Locke, William III, and the Reform of the Universities

J. R. MILTON (KING'S COLLEGE LONDON)

Recommended citation:

For more information about this article:
https://ojs.lib.uwo.ca/index.php/locke/article/view/906

Locke Studies is published by The John Locke Society.
This is an open access article published under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International license, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited and shared under the original license.
Most of the major early modern philosophers attended university, but before Kant none of them spent a lifetime as a university teacher. Locke’s connections with the academic world were closer than most: he went up to Oxford in 1652, at the age of twenty, as a newly elected student of Christ Church,¹ and he stayed there for nearly fifteen years. Though only intermittently in residence thereafter, he retained his studentship until he was expelled by royal command in 1684.² After the Revolution he drafted a petition to the king to have his place restored to him, but then withdrew it; according to Lady Masham he did not wish someone else to be deprived to make room for him.³ Locke wanted a public acknowledgement that he had been wronged, but he had no intention of returning to Christ Church and living again in the college. Neither his journal nor his letters contain any indication that he ever went back to Oxford.

¹ Students of Christ Church were approximately the equivalent of fellows at other colleges but had no role in the government of the college which was in the hands of the Dean and chapter: on the institution, see E. G. W. Bill, *Education at Christ Church, Oxford, 1600–1800* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 91–165.

² On these events, see Philip Milton, ‘Locke’s Expulsion from Christ Church in 1684’, *Eighteenth-Century Thought*, 4 (2009), 29–65.

³ Masham to Le Clerc, 12 Jan. 1705, Jean Le Clerc, *Epistolario*, ed. Maria Grazia Sina and Mario Sina (Florence: Leo Olschki, 1987–97), ii. 507. There is a draft of the petition in Locke’s hand in Bodleian Library [Bodl.]. MS Locke c. 25, fo. 41 and a copy in another hand of the full petition on fo. 42; part of the former and the whole of the latter were printed in Lord King, *The Life of John Locke* (London: Colburn and Bentley, 1830), i. 325–6. There is also a copy in the library at Christ Church, MS 375, item 3.
One document among Locke’s papers gives some further clues to his attitude towards his *alma mater* during this last part of his life. In November 1690 he drafted a proposal—set out in the formal language of an Act of Parliament—to remove from the fellows of colleges at Oxford and Cambridge any obligation to take holy orders:

And since a greater number of men in holy orders than can be well and plentifully provided for by ecclesiasticall preferments is of great prejudice to the said universities as also to the Church & Kingdom of England Be it further enacted by the authority aforesaid That noe fellow or scholler of the foundation of any colledg in either of the said Universities who does not finde in himself a disposition & fitnesse for soe high and sacred a function shall be obleigd hereafter to take holy orders or shall suffer losse of his Place expulsion or any other punishment for the neglect or omission thereof Any statute law or usage in either of the said universitie or of any colledg in either of the said universities notwithstanding.  

The phrase ‘noe fellow or scholler of the foundation’ makes it clear that the proposal was to apply to the students of Christ Church as well as to the fellows of other colleges. Locke’s strong aversion to taking orders had made the tenure of his own studentship precarious during the mid-1660s, and potentially so for some years thereafter.

He did not wish to see other young men placed in the same position. Any attempt to remove the requirement that college fellows should (generally) take orders would have been met by furious opposition, and even if William III and his ministers had privately favoured the proposal, they were occupied with other matters of (to them) far greater importance. A rather more modest reform was

---

4 Bodl., MS Locke c. 25, fo. 45’, endorsed ‘Universities Nov. 90’. The corrections in this document show clearly that it was composed by Locke himself, and not merely copied by him from another source.

proposed in 1692, when an attempt was made in the House of Commons to add a clause to a bill confirming the charters of the University of Cambridge and its colleges; this would have kept the colleges as predominantly clerical bodies, but would have allowed ‘any Number of Fellows, not exceeding one Third of the whole Number of Fellows at a time, to profess Law or Physick; any Statutes, Ordinances, or Usages of the said University, Colleges, or Halls, to the contrary notwithstanding’. The entire bill was rejected by a comfortable majority of 119 votes to 69, one of the tellers for the Noes being Locke’s friend and correspondent, Sir Walter Yonge, in other respects a firm Whig. After that, things went quiet for the remainder of William’s reign.

