

2. The Personal and Political Contexts of Robert Molesworth's *Account of Denmark*

D. W. Hayton

I

The *Account of Denmark* that the Anglo-Irishman Robert Molesworth published in 1694, just two years after the conclusion of his unhappy and unsuccessful embassy to Copenhagen, was neither the first, nor the only contemporary description of the country to appear in English in the late seventeenth century. The occasion of the marriage of James II's daughter Anne to the Danish Prince George in 1683 had been marked by the publication of two separate works, by the Huguenot exiles Miège and Pierreville, both entitled *The present state of Denmark ...*, and both seeking to capitalise on the topical interest of the northern kingdom.⁶⁴ The travel writer William Carr had also included Denmark in the kingdoms visited in his *Travellers guide ...*, a work which went through several editions under different titles between 1690 and 1693.⁶⁵ But whereas each of these preceding accounts of Denmark had been factual and largely favourable, Molesworth's, as is well known, was highly opinionated, and generally acerbic. By the simple expedient of being rude in print about the Danes and their country, Molesworth ensured that his name would be remembered (and execrated) by succeeding generations while those of his contemporaries were forgotten.

But while Molesworth's name has always been familiar to Danish historians, and the Danish reading public, until relatively recently he did not enjoy anything like the same celebrity in England, or in his native country, Ireland. Indeed, when his personal and family archive was offered for sale to the Bodleian Library in the 1970s, the then Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford, Hugh Trevor-Roper, reputedly advised against its purchase, on the grounds that Molesworth was a second-rate historical figure.⁶⁶

At that time, British and Irish historians had taken only a fleeting interest in Molesworth's political career: his attempts to enlist himself in Lord Treasurer Godolphin's court whig faction in England in 1705–8



ROBERT VISCOUNT MOLE'SWORTH

Published 3 Nov. 1798 by S. Harding, 127 Pall Mall & P. Brown, Crown St. Sch.

had been briefly noticed; as had his contribution to the Irish whig campaign against the tory administration of 1710-14.⁶⁷ In so far as he was remembered, it was primarily for his writing, and even then, the only scholar outside Denmark to have paid him much heed was Caroline Robbins, whose *Eighteenth-century commonwealthman*, published in 1959, had placed him at the hub of a circle of Irish 'commonwealth whigs' in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, having a minor but not inconsequential part to play in the transmission of civic republican ideas from Civil War England to revolutionary America.⁶⁸

In the past three decades, however, Molesworth's stock has risen appreciably among historians of early modern Britain and Ireland. Two processes have been in operation: the first a veritable explosion of historical writing on the development of political ideas in the Anglophone world in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, inspired and led by Professors Quentin Skinner and John Pocock; the second a revival of interest in the political, social and cultural history of Ireland in the fifty years or so after the Williamite conquest. In both literatures the author of the *Account of Denmark* now appears very much as a figure to be reckoned with.

Molesworth's contribution to the development of political ideology in England and Ireland was as an exponent of 'old' or 'true' whiggism. This may be construed as a defence of principles of 'classical republicanism' – civil liberties, a mixed constitution, and the right of the subject to resist a tyrannical ruler – in increasingly unfavourable political, social, and economic circumstances. Molesworth's commitment to this traditional whig doctrine was expressed in a number of different books and pamphlets, most notably perhaps in his preface to the English translation of François Hotman's *Franco-Gallia*, published in 1721.⁶⁹ In this and some of his other writings he conformed perfectly to the pattern of the 'true whig'. He denounced absolute monarchy and court corruption; praised the republican political systems of classical Greece and pre-imperial Rome, and the ancient Gothic constitutions of northern Europe; and he idealised rugged, incorruptible, aristocratic political virtue as a counterweight to the spreading corruption of courts and commerce. Needless to say, these preoccupations coloured the *Account*

Left: Engraving of Robert Molesworth. Published 3. Nov. 1798 by S. Harding 127 Pall Mall & P. Brown. Crown S. Soho.

