

*Il tema*

THE RELEVANCE OF JOHN TOLAND  
TO UNITED KINGDOM AND NORTHERN  
IRELAND POLITICS TODAY

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1.

It is sadly appropriate that, just eighty kilometres from this conference on the Enlightenment, the political dynamic of late seventeenth-century north-west Europe has not yet been superseded. In this paper I discuss the resonances between Williamite politics and current politics in Northern Ireland in particular and the U.K. in general. I relate these both to Toland's writings and his political activities.

From the perspective of my subject matter, it is appropriate that we are meeting here in Ireland in July. July is a difficult month in the northern half of this island. Primæval tensions are dragged to the surface in an all too familiar confrontational way between Catholic and Protestant. At best, neighbours stop talking to each other, or Orange lodges and churches of all denominations go up in flames. At worst, children are burnt to death.

And yet, what is being celebrated and mourned? The victory of Protestant William over Catholic James at the battle of the Boyne. That military outcome had a huge significance over Europe. It arguably established a more pluralist society in England, and safeguarded much of western Europe from the expansionist dynastic ambitions of Louis XIV's France. Although the war between France and England continued until the Treaty of Rijswijk in 1697, the battle of the Boyne had a decisive role in shaping the geopolitical reality of eighteenth-century Europe.

One would imagine then, that it would make absolutely no historical, political or religious sense to contest today the outcome of that military engagement. Yet this is exactly what occurs in Northern Ireland every summer. Consider a typical victory celebration, for example V. E. (Victory in Europe) Day. V. E. Day is a celebration of the end of a *war*. It is also a celebration of how much has changed since 1945. V. E. Day celebrates a *conclusive* turning point in history.

The Twelfth of July is a celebration in stark contrast to V. E. Day. For it celebrates a *battle*, not a war. From the perspective of the rest of Europe, the battle of the Boyne was a *conclusive* event. This has not been the case in Ulster: the defeat of political Papism was *inconclusive*. No one in Northern Ireland knows yet whether The Twelfth will be seen as a real victory in the struggle to stay British in Ireland, or whether it will have been a pyrrhic victory, only stemming the tide of confessional separatism in north-east Ireland for the past three centuries. Thus the drama of Drumcree symbolises further annual inconclusive battles in the struggle between Catholic and Protestant in Ireland. Political unionism can, perhaps, be summed up as an attempt to prevent the battle of the Boyne from becoming a pyrrhic victory.

## 2.

It has often been said that it is unwise to write history until after the dust has settled, when present and past have been clearly demarcated. I venture to suggest that the events of the late seventeenth-century cannot yet have a line drawn firmly under them in Ireland. This would certainly be true in popular perceptions of history. Perhaps this can be advantageous in understanding the mind of key personalities in Irish and British politics at that time, in that their issues are also our issues. One such influential person was John Toland.

We can trace the subversive ripples throughout the eighteenth century from this Donegal gadfly: from the Commonwealthman James Harrington, through Francis Hutcheson and on to the United Irishmen. Margaret Jacob – in her *The Radical Enlightenment*

(1981) – has argued that Toland was a key figure in the spread of Freemasonry in the early eighteenth century. In his book *A Deeper Silence* (1993), A. T. Q. Stewart proposed that Masonry played an important role in the development of 1790's republicanism in Ireland. It was Toland's deconstruction of the use of mystery by religious of all denominations that resonated so strongly with eighteenth-century radicals in Ireland.

Yet Toland was no separatist. He was a passionate believer in Ireland's rule by the English Episcopalian party in Ireland. He supported the Irish Parliament, but only as a means of excluding Catholics from power, as seen in his *Reasons ... why ... An Act for better Securing the Dependency of the Kingdom of Ireland upon the Crown of Great Britain Shou'd not Pass into Law* (1720). For example, in that pamphlet Toland states:

Nothing shou'd be attempted that might bring about the possibility of a Union of civil interests between the Protestants and Papists of Ireland, whose antipathies and animosities all sound Politicians will ever labor to keep alive (p. 23).