II

Between 1717 and 1719 several schemes were floated to reform the English universities, with the aim of permanently breaking the power of the Tories and their allies among the High Church clergy. These plans never came to fruition—indeed the proposed legislation


7 The attempt is mentioned in John Gascoigne, ‘Church and state allied: the failure of parliamentary reform of the universities, 1688–1800’, in A. L. Beier, David Cannadine, and James M. Rosenheim (eds.), The First Modern Society: Essays in English History in Honour of Lawrence Stone (Cambridge: CUP, 1989), 401–29, at 405, but with several serious errors: the bill was described as ‘An Act for Conforming [sic] the Charters of the Universities’, suggesting that both English universities were involved, the clause was wrongly reported as ‘allow[ing] any number of fellows to profess law or medicine’, and the whole episode was misdated to February 1691, when parliament was not even sitting.
was never submitted to parliament—but they generated a short flurry of controversial writing, both for and against.

Two accounts purporting to describe Locke’s attitude towards such reforms were published during these years. The first was in 1717, in An Account of the University of Cambridge, and the Colleges there, a work written by Edmond (or Edmund) Miller (c.1670–1730), a fellow of Trinity College:

I have been credibly inform’d, That the late famous, truly learned, and wise Mr. Lock, being admitted to the Conversation of that King [William III], at the beginning of His Reign, told his Majesty, That he had made a most glorious and happy Revolution; but that the good Effects of it wou’d be soon lost, if no Care was taken to regulate the Universities. Upon which His Majesty said to a Noble Peer now living, I think there is something in what Mr. Lock says; but the Peer reply’d, That Mr. Lock was a mere Scholar; tho’ Experience has sufficiently shewn, That he was a true Prophet; and a truer, tho’ not a greater Politician than the Peer.

The story was clearly regarded as one that might interest a continental audience: it was translated in a brief report on the book which appeared in the Bibliothèque angloise later in the same year.

Miller was a common lawyer—a serjeant-at-law—and a lay fellow of Trinity, where he had become one of the most active of the fellows opposed to what they thought of as the tyrannical rule of the

---


9 [John Toland], The State-Anatomy of Great Britain (London: John Philips, [1717]); Reasons for a Royal Visitation; occasion’d by the present great Defection of the Clergy from the Government. Shewing the absolute Necessity of Purging the Universities, and restoring Discipline to the Church (London: J. Roberts, 1717); Matthew Hole, The Second Part of the Antidote against the Poison of the following Pamphlets intituled …. IV. The State-Anatomist against Universities and Pulpits … VI. Reasons for visiting of the Universities (Oxford: E. Whistler, 1717).

10 An Account of the University of Cambridge (London: J. Baker, 1717), 196.

11 Bibliothèque angloise, 1 (1717), 539–40.

126
Master, the great classical scholar Richard Bentley.\textsuperscript{12} He was also Deputy High Steward of the University. His \textit{Account of the University of Cambridge} was by no means a work of harmless antiquarian scholarship, as was made clear to potential readers by the remainder of its full title: \textit{Being a Plain Relation of many of their Oaths Statutes and Charters. By which will appear, The Necessity the present Members lie under, of endeavouring to obtain such Alterations, as may render ’em practicable, and more suitable to the present Times. Together with A Few Natural, and Easie Methods, how the Legislature, may for the future fix That, and the other great Nursery of Learning, in the true Interest of the Nation, and Protestant Succession. Most Humbly propos’d to both Houses of Parliament.} Miller was pressing for a royal visitation of the university that would reduce the power of the clergy by removing the obligation imposed on almost all fellows of taking orders, and would also replace the study of divinity by more useful disciplines such as fortification, gunnery, navigation, drainage, and experimental philosophy.\textsuperscript{13}

In Cambridge, and indeed in his own college, the book was not at all well received, the events that followed being described by a later historian of the university:

The Heads of Colleges immediately on the appearance of this publication, applied to the Earl of Manchester the High Steward, to remove the author from the office of Deputy High Steward; the Earl complied with the request, and the Senate ratified his act in a grace in which the book is termed, ‘Libellum quendam famosum, contra honorem et privilegia Academiae scriptum.’ Proceedings were also instituted in the Vicechancellor’s Court