of Denmark, especially his admiration for the ancient Gothic constitution of the Danes and condemnation of what he saw as a decline in traditional standards of public virtue, manifest in the behaviour of court society in Copenhagen. In a typical passage he dismissed those English visitors to the Danish royal palaces who were seduced by the luxury and pageantry on display: “they prefer gilded slavery to coarse domestic liberty, and exclaim against their old-fashioned countrymen who will not reform their constitution according to the new foreign mode”.⁷⁰ After his return from Denmark, and the publication of the *Account*, Molesworth could be found at the heart of the most advanced coteries of radical whigs in England, those who frequented London’s Grecian Tavern: men like the veteran republican Henry Neville, the pamphlet campaigners against the standing army, Walter Moyle and John Trenchard, and the egregious anti-clerical journalist John Toland, all of whom were personally known to Molesworth and in some cases were closely connected to him.⁷¹

By this time Molesworth was also dancing attendance on a rather different kind of political thinker, the third Earl of Shaftesbury, philosopher grandson of the founder of the whig party.⁷² Molesworth sought out Shaftesbury as a potential patron during a long period of self-imposed exile in England (Irish political society having failed to recognise his talents); wrote him ingratiating letters; consorted with others of his friends and clients, like Sir John Cropley and the young James Stanhope (later to rise to the position of joint first minister under King George I); and sought to obtain, through Shaftesbury’s help, a seat in the Westminster parliament. Although the Earl proved too sickly, or too precious, to make much of a lasting mark himself on parliamentary politics, and Molesworth was obliged to transfer his attentions to others to secure the office his fragile finances required him to occupy, he did not relinquish the connexion he had worked so hard to establish, and even after Shaftesbury’s death in 1713, maintained a devotion to the Earl’s memory.⁷³

Shaftesbury has been much studied, as a thinker and writer. Particular attention has been paid to his emphasis on the preservation of civic virtue through education and through the promotion among the social elite of the values of ‘politeness’ in taste and morals. This cult of the ‘polite’ has been elevated by some modern students, most notably Dr Lawrence Klein, into an ideology that supposedly succeeded in accom-

modating classical ideals of civic virtue to the modernising trends of an increasingly commercial society.⁷⁴ In this progressive tableau Shaftesbury is seen as providing an intellectual link between seventeenth-century commonwealth whigs and eighteenth-century moral philosophers; and Molesworth is often depicted at his side.

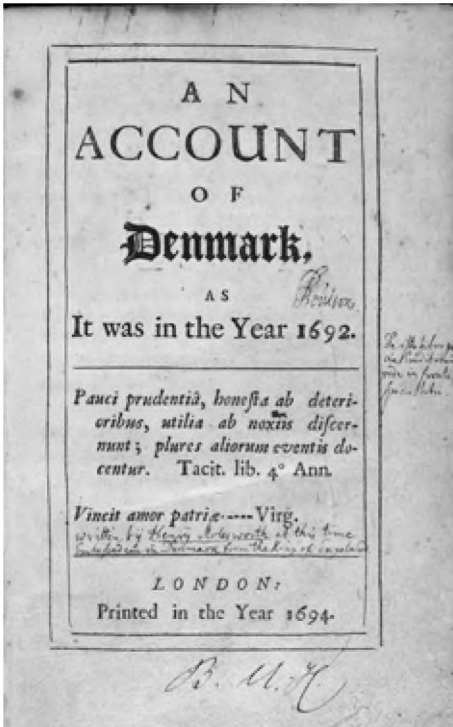
Students of Irish political thought have followed the “Shaftesbury connexion” across the Irish Sea. When Molesworth abandoned England after the Hanoverian Succession – in another pique of disappointed ambition – and resettled on his estate at Breckdenston, near Swords in County Dublin, he in turn patronised young politicians, philosophers, pamphleteers, and journalists, much as Shaftesbury had done. Historians such as M. A. Stewart, Ian McBride, and Michael Brown have described a “Molesworth circle” in operation in Dublin in the late 1710s and early 1720s, which included John Toland (who once described Molesworth as “my dearest patron”), and the fledgling moral philosopher Francis Hutcheson, later to emigrate to Scotland and become a key figure in Scottish intellectual history.⁷⁵ The activities of the “Molesworth circle” are presented as crucial to the onward transmission of Shaftesburian ideas: Molesworth brought notions of politeness from England to Ireland, influencing in particular the young Hutcheson, who developed these further in his professorial career in Glasgow. Thus Molesworth may be depicted, albeit with a little exaggeration, as one of the *accoucheurs*, so to speak, of the Scottish enlightenment.

