

# James Harrington and Robert Molesworth: European Models and the Politicisation of Travel

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*The aim of this paper will be to demonstrate that for several important political writers of the mid to late seventeenth century experiences on the continent led to a process of political discovery which had a profound influence on their subsequent ideas and writings. This is in opposition to the conventional narrative which argues that political thinkers, particularly republicans, were exclusively influenced by the ancient commonwealths of Rome, Athens and Sparta, and the political writings of Aristotle, Plato and Cicero. From these ancient constitutions, it has been argued, they sought ways in which England could be settled after the political turmoil of the civil wars and interregnum. By looking to the specific examples of James Harrington, who stands central to the republican canon, and the lesser known Robert Molesworth, I aim to demonstrate that discovery could be first-hand as well as second. I will argue that Harrington's experiences on the continent first ignited his interest in political systems, and that this influenced the method by which he went about building his utopia, The Commonwealth of Oceana. Molesworth is even clearer on the connection between politics and travel; he wants travel to create citizens, with all its political undertones, as opposed to gentlemen. Moreover, he does not simply believe in visiting 'good' governments, in this case the commonwealths of Europe, but also the worst forms of government, in which he claims the greatest lessons can be learned. I will demonstrate that both men advocated a reinvigorated Grand Tour as the ideal means of creating not gentlemen, but citizens.*

‘What is the purpose of writing about other lands or recounting one’s experiences of foreign travel?’ asks Andrew Hadfield in the introduction to his monograph on travel and colonial writing.<sup>2</sup> His answer, that it provides an increase in our knowledge of other cultures, may seem simplistic, but more engaging is his claim that travel writings were undoubtedly political genres in a double sense: firstly that they contained political content, and secondly that they were often caught up in the turbulent political histories in which they were produced. He goes on to demonstrate, through Markku Peltonen’s argument of a broadly based definition of republicanism dating back to the early eighteenth century, that the range of political opinions were even more widespread than Peltonen concludes, and that some of

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<sup>2</sup> Andrew Hadfield, *Literature, Travel and Colonial Writing in the English Renaissance 1545-1625* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 1.

‘the most vociferous expressions of republican sentiment were contained in the representations of other countries and cultures.’<sup>3</sup>

Hadfield’s assertion of the political nature of travel and travel literature is hardly unique. John Stoye also highlights that prior to the seventeenth century much of the didactic writing on travel chiefly justified it as a means to educate trustworthy and well-informed servants for the state.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, even into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Jeremy Black argues that, through the conventions of the Grand Tour, there were always opportunities for travellers to learn about politics and government from their time spent at court and through visiting with aristocratic families.<sup>5</sup> That there was a connection between the role of travel and a political education was therefore an accepted trope both before and after the seventeenth century. And yet the study of seventeenth-century republicanism has largely remained rooted in the ‘English republican tradition’. As such, historians have tended to see English republicanism as distinctive, and where connections with the broader republican tradition has been examined, the focus has primarily emphasised its classical roots rather than any influence exerted on English thought by contemporary republican regimes. This notion of ‘classical republicanism’ was established in the 1940s by Zera Fink, and was subsequently perpetuated by the great John Pocock, ensuring its lasting influence over the field.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 6. Also see Markku Peltonen, *Classical Humanism and Republicanism in English Political Thought, 1570-1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> John Walter Stoye, *English Travellers Abroad 1604-1667: Their Influence in English Society and Politics* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1952), 17.

<sup>5</sup> Jeremy Black, *The British Abroad: The Grand Tour in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1992), 216.

<sup>6</sup> Zera Fink, *The Classical Republicans: An Essay in the Recovery of a Pattern of Thought in Seventeenth Century England* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1988); J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1975).

Nonetheless, attempts have been made by historians to challenge this backwards perspective, such as that of Franco Venturi in the 1970s. He argued that tracing ideas back to their origins risked distorting their history, instead arguing that we should examine the function of ideas in the context of their own time.<sup>7</sup> However, this suggestion has been largely overlooked, and it is only recently with the rise of transnational history and cultural exchange and network theories that this has begun to be challenged.<sup>8</sup> It is as part of this current awareness of the necessity of broadening the national borders of republican studies, that the necessity of examining the role of travel becomes evident. Whilst travel literature has considered the impact of politics and indeed republicanism, the reverse has not been true. Accordingly, the role of travel and by extension, men's experiences of the continent, the lessons they learnt there, ideas they encountered and events they witnessed, have been overlooked.