\textsuperscript{13} \textit{An Account}, 148, 150.
against the Serjeant, with the view of procuring his expulsion from the University, but these proceedings were ultimately abandoned.\textsuperscript{14}

Though Miller was not expelled from the university, he had fatally alienated his former supporters among the fellows of Trinity, and in 1719 he cut a deal with Bentley under which he resigned his fellowship in return for a settlement of all his (considerable) financial claims against the college. He then departed for London, where he resumed his legal practice.\textsuperscript{15}

After leaving Cambridge, Miller had a short parliamentary career as a Whig MP for Petersfield in Hampshire from 1722 to 1727, and in 1726 gained preferment as a Baron of the Exchequer in Scotland.\textsuperscript{16} He was an extreme anti-clerical, who disliked the High Church clergy so much as to describe them in his will as ‘the Vermin of the Nation’.\textsuperscript{17} He did not say who had ‘credibly inform’d’ him of Locke’s conversation with the king, but his words were clearly designed to indicate that the story was more than a stray piece of academic gossip, and there is no reason to disbelieve him. Whether the story is true is, of course, quite another matter.

Another version of the same story was published two years later, when Thomas Gordon, a young Scottish lawyer and journalist, published a short pamphlet, \textit{The Character of an Independent Whig}, in which the following account appeared:

One of the greatest Men of the last Age told King William, That the Universities, if they continued upon the present Foot, would destroy Him, or the Nation, or some of His Successors. And they have ever since been

\textsuperscript{14} C. H. Cooper, \textit{Annals of Cambridge} (Cambridge: Metcalfe and Palmer, 1842–52), iv. 146; see also Monk, \textit{Bentley}, i. 414–16.

\textsuperscript{15} Monk, \textit{Bentley}, ii. 81–8.

\textsuperscript{16} Miller has no entry in the \textit{ODNB}, but there is a short biographical account in Romney Sedgwick (ed.), \textit{The House of Commons 1715–1754} (London: HMSO, 1970), ii. 258.

\textsuperscript{17} National Archives, Kew [henceforward, NA], PROB 11/368, fo. 186v.
endeavouring to make good his Words. That Prince was so thoroughly
apprized of the dangerous Genius and Principles of these two Bodies of Men,
that he intended a Regulation, but, as it is said, was prevented by the
pernicious Advice of the late Duke of S——, who had at that Time gained the
King’s Confidence, and was at the Head of the Whigs, but was betraying both,
and making a Party with the Tories, as afterwards plainly enough appeared.\textsuperscript{18}

The identity of the person who had allegedly given this advice to the
king was not indicated, but it was revealed a decade later, when this
essay was included in the fifth edition of \textit{The Independent Whig}, a
periodical mostly written by Gordon and John Trenchard, which had
originally been published in weekly instalments between January
1720 and January 1721 and frequently reprinted thereafter. A
footnote in the fifth edition revealed the identity of the great man as
‘\textit{Mr. Locke’}.\textsuperscript{19} The Duke of S—— was not identified, but the
description of his career indicates without any room for doubt that
it was Charles Talbot (1660–1718), twelfth Earl and (from 1694)
first Duke of Shrewsbury. Shrewsbury was one of the
Secretaries of
State in 1689–90 and again from 1694 to 1698. Gordon’s
description of him as then being at the head of the Whigs but
making a party with the Tories seems to link the story with the
second of these periods, whereas Miller had located the story ‘at the
beginning’ of William’s reign, which would point to 1689–90.

Like Miller, Gordon was a fervent Whig with an intense dislike
of Tories and High Churchmen and a desire to see them crushed,
or at least rendered politically impotent. He came from a part of
Scotland—Kircudbright, in Galloway—where the Covenanting
tradition had been particularly strong, and his animus against the
Anglican clergy seems a blend of an Enlightenment hatred of

\textsuperscript{18} \textit{The Character of an Independent Whig} (London: J. Roberts, 1719), 11–12.

