

Introduction

*“A man of versatile mind”*¹

In his later years John Locke had “forgot the year of his birth” (though “he believed that he had set it down somewhere”^{*}). Not knowing exactly where he had been born, his friends took some months after his death to locate the record of his baptism in the register of All Saints’ Church, Wrington, Somerset. They were then able to complete the Latin obituary he had composed for himself, and to have it engraved on the marble tablet which was set, adjacent to his tomb, into the south-facing wall of All Saints’ Church, High Laver, a small Essex village one hundred and twenty miles to the east of his birthplace.

Siste Viator, Hic juxta situs est JOHANNES LOCKE Stay, traveller: near this place lies JOHN LOCKE. If you ask what sort of man he was, the answer is that he was contented with his modest lot. Bred a scholar, he used his studies to devote himself to truth alone. This you may learn from his writings which will show you anything else that is to be said about him more faithfully than the doubtful eulogies of an epitaph. His virtues, if he had any, were too slight for him to offer them to his own credit or as an example to you. Let his vices be buried with him. Of good life, you have an example, should you desire it, in the gospel; of vice, would there were none for you; of mortality, surely (and you may profit by it) you have one here and everywhere. That he was born on the 29th of August in the year of our Lord 1632, and that he died on the 28th of October in the year of our Lord 1704, this tablet, which itself will quickly perish, is a record.²

The tablet (now inside the church) has not perished yet. As for his writings, it is striking that these were published only towards the end

of his seventy-two-year life. Had he not survived a winter sea-journey back from Holland after five years of political exile which ended with William of Orange's "Glorious Revolution" of 1689, his life and work would probably have had little more record than that tablet itself. For that first year back in England, when he was approaching sixty, saw the publication of the three works on which his fame rests, and which, over three hundred years later, are still on the curriculum at universities the world over: *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, *Two Treatises of Government*, and *A Letter concerning Toleration*. Without them he would not soon have been recognised by Voltaire as, along with Newton, among the "greatest philosophers, as well as the ablest writers of their age"; without them there would have been no grateful plaque near his tomb remembering that "his philosophy guided the founders of the United States of America".³

A student required to read the *Essay*, with its tendency to repetition and perhaps prefaced with an engraving of one of the Kneller portraits of a gaunt, rather forbidding, ageing man, would easily come to what is perhaps the popular view of Locke as stern, distant, perhaps boring: George Eliot conjured up her Mr Casaubon by making him "remarkably like the portrait of Locke".* There can be no doubt that he was a deeply serious man, trustworthy and reliable, with a keen sense of duty and loyalty, but any view of him as the embodiment of a heavy gravity is mistaken, at least according to the obituarial eulogies of friends. Far from "assuming . . . airs of gravity" Locke disapproved of them, and looked on them as "an infallible mark of impertinence"; he would indeed sometimes make fun of them, and "divert himself with imitating that studied gravity, in order to turn it the better to ridicule; and upon this occasion he always remembered this maxim of La Rochefoucault, which he admired above all others, that gravity is a mystery of the body, invented to conceal the defects of the mind". Nevertheless, the view of Locke as having a stern distance did have some contemporary currency:

Many who knew him only by his writings, or by the reputation he had gained of being one of the greatest philosophers of the age, having imagined to themselves beforehand that he was one of those scholars that, being always full of themselves and their sublime speculations, are incapable of familiarising themselves with the common sort of mankind, or of entering into their little concerns or discoursing of the ordinary affairs of life, were perfectly amazed to find him nothing but affability, good humour, humanity, pleasantness.⁴

It was not, however, that affability and pleasantness were ever-present. Though no one was

less magisterial, or dogmatical than he; or less offended with any man's dissenting from him in opinion: there are yet an impertinent sort of disputants who though you have answered their arguments over, and over again, will still return to them, and still repeat the same things, after having been ever so often beaten out of them. With these Mr Locke would be apt sometimes to speak a little warmly; for which yet he would oftener blame himself than anybody else saw cause for him to do.⁵

Locke was a man who liked company and conversation, and who, in his turn, was valued for his amusing and affable company. He had, it was said, "all the good qualities, that could render his friendship pleasant and agreeable". Pierre Coste's picture of him is entirely believable: "when an occasion naturally offered, he gave himself up with pleasure to the charms of a free and facetious conversation. He remembered a great many agreeable stories, which he always brought in properly; and generally made them yet more delightful, by his natural and agreeable way of telling them". Yet, Coste also makes plain, this affability was not always completely spontaneous, and was sometimes something Locke exercised, almost dutifully, in the service of a higher seriousness. What Locke "chiefly loved", Coste said, was "truths that were useful, and with such fed his mind, and was generally very well pleased to make them the subject of his discourse"; but he believed that the very pursuit of "serious and important occupations" required, as a beneficial contrast, that we spend some part of our life in "mere amusements, and it was at least partly for this reason that he would give himself over to free and easy conversation".⁶ We might also suppose that, amusing and agreeable as he might genuinely have been on such occasions, he would not for a moment have abandoned his cautious inclination, apparent throughout his life, towards reserve, control, and even secrecy.