At the same time, scholarly interest in the history of early eighteenth-century Ireland has also been undergoing a marked revival, and here again Molesworth’s name has come to the fore. We now have a greater appreciation of the vitality of the Irish political scene in the generation after the Glorious Revolution, and of the emergence of the Irish parliament as a necessary element in the governance of the kingdom (what Dr C. I. McGrath has described as an Irish constitutional revolution).⁷⁶ The very fact that Molesworth was such a prominent figure in the whig parliamentary faction in Dublin during the ‘rage of party’ under King William III and Queen Anne is enough to invest his career with interest. Even more important was his role after 1715 at the centre of the so-called ‘patriot’ party, staunchly defending the rights of the Irish parliament against interference from Westminster and Whitehall. It is here that we can for once see a clear continuity between his political preaching and practice.

Irish historians' interest in Molesworth is not, however, confined to his influence in the political arena. He also features strongly in the burgeoning literature on the material culture of the Irish Protestant land-owning elite: as a member of a so-called "new junta for architecture", helping to introduce the principles of Palladianism into Irish house-building;⁷⁷ and as the owner and presumed designer of a fashionable and innovative garden in his County Dublin demesne, which a recent historian has hailed, rather over-enthusiastically, as marking the emergence of a distinctively Dutch and whiggish approach to Irish garden design.⁷⁸

Clearly, if Molesworth's papers were now to be offered for sale there would be no difficulty in securing a positive opinion of their value. For he has come to be perceived as a first-rate figure in British and Irish history, with many claims on our attention, most notably his part in the development of whig ideology, first in England and then in Ireland. Recent historical writing has thus done a great deal to elucidate his milieu, and the mainsprings of his thought and actions. Among other things, these discoveries have thrown fresh light on the personal and political contexts in which the *Account of Denmark* was written. They have already encouraged one author, Hugh Mayo, to look again at the background to the text.⁷⁹ His conclusion is that we should view Molesworth not simply as another 'commonwealth' whig, in the style of those studied by Caroline Robbins and her successors, but as a representative of a specifically Irish form of whiggism; and we should understand the *Account* as having been informed by the particular concerns and prejudices engendered by the traditions of Irish political theory and a political upbringing in the atmosphere of Restoration Dublin.

The present essay intends to make use of the insights of the newer historiography in a similar way but with a different emphasis. Its argument is based primarily on a re-consideration of what is known of Molesworth's early life and career, up to and including the publication of the *Account*, and of the precise political context in which the book was written and prepared for the press; together with a re-examination of his private correspondence at the time of his Danish embassy. What emerges is an interpretation that emphasises the formative influence of Molesworth's experiences in the reigns of Charles II and James II, and during the Williamite Revolution; and his anxiety for the safety of the revolution settlement, both at home and abroad. There is of



The title page of Robert Molesworth *An Account of Denmark as it was in the Year 1692* (London 1694).

course evidence of a pervasive personal animosity towards the Danish king and his ministers, but the tone and direction of the *Account* also reflects the uncertainties of English, Irish, and European politics at the time of Molesworth's embassy, and during the subsequent writing and publication of his book.

II

The first point to be made about the text of the *Account* is that, despite its continuing impact on Danish national sensitivities, its author seems not to have focused on issues of national identity and national character. He does indeed have things to say from time to time in his *Account* about the Danes as a people: their "whining" national tongue, their fondness for drink, their prodigality, the effete nature of their aristocracy and the baseness of character of the downtrodden peasantry.⁸⁰ But his disdain for what he has encountered does not derive from any sense of the natural or genetic inferiority of Danes, in the way

that some of his contemporaries wrote about the Irish among whom he himself lived. Molesworth's references to the Gothic origins of the Danes are confined to his comments about their former constitution with its elective monarchy.⁸¹ Rather, he attributes any defects of character to the pernicious nature of the political, social, and economic systems under which the people laboured, in much the same way as Sir William Petty (by whom he may have been influenced) ascribed Irish faults to climate.⁸²