\textsuperscript{19} [John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon], \textit{The Independent Whig}, 5th edn. (London:
J. Peele, 1732), ii. 348. The essay in which this passage occurs, ‘The Folly of the Clergy’s
demanding Respect when their Characters are bad’ was taken (with alterations) from \textit{The
Character of an Independent Whig}, and had not been included in earlier editions of \textit{The
Independent Whig}. 129
of prelacy in all its forms. He probably came south after the Act of Union and spent his early years in London living on his wits. Trenchard, whose widow Gordon subsequently married, came by contrast from a well-connected Whig family—a distant relative, Sir John Trenchard, had been an associate of Locke’s patron the first Earl of Shaftesbury and subsequently Secretary of State under William III. If Gordon did not make up the story of Locke and William III—and this would seem very unlikely, given Miller’s earlier recounting of it—then his most likely source would have been Trenchard.20

Whether Miller and Gordon knew each other is unclear, and the only piece of evidence known to the present author is rather difficult to interpret. In his will, Miller left 20 guineas to a ‘Mr John Gordon … for his many writings & Excellent expressions in favour of Liberty’. No author called John Gordon appears to have written anything on such matters, and the thought naturally arises as to whether the person intended was Thomas Gordon. The main difficulty with this otherwise attractive conclusion is that no fewer than three copies of Miller’s will have survived, and in all of them the handwriting is clear enough for there to be no doubt whatever that the name given is John Gordon, not Thomas.21

III

It is certainly not absurd to suppose that Locke could have had a conversation with William III of the kind Miller and Gordon


21 NA, PROB 11/368; NA, E 134/7Geo2/Trin4; London Metropolitan Archives, ACC/3085/3. None of these is the original will, but it would seem unlikely that the same copying error was made on three separate occasions.
described. Some of his biographers have, indeed, been quite prepared to suppose quite close relations between them: according to Fox Bourne, Locke met his future sovereign while he was in the Netherlands, and a ‘hearty friendship’ grew up between Locke and both William and his wife.\(^{22}\) No evidence was cited for these claims, and all Locke’s papers reveal is that in the autumn of 1687 either he or his manservant made several short trips from Rotterdam to The Hague, where William had his court.\(^{23}\) It would be over-hasty to conclude from this that Locke had any dealings with William or Mary: when he went to The Hague in February 1689, just before leaving for England, it was to see Lady Mordaunt, and his earlier visits—if it was he indeed who made them, and not Brounower—may have been for the same reason.\(^{24}\) Despite frequent claims to the contrary, Locke did not travel back to England on the same ship as Princess Mary, but a copy of the first edition of the \textit{Essay} was presented to her in 1690.\(^{25}\)

Edmond Miller’s account of Locke’s conversation with William states that it took place ‘at the beginning of His reign’, and though vague this does seem to imply a meeting soon after Locke’s return to England. Locke may have spoken with the king at this time, but if he did, their meetings seem to have left no record.\(^{26}\) Locke was not someone who had regular access to the king: when James Tyrrell wished a petition on behalf of a distressed relative to be

\(^{22}\) H. R. Fox Bourne, \textit{The Life of John Locke} (London: Henry S. King, 1876), ii. 57–8.

\(^{23}\) Bodl., MS Locke f. 34, fos. 12', 13'; these visits are not mentioned in Locke’s journal.


\(^{25}\) Roger Woolhouse, \textit{Locke: A Biography} (Cambridge: CUP, 2007), 265, 490; Bodl., MS Locke c. 25, fo. 50'; \textit{Correspondence}, viii. 450.

\(^{26}\) Locke’s draft letter of 21 Feb. 1689 to Lord Mordaunt, \textit{Correspondence}, iii. 573–6, reporting his decision to decline the king’s offer of a diplomatic post makes it clear that the two men had not met to discuss the offer.
presented to the king, he told Locke that if Locke thought the plan feasible, he would give him a petition from her ‘which I desire you would give either to my Lord M. or Lord S. to be deliverd to his Majesty.’

There was no suggestion that Locke might have been able to do it himself.

The only conversations between Locke and the king for which there is firm evidence took place much later, after Locke had been involved in the great recoinage and had been appointed a member of the Board of Trade and Plantations. In January 1698 Locke travelled to Kensington Palace, where he was offered an unidentified but clearly important post, which E. S. de Beer surmised might have been that of Secretary of State for the southern department, recently vacated by the Duke of Shrewsbury. Whatever the offer was, Locke chose to decline it.