Both Pierre Coste and Damaris Masham remarked something we have seen already in Locke's habit of recording and note-taking, that he "above all things, loved order" and was an "exact keeper of accounts". This was surely a polite way of saying that he was "anally retentive", strong-willed, obsessively anxious for control; and, given these characteristics, it is noteworthy that his life did not take the shape he seems for a long time ideally to have wanted – that of "a retired single life" of residence in his Oxford college, combining an interest in

experimental iatrochemistry (chemistry as applied to medicine) and other areas of natural philosophy with practice as a physician: “Dr Locke”, as his contemporaries in fact often referred to him. Chronic ill-health and a strong sense of duty were impediments to this, as of course were external events at whose mercy he continually felt himself to be.

“Troubles and business”, he said, “will in spite of the gentler fluxes of our inclinations carry us which way they please.” By the time he was in his forties he was “accustomed to have fortune . . . dispose of me contrary to my design and expectation”; and he spoke of being under the influence of some unknown “witchcraft” and of being ridden by goblins who make use of us “to trot up and down for their pleasure and not our own”. But at least as important as external events was that, despite an awesome capacity for hard work and focused concentration, there was, overall, a certain lack of single-mindedness – a breadth of interest and ability, which, though it certainly did not waste his talents, got in the way of any narrow expression of them. “I believe you and your parts such”, a friend once told him, “that you may well be said to be *homo versatilis ingenii* [a man of versatile mind], and fitted for whatever you shall undertake.”⁷

I

Upbringing and Education (1632–1658)

1632–1646: “I FOUND MYSELF IN A STORM”¹

John Locke’s great-grandfather, Sir William Locke, was said to be “the greatest English merchant under Henry the Eighth”. His activities as a mercer dealing in silk and velvet were continued by his son Nicholas, who moved from Buckland Newton, Dorset, to Pensford, in Somerset, where he built up a flourishing business, collecting in, and shipping on, the woollen cloth woven in cottages throughout the west of England. Nicholas had a number of children, two girls, Frances and Anne, and four sons: John, the eldest son, born in 1606, did not follow his father into the cloth trade, but turned instead to the law; Peter (1607–86), initially a tanner, later earned a living as a landowner; Edward (1610–63); and Thomas (1612–64), who became a rich brewer in Bristol. All these children were said to have been “persons of very exemplary lives”.²

John was twenty-three in July 1630, when he married Agnes Keene, ten years his senior and said to have been “a most beautiful woman”. Her family was local to Wrington where, about ten miles from Pensford, various members owned land and houses. Her elder brother took both her father’s name, Edmund, and his trade of tanner; another brother, John, was an attorney.³

John and Agnes Locke had been married just over a year when, on 29 August 1632, their first child, John, was born; their second, Peter, died in infancy; and their third, Thomas, was born in August 1637. Throughout their marriage John and Agnes lived at Belluton, in a house given to them by Nicholas Locke. Their son John was not born

here, however, but in Wrington, in what had been Agnes's grandparents' home but which was then lived in by her brother.⁴ The house,* which existed into Victorian times, was immediately adjacent to the north side of the church where John was baptised on the day of his birth.

At first, John Locke senior was clerk to Justices of the Peace, who included Alexander Popham, a considerable landowner and Member of Parliament for Bath at various times; later he practised as an attorney and had responsibility for the county drainage sewers. The management of land and tenements that he was left by his father also occupied him. Details of these occupations and preoccupations over a quarter century are recorded in his notebook in which there are records of local assize cases and their juries, forms of court oath, receipts for rents, and lists of liabilities for taxes.⁵

Little is known of the influence of Agnes on her son John. Later he would say that she had been "a very pious woman and an affectionate mother". In letters to his father he mentioned her only to the extent of asking him to "remember my humble duty to my mother". More is known of the father's influence (perhaps an indication that it was stronger). "I have often heard . . . that he was a man of parts", it would be reported years later:

Mr Locke never mentioned him but with great respect and affection . . . His father used a conduct towards him when young, that he often spoke of with great approbation. It was this being severe to him by keeping him in much awe, and at a distance while he was a boy; but relaxing still by degrees of that severity as he grew up to be a man, till (he being capable of it) he lived perfectly with him as a friend. . . . He has told me that his father, after he was a man, solemnly asked his pardon for having struck him once in passion as a boy; his fault not being equal to that correction.⁶

In retrospect Locke approved of this upbringing, as is witnessed not only by that report, but also by some remarks he made in a book on child rearing he published towards the end of his life. Here he said that many fathers make the double mistake of indulging their children when they are little and then being more severe and reserved in later years. This tends to produce "an ill understanding between father and son", whereas if the son's later friendship is to be had, an early strict discipline and severity should gradually be relaxed as the father admits the maturing boy "into a nearer familiarity".⁷ We do not know how Locke felt as a child, but the relationship certainly flourished in the long term: the report that they came to live "perfectly together as

friends” is supported by the cordiality and devotion of his letters to his father.

As a child, Locke must have been exposed to his father’s non-professional interests, and something of what they were can again be found in his father’s notebook. Recorded there are various medical prescriptions, “against the plague”, “for consumption and cough”, “for a sprain on a horse”; there are details of bell-ringing changes, and a list of “The seven wonders of the world”. At a higher level of intellectuality, there are notes on “History, Ethic, and Dialectic”, and Latin entries concerning divine providence and predestination. We know too that Locke senior borrowed from a local vicar such books as Procopius’ *History of the Wars of the Emperor Justinian*, Anthony Cade’s *A Justification of the Church of England* (1630), Richard Overton’s *Man’s Mortality* (1643), and a book of poems. But what the father tried to teach the son, both formally and informally, or what his early hopes for him were, is unknown. At some point he seems to have had ambitions for him as “a scholar”.⁸

Locke’s childhood home at Belluton was on the northern ridge of the Chew valley, five or six miles south of the great trading port of Bristol, overlooking the small market town of Pensford and looking across to the Mendip Hills. The local rural economy was largely based on wool: sheep farming, wool spinning, and cloth weaving. But there was also lead and coal mining in the Mendips, and Pensford itself was located in a coal field (part of which would form an element in Locke’s later business interests).

The house at Belluton no longer exists, but an inventory taken at the time of Locke senior’s death gives some impression of it, with a list of the contents of nine rooms – parlour, hall, kitchen, study, buttery, outward chamber, inner chamber, hall chamber, and stable. For example,

Parlour. Two table-boards, six cushions, two carpets, two sideboards, six chairs, two cast-iron dogs and one back; *Kitchen.* Three pairs of tongs, one fire shovel, one iron fork, three pairs of hangers, two dripping pans, two frying pans, two pairs of pothooks, three spits, one pair of cast dogs, one pair of grills with a bar, one beef fork, one chopping knife, one gridiron, one jack, one smoothing iron, two brand irons, one cleaver, one sideboard; *Inner chamber.* One standing bedstead, with cord matt valance and curtains, one flock bed, two feather bolsters, two pillows, one pair of blankets, two white coverlets, one green rug, one press, one round table, one desk, one coffer, one trunk.

The overall value of the contents amounted to about £80.⁹

About three miles southwest of Pensford was the manor house of Sutton Court, where, a couple of years younger than he, one of Locke's childhood (and lasting) friends, John Strachey, lived. The two boys must have explored the various nearby antiquities (which years later Locke would describe to John Aubrey): at Stanton Drew, more or less midway between their two homes, was a complex Stone Age megalithic site, part of which was the standing stone of Hautville's Quoit; two miles away from Belluton, to the northwest, were the remains of Maes Knoll, a Celtic Iron Age camp.¹⁰

In 1642, within days of Locke's tenth birthday, civil war broke out between the Parliamentary army and that of the King, Charles I. Recalling this eighteen years later he would write, "I no sooner perceived myself in the world but I found myself in a storm, which has lasted almost hitherto".¹¹

A number of disagreements and discontents (economic, political, religious) led up to the war. One of these concerned Charles's attempt at personal rule without the aid (the hindrance, as he saw it) of Parliament, which had not been called between 1629 and 1640. Apart from anything else, a clear and direct problem for the King in this was his need for money, for he was expected to "live of his own" in normal circumstances, and except in an emergency could not impose taxation without the agreement of Parliament. In 1634 Charles decided that the prevalence of piracy on English ships and shores, and the weakness of the navy, constituted just such an emergency, and he revived an old tax of Ship Money, extending it to the inland counties. As a clerk to the local Justices, Locke's father was involved with the imposition of this hugely unpopular tax, and his notebook contains details of shipping belonging to Somerset ports, and of amounts due from various individuals.