Whilst it is not my intention to deny the influence of classical and biblical thought on a culture deeply ingrained in such a language, the ideas and events occurring immediately around these seventeenth-century republicans also had an impact on their political works. This article will demonstrate that travel proved to be an important source of information with regards to influencing men to thinking about politics broadly and republicanism specifically. As a result the contemporary world, including its events, ideas, politics and government, becomes an equally important factor to consider when approaching republican texts.

Here two case studies will serve to demonstrate my point. The first will examine James Harrington, perhaps the best known of the seventeenth century republicans, and the

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<sup>7</sup> Franco Venturi, *Utopia and Reform in the Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 2.

<sup>8</sup> Ann Thomson and Simon Burrows, eds., *Cultural Transfers: France and Britain in the Long Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2010); Quentin Skinner and Martin Van Gelderen, ed., *Republicanism: A Shared European Heritage, Vols. 1&2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Gaby Mahlberg and Dirk Wiemann, *European Contexts for English Republicanism* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013).

second will look at the lesser known Robert Molesworth. I will demonstrate that their experiences and self-discovery during their time on the continent had a direct impact on the political works they subsequently produced. Moreover, it will be shown that Harrington and Molesworth sought to reinvent the concept of travel, turning their backs on the traditional Grand Tour, and instead placing political education at its core.

Historians know little with regards to the specifics of James Harrington's life. We know that he attended Trinity College in Oxford, and that he left without a degree before entering the Inns of Court, although he subsequently abandoned that too. We know that he held no public office, but that he was a gentleman of the bedchamber to King Charles I during his captivity in the late 1640s. Little more is heard of him until he published *The Commonwealth of Oceana* in 1656. The Oceana of which he writes is fictional, and yet it is unmistakably England. Thus the orders and institutions that Harrington proposes are both an ideal model, and a practical proposal for the country. He based his political theory on the superiority of ancient prudence versus the failings of modern prudence. Put simply, this meant that he believed in a government of laws over a government of men. He believed that humans were always in danger of putting their own self-interest before the public good, and therefore that government had to be made of such instruments, constitutions and orders, that human nature could be removed from the equation.

The fact that Harrington travelled in his younger days is well documented by his biographers and contemporaries, particularly John Aubrey and Anthony Wood. However it is from John Toland, who edited Harrington's works, that we learn most with regards to the latter's experiences on the continent. Toland published his edited version of Harrington's tracts in 1700, and they were prefaced by a biography of his life. Since Toland has often been seen as an unreliable editor, and the papers that he claims to have worked from have been

lost, his account has been mistrusted by historians.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, we must approach Toland's account with a healthy degree of scepticism. Nonetheless, I shall demonstrate that the Harrington portrayed by Toland corresponds with ideas that can be found in *Oceana*.

Harrington's first step, claims Toland, was into Holland, a place 'wonderfully flourishing under the influence of their Liberty which they have so lately asserted.'<sup>10</sup> He tells us that Harrington spent time in 'the principle school of Martial Disciplin, and that for some months he lifted himself in my Lord CRAVEN'S Regiment and Sir ROBERT STONE'S.'<sup>11</sup> In itself, Harrington's travel into the United Provinces seems entirely unremarkable. With their excellent martial training, it was common for English soldiers to spend time in the Dutch army, although perhaps less so for Grand Tourists.

However, Toland expands by emphasising the way in which Holland was formative in the development of Harrington's political thought:

Here, no doubt it was, that he begun to make Government the Subject of his Mediations: for he was often heard to say that, before he left *England*, he knew no more of Monarchy, Anarchy, Aristocracy, Democracy, Oligarchy, or the like than as hard words whereof he learnt the signification in his Dictionary.<sup>12</sup>

Toland thus asserts here that Harrington learned in Holland the true meanings of these different types of government. The emphasis here is on experience. Learning from books is well and good, and indeed it might even fire up a curiosity, but to truly understand these types of government, one must experience them first hand. The rest of the account that Toland gives us of Harrington's travels stays true to the assertion that Harrington was now

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<sup>9</sup> Blair Worden, 'Whig History and Puritan Politics: The *Memoirs* of Edmund Ludlow Revisited', *Historical Research*, 75, 188 (2002), 209-237.