The other recorded conversation took place in 1700, and related to Locke’s resignation from the Board of Trade. According to Pierre Coste:

At length, when Mr. LOCKE could no longer pass the Summer at London without endangering his life, he went and resigned that Office to the King himself, upon account that his health wou’d permit him to stay no longer in Town. This reason did not hinder the King from intreating Mr. LOCKE to continue in his Post, telling him expressly, that tho’ he cou’d stay at London but a few weeks, his services in that office wou’d yet be very necessary to him: but at length he yielded to the representations of Mr. LOCKE, who could not prevail upon himself, to hold an Employment of that importance, without doing the duties of it more regularly. He formed and executed this design, without mentioning a word of it to any body whatsoever; thus avoiding with a generosity rarely to be found, what others wou’d have earnestly laid out after: for by making it known, that he was about to quit that Employment, which brought him in a thousand pounds a year, he might easily have enter’d

27 Tyrrell to Locke, 5 Mar. 1690, Correspondence, iv. 22. Lord M was Lord Mordaunt, now the Earl of Monmouth; Lord S is not certainly identifiable.

into a kind of composition with any pretender, who having particular notice of this news, and being befriended with Mr. Locke’s interest, might have carried the Post from any other person. This, we may be sure, he was told of, and that too by way of reproach. *I knew it very well,* replied he; *but this was the very reason why I communicated my design to no body. I received this Place from the King himself, and to him I resolved to restore it, to dispose of it as he thought proper.*

There is little reason to doubt any significant part of this. We know from the journal of the Board of Trade and Plantations that Locke went to see the king on 27 June, the day before he informed the board of his resignation. Coste had been living at Oates when the events he described took place, and he could have heard the story either directly from Locke himself, or at second-hand via Lady Masham, who herself gave a similar account to Jean Le Clerc:

In the year 1696 Mr. Locke was made one of the Lords Commissioners for Trade and the Plantations; a place of a thousand pound a yeare sallary. In which he acquited himself with great approbation of all men till the year 1700 but then (on account of not being able to stay in London so long as he was wont to do) he laid it down; without saying any thing to any one till he had surrendred his Commission to the King, who very unwillingly receiv’d it, telling him that were his attendance ever so small, he was sensible his continuance in the Commission would be usefull to him; and that he did not desire he should be one day in Town on that account to the prejudice of his health. But he told the King he could not be satisfi’d to hold a place of that Proffitt without giveing more attendance on it than he was able to do; and

---


30 ‘Mr. Locke acquainted the Board that … he had been yesterday to wait upon the King and desired his Majesty’s leave to lay down his place in this Commission, and that he therefore came to take leave of the Board; and so withdrew’, *Calendar of State Papers Colonial, America and West Indies, xviii* (1700), (London: HMSO, 1910), 386. The meeting is also mentioned in James Vernon to the Duke of Shrewsbury, 27 June 1700, in G. P. R. James (ed.), *Letters Illustrative of the Reign of William III. From 1696 to 1708. Addressed to the Duke of Shrewsbury by James Vernon, Esq.* (London: Henry Colburn, 1841), iii. 100.
humbly therefore beg’d to be discharg’d from that service which was the last Publick Business he undertook.\footnote{Masham to Le Clerc, 12 Jan. 1705, \textit{Epistolario}, ii. 509.}

The two accounts are clearly textually independent, in that neither was copied from the other. Coste’s memoir was begun very soon after Locke died, and though he subsequently claimed to have read a version of it to Lady Masham before he left Oates in the late autumn of 1704, her account is more likely to be based on her own recollections of what Locke had told her than on anything she had heard from Coste.\footnote{On the composition of Coste’s memoir, see J. R. Milton, ‘Pierre Coste, John Locke, and the Shaftesbury Family: A New Letter’, \textit{Locke Studies}, 7 (2007), 159–71.} Her own version of the conversation was given in a letter to Le Clerc dated 12 January 1704 (i.e. 1704/5), more than a month after Coste had gone to London. Coste’s memoir was published in February 1705, before he would have had any chance to read Lady Masham’s account when it appeared as part of Le Clerc’s ‘Eloge’ later in the same year.\footnote{‘Lettre de Mr. Coste à l’Auteur de ces Nouvelles, à l’occasion de la mort de Monsieur Locke’, \textit{Nouvelles de la république des lettres}, Feb. 1705, 154–77; ‘Eloge de feu Mr. Locke’, \textit{Bibliothèque choisie}, 6 (1705), 342–411.}