Charles's leanings towards personal rule were associated with his religious views, and these too brought him into conflict with his subjects, many of whom had puritan views. He had a firm belief in the divine right of kings and in the congruence of the English state and the Anglican Church. William Laud, his Archbishop of Canterbury since 1633, though an unswerving Protestant, was in no way in sympathy with puritan thinking, according to which the Calvinist-influenced reformation of an earlier century had not gone far enough in purifying and purging the church from its association with Catholic Rome. Unlike the puritans, he believed in an episcopalian hierarchy for

the church and in the apostolic succession of bishops; he believed in a decent conformity to a traditional and ceremonial order of church service according to the Prayer Book; he believed in bowing at the name of Jesus, making the sign of the cross, wearing of surplices by the clergy, and in placing the altar behind rails. He believed too that once the religious observances of the morning service were performed, Sunday was a day for innocent enjoyment and recreation, for dancing, drinking, and the playing of games.

For the Calvinistic puritans, however, these beliefs and practices were too heavily redolent of Catholicism; and such activities outside of church were in clear breach of the injunction to keep the Sabbath holy, an injunction which required sermonising and serious study of the Bible, rather than a merely conforming observance of what to them were suspicious rituals.

There is little direct evidence as to how “puritanical” Locke’s upbringing was, but it seems likely that his family were Calvinists, with leanings to Presbyterianism. His grandfather, Nicholas Locke, did as a Calvinist might, and willed money to the church in Pensford for a weekly Bible lecture. Locke’s description of his mother as having been “a very pious woman” is some indication too, as perhaps is the ardent puritanism of the rector of Wrington, by whom his mother had him baptised. The religious tendency of people in the local area, and of Locke’s relations, point this way too, as does Locke’s father’s service in the Parliamentary army.¹²

Matters which exercised puritans certainly exercised Locke’s father, for his notebook shows a concern with questions such as “Whether bowing towards an altar is lawful?”, “Whether the order of bishops is of divine institution?”, “Whether bowing at the name of Jesus be a pious ceremony?”, “Whether in the election of ministers the voice of the people is required?”, and “Whether a minister may with a safe conscience administer the sacrament to one not kneeling?”¹³

Parliament had eventually been allowed to meet in 1640, and the next year issued a Grand Remonstrance which challenged the King’s authority and fitness to rule. When armed resistance to the crown began to break out in 1642, Locke’s father’s employer, Alexander Popham, raised his own regiment of cavalry, becoming a colonel in the Parliamentary army. Earlier in the year Locke’s father had publicly announced assent to Parliament’s protest, and he soon became a captain in Popham’s regiment. His notebook contains lists of local

footsoldiers, pikemen and musketeers, and notes on the loading of muskets.¹⁴

Despite initial successes Parliamentary forces in the West Country were defeated at Devizes, and by the latter half of 1643 Somerset was in the King's control. It seems likely that both Popham and Locke's father left the army at this point (and so were not amongst the Parliamentary forces which eventually regained control).¹⁵ Though their political cause finally prospered, both Popham and Locke senior suffered considerable material loss in the civil war. Popham's house was burnt by the Royalists, and as for Locke, it was later said (on the basis of his son's testimony) that as "a captain in the Parliamentary army ... [he was] by that means a private sufferer in those public calamities: which probably was the sole cause of his fortunes being impaired".¹⁶

On the other hand, the support that Locke senior had given to Popham over the years, both in peacetime and in war, was recognised in a way which hugely determined the future life of his son. As a member of Parliament, Popham was privileged to nominate boys for entry into Westminster School in London, and he successfully nominated the young John Locke. The boy's life would undoubtedly have taken a very different course had he not (probably in 1646, the year of his fourteenth birthday) left his home in rural Somerset and made the hundred or so mile journey to Westminster, one of the finest schools in the country.¹⁷

1646–1652: "A VERY SEVERE SCHOOL"¹⁸

At Westminster, Locke joined about two hundred and fifty other boys, some a few years younger. About forty were King's Scholars (the name being retained by the Royalist headmaster), who boarded in the school. Others were "oppidans", the sons of local residents, who lived at home; or "pensioners", who boarded in the house of a master or of a member of the Westminster Abbey Chapter. Locke himself was a "peregrine", one of the boys who, having to come to school from the country, lived with friends or relations or simply took suitable lodgings nearby, in his case with a Mrs Susan Bates.¹⁹

Towards the end of 1649 Locke started a careful account of his income and expenditure, something he would continue throughout his life. His father had arranged for him to receive regular money via a London man, "cousin William Strickland", half-yearly sums varying