<sup>10</sup> John Toland, 'The Life of James Harrington' in *The Oceana of James Harrington, and His Other Works: Some wherof are now Publish'd from his own Manuscripts* ed. by John Toland (London: 1700), xiv.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv.

focused on politics. There is no account of the sights he saw, or experiences he had: rather we simply learn that in France Harrington saw the things that deserved his curiosity before making ‘such remarks on their government as will best appear in his Works’ before retiring to Italy. Of Italy we simply learn that: ‘He prefer’d *Venice* to all other places in *Italy*, as he did its Government to all those of the whole World.’<sup>13</sup>

That Harrington’s experiences on the continent shaped his political ideas is demonstrable if we examine closely Harrington’s *Commonwealth of Oceana*. In the ‘formation of the citizen’ Harrington argues that ‘we may not shut out this part of education’ – by which he means travel – ‘in a commonwealth which will herself be a traveller.’<sup>14</sup> This is a crucial passage, and one that has been overlooked, but which actually helps clarify significant parts of Harrington’s work. Firstly, the use of the word ‘citizen’ provides the notion of travel with a specifically political purpose, distinct from the usual phraseology that travel moulded young men into gentlemen. In Harrington’s eyes, travel as education has a more specific purpose; to create the ideal citizen who can be active and useful to the commonwealth. He goes on to state that ‘no man can be a politician, except he be first an historian or a traveller; for except he can see what must be, or what may be, he is no politician.’<sup>15</sup> So in order to be active in the commonwealth, or to be able to call oneself a politician, Harrington emphasizes the need to know of the world, either that which has gone before, or that exists now. What can be learned through travelling is therefore equally as useful and important as that which can be learned about historical governments from books.

The second significant aspect of this passage is the idea of the commonwealth as a traveller, and this statement shapes the way in which Harrington actually went about

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, xv.

<sup>14</sup> James Harrington, *The Commonwealth of Oceana* (1656) in *The Commonwealth of Oceana and A System of Politics* ed. by J. G. A. Pocock (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 197, 205.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 205.

constructing his ideal commonwealth. In his fictionalized world of Oceana, the character Lord Archon gathers his council of legislators around him, and requests ‘an urn to be brought’ so that each man may draw lots of specific models of government. These include ancient governments such as Athens, Rome, and Carthage, but also the far more modern Swiss Cantons, United Provinces and Venice. These governments, Archon claims, contain ‘in them all those excellencies whereof a commonwealth is capable (so that to have added more had been to no purpose)’.<sup>16</sup> The councillors were to study the government assigned to them, and based on their findings, the orders and constitution of the commonwealth of Oceana were to be modelled.

Again the emphasis here is on the value of ancient republics, as well as those of the modern world in providing information and useful material for legislators. Harrington argues that this handpicked selection of commonwealths contain within them all the best orders and laws. Harrington picks and chooses aspects of these commonwealths, and puts them together in a way that is best suited to England. In this way, Harrington’s commonwealth itself is a traveller. Rather than learning all in relation to one country and then transpose that wholesale to England, Harrington creates an amalgamated commonwealth based on the lessons learned from republics across Europe. Moreover, for those who are unable, for whatever reason, to stray beyond England’s borders, he suggests that:

every youth at his return from his travels is to present the censors with a paper of his own writing, containing the interests of state or form of government of the countries or some one of the countries where he hath been; and if it be good, the censors shall cause it to be printed and published.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 191-2.

Harrington believed that learning by experience could be equal to, if not more effective than, learning simply from books. Moreover, those who could travel should utilise their own experience in order to educate those who could not. Harrington wanted to learn about other republican forms of government so that he could build his ideal commonwealth, and in doing so bring peace and stability to England. Like Harrington, Robert Molesworth also believed in learning from experience, and ensuring the stability and peace of England. But writing under entirely different conditions to Harrington, Molesworth's approach was somewhat different.

Robert Molesworth has remained an understudied figure in the republican tradition. An Irishman, Molesworth graduated from Trinity College with a BA in 1675, before entering Lincoln's Inn. He pursued a career in both the English and Irish parliaments, but his outspoken nature and staunchly Whiggish views did not particularly suit him to the role, and he achieved little success. He is most famous for writing *An Account of Denmark*, published in 1694, after acting as an envoy at the Danish court from 1689-92, in order to counter French influence there. His three years in Denmark gave him inside knowledge of the Danish context, and particularly of the constitutional revolution that had occurred there in 1660 which had seen Gothic liberty displaced by legal hereditary absolutism. His account therefore asks the question: why did the Danes lose their freedom? And in asking this, he hopes to emphasize to his English audience the fragility of liberty and the need for them to protect it in their own state.

