Histories of Heresy in Early Modern Europe: for, against and beyond persecution and toleration* (Houndsmills, 2002); (co-ed.) *Denis Veiras: The History of the Sevarambians, a Utopian novel* (Albany, 2006); (ed.) *Monarchisms in Early Modern Europe: liberty, patriotism and the common good* (Toronto, 2007).

Robert J. Mankin (Universitè de Paris VII): (ed.) *Edward Gibbon: Essai sur l'étude de la littérature* (Oxford, forthcoming).

John W. Marshall (Johns Hopkins University): *John Locke: Resistance, Religion and Responsibility* (Cambridge, 1994); *John Locke, Toleration and Early Enlightenment Culture* (2006).

Anne McLaren: *Political Culture in the Reign of Elizabeth I: queen and commonwealth, 1558-1585* (Cambridge, 2000).

Wyger R. E. Velema (University of Amsterdam): *Enlightenment and Conservatism in the Dutch Republic: the political thought of Elie Luzac, 1721-1796* (Assen, 1993); *Republicans: essays on eighteenth-century Dutch political thought* (Brill, 2007).

4. From the Folger Institute Centre for the History of British Political Thought:

1980: J. G. A. Pocock (ed.) *Three British Revolutions: 1641, 1688, 1776* (Princeton University Press).

1988: Terence Ball and J. G. A. Pocock (eds.): *Conceptual Change and the Constitution* (University Press of Kansas).

1990-93: Gordon J. Schochet, with Patricia Tatspaugh and Carol Brobeck (eds.): *Proceedings of the Folger Institute Center for the History of British Political Thought* (Washington: the Folger Institute).

1991: Linda Levy Peck (ed.): *The Mental World of the Jacobean Court* (Cambridge University Press).

1992: Lois G. Schwoerer (ed.): *The Revolution of 1688-89: Changing Perspectives* (Cambridge University Press).

1993: J. G. A. Pocock, with Gordon J. Schochet and Lois G. Schwoerer (eds.): *The Varieties of British Political Thought, 1500-1800* (Cambridge University Press).

1994: Roger A. Mason (ed.): *Scots and Britons: Political Thought and the Union of 1603* (Cambridge University Press).

1995: John Robertson (ed.): *A Union for Empire: Political Thought and the British Union of 1707* (Cambridge University Press).

1996: Glenn Burgess: *Absolute Monarchy and the Stuart Constitution* (New Haven: Yale University Press).

1998: Hilda L. Smith (ed.): *Women Writers and the Early Modern British Political Tradition* (Cambridge University Press).

1999: Hiram Morgan (ed.): *Political Ideology in Ireland, 1541-1641* (Dublin: the Four Courts Press).

2000: Jane Ohlmeyer (ed.): *Political Thought in Seventeenth-Century Ireland: Kingdom or Colony?* (Cambridge University Press).

2000: S. J. Connolly (ed.): *Political Ideas in Eighteenth-Century Ireland* (Dublin: the Four Courts Press).

2001: Michael J. Mendle (ed.): *The Putney Debates of 1647: the Army, the Levellers, and the English State* (Cambridge University Press).

2006: David Armitage (ed.): *British Political Thought in History, Literature and Theory, 1500-1800* (Cambridge University Press).