Ironically, the publication of *Christianity not Mysterious* rendered Toland *persona non grata* among establishment Protestantism in Ireland. By contrast, he had the ear of William of Orange and many other influential persons in London. His many pamphlets reveal a skilled propagandist for the idea of a Protestant Britain and a virulent anti-Papist sensibility.

### 3.

Irish republican separatists (Sinn Féin) are – in the aftermath of the failure of the most recent bout of negotiations in Northern Ireland [July 1999] – waging a strong anti-unionist propaganda war at present by saying that unionists don't want to share power with Catholics. This position is arguable, but I draw your attention to it if only to show that the current political dynamic in Ulster – depending on one's politics – can seem to resonate with the same

overriding political dynamic throughout the British Isles from the accession of James II in 1685 to the defeat of the Stuart Pretender to the throne Bonnie Prince Charlie at Culloden in 1745: that is, to prevent Catholic rule in any part of these islands.

Can we argue that anti-Catholicism is confined only to the western extremity of the United Kingdom? No. Linda Colley has shown in her book *Britons: Forging the Nation* (1992) how essential Protestantism was in creating the new nationality of Britishness in the eighteenth century. Laws that are at the very core of the establishment of the British monarchy show a definite anti-Papist bias. In both the 1688 Bill of Rights and the 1701 Act of Succession the following passage occurs:

all ... persons that were or afterwards should be reconciled to or shall communion with the see or church of Rome or should professe the popish religion or marry a papist should be made ... forever incapable to inherit possess or enjoy the crown and government of this realm.

(I wonder does the inclusion of the word “government” imply that Tony Blair is “forever incapable” to be Prime Minister because his wife is Catholic!) One would not be surprised to hear rhetoric such as this from Ian Paisley three hundred years later. Yet John Toland was one of the persons who were chosen to carry the Act of Succession – that guaranteed the Protestant nature of the English monarchy – to Hanover in 1701.

I am not suggesting that John Toland would today be a Paisleyite, or even that Ian Paisley can be regarded as a freethinker! I suggest that it is problematical to regard Toland simply as a radical freethinker unambiguously on the side of tolerance.

We see other elements of Protestant – or should I say Anglican – political supremacism in such laws as the Catholic “Emancipation” Act of 1829 (which forbids priests from taking seats in Parliament). The then Attorney-General Sir Michael Havers, writing in *Halsbury’s Statutes* in the mid 1970s, suggested that Catholics could not teach in such schools as Eton or Westminster, places where members of the Royal Family are educated.

One of Winston Churchill's most famous quotations is one he made in 1922, as Ireland was being partitioned. He compares the change in Europe after the first World War to the intractableness of Ulster:

The whole map of Europe has been changed. The position of countries has been violently altered. The modes of thought of men, the whole outlook on affairs, the grouping of parties, all have encountered violent and tremendous changes in the deluge of the world, but as the deluge subsides and the waters fall short we see the dreary steeples of Fermanagh and Tyrone emerging once again. The integrity of their quarrel is one of the few institutions that has been unaltered in the cataclysm which has swept the world.

Perhaps I could dare to rephrase Winston Churchill and suggest that if one examines the sectarian elements in U. K. law, it is the dreary steeples of Anglican middle England rather than Ulster that help to perpetuate the integrity of the quarrel between British and Irish identities.

#### 4.

John Toland had a foot in both camps. He was born in Plantation Ulster of Gaelic lineage, and at various times of his life was Catholic, Protestant, Irish and British. To attempt to come to grips with Toland's writings from three hundred years ago is to gain a deeper understanding of present-day Ireland and Britain.

I will end on a note of caution. Perhaps in Ireland, it is not possible for us to draw the definitive portrait of Toland, for in a sense we are all still undefined: trapped in the yawning gap between political reality and tribal aspiration. For Toland it was a case of political aspiration and tribal reality: an enthusiastic proponent of the concept of Britain (which came into fruition 11 years after *Christianity not Mysterious* was published), yet doomed to marginality as an outlandish person.

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