Here the focus will primarily rest on the Preface to the work, rather than any specifics about the Danish context itself. It holds particular interest because not only does Molesworth talk at length about the problems that existed with the way in which travel was



conventionally undertaken, but he also proposes ways in which this must be changed. It will be demonstrated that in several ways Harrington and Molesworth held similar views, although the latter was often more extreme than his predecessor. Molesworth is far more outspoken in his criticisms of the existing nature of travel; he wants to create a wider politically aware elite; and he wants them to travel to a much more diverse range of countries, not all of which were republican.

Like Harrington, Molesworth argues for a specifically political purpose to travel. He does not want to create gentlemen, but citizens, who are ‘serviceable to the Publick’ and who will then be capable of ‘contributing daily towards the bettering of our Constitution.’<sup>18</sup> However, he wants a wider proportion of the people to participate in this political education. He argued that ‘no Nation in the World’ can travel ‘so commodiously as the English.’ ‘The affluence of their Fortunes and Easiness in their private Affairs are evidently greater than those of other People of Europe,’ but that none have practiced less than they. In England, there ‘are a very many Gentlemen, whose Estates will afford them to Travel.’ Molesworth therefore proposes that all Gentlemen should travel in order to gain ‘Knowledge of the present State of our Neighbour Nations.’ In doing so, they would be suitably equipped to partake in ‘our Government in Parliament, where foreign Business comes frequently under consideration.’<sup>19</sup>

What Molesworth makes emphatically clear though, is that the Grand Tour, as it was conventionally practiced, was for the most part inadequate for this purpose. Traditionally the purpose of travel was to enable young men to acquire manners, and generally ‘make such Observations as shall render them useful to their country.’ However, he claims that the Grand

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<sup>18</sup> Robert Molesworth, *An Account of Denmark* (1693) in *An Account of Denmark with Francogallia and Some Considerations for the Promoting of Agriculture and Employing the Poor* ed. by Justin Chamption (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2011), 8.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

Tour 'hardly answers any of these ends; on the contrary, it has hitherto been so mischievous, that tis well travelling has been so little in fashion.'<sup>20</sup> He complains that 'we send them abroad Children', only for them to return home nothing better than 'great Boys', suggesting that they have learned nothing during their travels which will equip them for maturity or manhood. Of the habits these gentlemen are expected to acquire, he states that 'Languages is the very best' but it was more likely they would return home with 'an affected Foppishness', 'a filthy Disease' and the fear that 'they sometimes exchange their Religion.'<sup>21</sup> These complaints are not uncommon in seventeenth and eighteenth century literature. What makes Molesworth unique is the emphasis that he places on the danger of European courts, and subsequently, the way in which he proposes to change the nature of travel in Europe.

For Molesworth, the greatest danger facing young gentlemen on the continent was the lure of corrupt European courts, and political, rather than religious conversion. He feared that: 'the Pageantry, Luxury and Licentiousness of the more Arbitrary Courts have bribed them into an Opinion of that very Form of Government.'<sup>22</sup> Molesworth was afraid that these young Englishmen were being adversely influenced by the seemingly glamorous and exciting courts of France, Spain and Italy. He described them scathingly as 'Idiots who part with their Bread for a Glittering piece of Tinsel, who prefer gilded Slavery to coarse domestick *Liberty*.' He believed that these 'tinsel like' arbitrary courts were designed to 'dazzle the eyes of most travelers' with their manner of living, magnificent buildings, pleasant gardens and excellent entertainment, so much so that they did not notice the slavery that was inherent in their governments.<sup>23</sup> Indeed he says that these courts knowingly 'cast a disguise upon the

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 24.

slavery of those Parts’, and by keeping it hidden from view, the ‘Cursory Traveller, was prevented from considering the Calamities which accompany so much Splendour.’<sup>24</sup>

Molesworth then, despaired of the type of travel that had existed prior to the 1690s - the route of the Grand Tour took young men to countries in which they could be too easily distracted and corrupted. And yet, he did not believe that travel was a practice that should be stopped altogether. Rather, he merely suggested a change of destinations – from the warm, pleasant, glamorous courts of Southern Europe, to ‘the Northern Kingdoms and Provinces.’ In these northern countries, suggests Molesworth, there is ‘little or nothing to divert the Mind from contemplating Slavery in its own Colours, without any of its Ornaments.’<sup>25</sup>