There are parallels between the stories told by Coste and Lady Masham on the one hand, and by Miller and Gordon on the other, in that in both cases the two versions of the story appear to be independent from one another. The main difference is in their provenance. Coste and Lady Masham had both lived in the same household as Locke for many years and knew him well, while neither Miller nor Gordon appear ever to have met him.\footnote{The early part of Gordon’s life is extremely obscure, but he was probably still a boy when Locke died, and had certainly not left Scotland.} Their source—or sources—were not indicated, and unless further evidence is forthcoming can only be a matter of conjecture.
Apart from its intrinsic interest as providing another potential stone for the cairn of Lockian biography, the story of Locke talking with William III about the reform of the universities is important because it bears on a central and enduring problem of interpretation: Locke was undoubtedly a Whig, but what kind of Whig was he? Was he a Court Whig, a firm but moderate supporter of the revolution of 1688, who felt that it had gone quite far enough? Or was he a Country Whig, a radical who applauded the changes which the new regime had brought but wished them to be carried much further?

It would appear that the two main accounts of the alleged conversation with the king, by Miller and by Gordon, are independent of one another, and though this certainly does not prove that the story is true, it does show that it was being related a decade or so after Locke’s death, when many people who had known him were still alive.

If the story is true, at least in broad outlines, then one can only speculate as to how it came into the hands of Miller and Gordon. William can be excluded as a source, as probably can Shrewsbury since both versions of the story treat him unfavourably. It could have come from a courtier who had been present. A final possibility is that it derived from Locke himself, who had remembered the exchange and subsequently related it to one of his friends. If this was what happened, perhaps the most likely transmitter of such a story would have been Anthony Collins, who moved in the same circles as Trenchard and Gordon, and shared much of their outlook.35 (Whether he knew Miller is less clear, though he certainly owned a copy of his Account of the University of Cambridge.36) Collins greatly admired Locke, and was capable of taking vigorous


action to safeguard his reputation from slurs and false reports.\(^{37}\) He would very happily have passed on a story that revealed Locke’s hostility to the High Church clergy, but it is not at all likely that he would have invented one.

Someone who might well have invented such a story was John Toland, who in 1717 had himself argued strongly for a royal visitation of the English universities that would purge them of Tories and other undesirables and relieve the fellows of colleges from any obligation to take orders.\(^ {38}\) Toland was well connected, if widely distrusted, and his editorial work on Edward Ludlow’s memoirs gives ample evidence of both his ability and his lack of scruple.\(^ {39}\) There are people of whom one can be quite sure that they would have been deterred from spreading a story about someone by the thought that it might be untrue, but Toland would not seem to be one of them.

So is the story true, either in whole or in part? Did Locke wish to see the English universities reformed in the manner proposed a generation later by the anti-clerical Whigs, and if he did, did he voice such views to William III on one of the (apparently infrequent) occasions when he spoke with him? It is difficult to be sure, and more evidence—if it exists—could swing the decision either way. My own inclination is to be cautious. Locke did sometimes harbour anti-clerical sentiments—usually mild, but


occasionally not, \(^{40}\) though this never prevented him from having friends among the clergy—but he would have had no sympathy with the anti-Christian outlook so widespread (in barely concealed form) among the radical Whigs in the decades after his death. He was not one of them, and their testimony needs to be approached with caution.

When any story of this kind is told, one needs to consider the aims and motives of those who are telling it. As the Vicar of Bray knew well, when George came over in Pudding Time, Moderate Men may indeed have looked big, but men like Miller and Gordon were far from moderate, especially in ecclesiastical matters. They were both on the extreme wing of their party, the Whig counterparts to Tory ultras like Sacheverell and Atterbury. A reform of the English universities along the lines they proposed would not merely have enraged the Tories and High Churchmen—that was only to be expected, and could be allowed for—but there was also a very real danger that it would have alienated the Whig sympathizers among the clergy, not least among the bishops. For the purposes of trying to build and stabilize a reforming coalition, what could have been more apposite than a story linking such a reform with two Whig heroes, Our Great Restorer, King William, and the philosopher who had provided the theoretical justification for the revolution which he had brought about?

*King’s College London*