Molesworth expanded his justification for travelling to these dreary countries and made it sound even less appealing. For him, the benefit of travelling to countries like Denmark, was to experience and truly feel the misery of the people who lived there. For Molesworth believed that it was only by appreciating how much worse others had it, that Englishmen could truly appreciate the joy of liberty that they possessed. For just as ‘practicing upon other Mens distempers is to make an able physician,’ so it was that only by ‘quitting his own country’ could an Englishman ‘know experimentally the want of publick Liberty.’<sup>26</sup> Continuing the analogy of illness and disease, Molesworth argued that a man who travelled into a country infected with the disease of slavery ‘does not only see, but in some measure feel the Grievances occasioned by it in the several Inconveniences of living... so as to relish better upon his return...the freedom and ease of his own home Constitution.’<sup>27</sup> Whilst Harrington had argued that experiencing government was fundamental in educating

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 8.

oneself about government, Molesworth emphasizes the need to truly feel the loss of liberty that accompanies absolutist government.

Like Harrington, Molesworth can see that there are aspects of other governments from which the English can learn. But just as before, Molesworth goes further than his predecessor: he is willing to see lessons to be learnt in even the worst forms of government, whereas Harrington could not see beyond the republican models. For Molesworth, ‘few governments are so ill constituted, as not to have some good Customs’, and he sees ‘admirable Regulations in Denmark’ as well as ‘among the Savage Americans’, that could be ‘fit to serve for Models to the most civilized Europeans.’<sup>28</sup> He uses the metaphor of trade to illustrate his point, arguing that our ‘Merchants bring every day from barren Countries many useful things, which our own good one does not produce.’ Why then should we not learn of ‘the Constitutions, Manners, and Condition of other Nations, as we might without doubt find out many things to our purpose, which now out of mere Ignorance keeps us from being sensible that we want.’<sup>29</sup> English pride and the belief in the excellence of their constitution was preventing them from becoming, perhaps, a stronger and more stable country. As his *Account of Denmark* demonstrates, if even a country that until 1660 had appeared to love its liberty and freedom could succumb to absolutism, then surely the same could happen to England.

Moreover, Molesworth even argues that in putting aside their pride and stubbornness, and looking towards the continent for lessons on the ways in which they could prevent a slide into tyranny, people would be following the classical example. He claims that the ‘Athenians, Spartans, and Romans did not think themselves too wise... to procure the Laws of other

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 10.

Nations, thereby to improve their own: and we know they throve by it.’<sup>30</sup> The ancient commonwealths, Molesworth argues, were willing and able to learn from one another in order to better and strengthen themselves; why then, asks Molesworth implicitly, are the English reluctant to do the same in order to improve themselves?

Here the argument comes full circle. It would be foolish to argue that contemporary republics and government held exclusive influence over these seventeenth century political thinkers. This was an era still educationally and culturally steeped in the classical world. It was in fact in the classical world that an important lesson could be found: the need to learn about political institutions and principles that were of immediate and contemporaneous relevance. Although this could be learned in books, both Molesworth and Harrington argue that the most efficient way to gain this essential knowledge was through travel. These men took different lessons from their travels, and put them to use in different ways in their political writings. Nonetheless, both advocated a reinvented form of travel that was distinct from the Grand Tour as the ideal means of creating not gentlemen, but citizens.

What I have demonstrated here is that Harrington and Molesworth were not isolated from the world around them. Their own personal experiences on the continent in many ways shaped the political writings they subsequently produced. As such we must rethink the way we approach political texts in the seventeenth century. Republicanism was not necessarily only learnt through examining the classical world; there were lessons to be learnt in the world immediately surrounding them. It is necessary to consider the lives and experiences of these men when examining the works they produced, to assess how these may have influenced their political thought. Equally, the immediate context of events during the writing of these political tracts cannot be overlooked either. One method of doing this is to examine the

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 10.

influence that travel had and how it shaped political thought. A second is to look at literature that was available – both historical and contemporary – about European politics and government, and examine how far this had an influence on seventeenth century republican thought. Combined, both of these methods can help us challenge the traditional historiography of a retrospective, insular republicanism.

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