This absence of concern with a subject that modern authors find obsessively interesting may derive from Molesworth's 'Anglo-Irish' heritage, for he shared the ambivalent, flexible – or perhaps a better word is indeterminate – notion of nationality characteristic of his class.⁸³ The adjective 'Anglo-Irish' is of course an anachronism, and worse still, can be a term of abuse, used by nationalists against the nineteenth- and twentieth-century landed aristocracy as a means of insinuating that they were not properly Irish, and resented accordingly. In consequence, much printer's ink has been expended – by modern historians and by representatives of the Anglo-Irish themselves – in an effort to define what an 'Anglo-Irish identity' means. For some, it is consonant with a kind of elevated Irish patriotism, constructively non-sectarian; for others, like the twentieth-century novelist Olivia Manning, it meant having no identity at all, caught between two worlds and belonging nowhere. This was not how seventeenth-century Irish Protestants would have understood their position. In certain circumstances – when, for example, Irish economic interests ran up against those of England, or when the rights and privileges of the Irish parliament were disparaged or threatened – they readily identified with Ireland as their native land. Yet they also defined themselves as the crown's "English subjects of Ireland". The Irish propertied elite was still largely a planter class, with only a minority of families able to trace their residence in Ireland back more than two generations, and they were conscious of representing the "English interest" in Ireland. When writing about domestic politics they often used "the Irish" as a shorthand term for Catholics. Far from being uneasy about their identity, Irish Protestants of Molesworth's generation shifted comfortably between national identities. If protesting at the English parliament's casual discrimination against Irish trade or industry, they were "Irish"; if contemplating the prospect of a resurgent Catholic power in the Ireland of James II, they were "English".

Molesworth's attitude to Ireland conforms perfectly to this paradigm. He was born in Dublin, educated there, at Trinity College, married into the Irish landed class, and, apart from a brief spell at Lincoln's Inn in London, and some travels in Europe in the later 1680s, lived most of his life in Ireland. He was capable of outbursts of a kind of political patriotism, in defence of the rights of the Irish parliament, especially in the latter stages of his career, when he had at last settled for good in the country of his birth. But these were not nationalist outbursts, calling on his countrymen to throw off the Saxon yoke; they were instead reasoned defences of the right of any people to enjoy representative government, wherever they might live, and were also expressions of concern lest Westminster tyranny weaken the English Protestant interest in Ireland. At other times he was happy to describe himself as English, which he did at several points in the *Account*, a book expressly written by an Englishman for English readers.⁸⁴ And occasionally he was capable of a breathtaking disregard for the country of his birth. Indeed, at several crises in his life he declared that he would leave Ireland for good and settle on his English estate, at Edlington in Yorkshire. Irish politics were hopeless. Ireland would be his "pis aller", the bog in which his talents would for ever lie hidden from public view.⁸⁵ It was only when he admitted the irrevocable failure of his attempt to make a career at Westminster that he returned to Dublin to assume the attitude of the outraged Hibernian. Moreover he never had much time for the Gaelic Irish, their traditions, culture and religion, or their language. The passage in the *Account* which sneers at the Danish language does so by comparing it to the Irish: "it is very ungrateful, and not unlike the Irish in its whining, complaining tone".⁸⁶

Admittedly, the fact that he belonged to the Irish propertied elite would have made Molesworth especially conscious of the issue of nationality, because of the identification of political with national causes in contemporary Ireland. From this perspective he would also have been aware of the ways in which some aspects of social and political behaviour among the 'native Irish' had been, and to some extent still were, explained by reference to ethnic origins. But the flexibility of his attitudes to national identity (in common with those of his class) would have blunted any deterministic impulses. Ethnicity had also to compete, as an interpretive force, with the other powerful influences and preoccupations which shaped Molesworth's political thought: a libertarian whiggism, of a traditional kind, suspicious of courts and in favour of limiting the powers of

monarchs through the agency of representative assemblies; a commitment to economic improvement, which would be obstructed by authoritarian regimes in church and state; a vigorous anti-popery, which should not be confused with anti-Catholicism; and last but not least, a profound fear of French military power, especially when exercised by King Louis XIV. These are what really coloured his responses to his experiences in Copenhagen, and his representation of Denmark in the *Account*.

III

To understand Molesworth's cast of mind, it is necessary to trace his personal history and political development until and beyond the ill-fated Danish embassy. As an Irish Protestant, he would not have been able to participate in parliamentary politics in his native country before the Williamite revolution. The Irish parliament was not summoned after 1666, and as a consequence Irish politics remained in a kind of limbo in Charles II's reign. But he would certainly not have been insulated from events in England. He spent some time in London in the mid-1670s, at Lincoln's Inn, and while in Dublin he would have received news of events across the water from friends and relations, and from the reports of Irish men and women returning home. In many respects this was a unified political world. Thus he would have been well aware of the attacks being made on Charles II's administration in the 1670s for corruption, the suspicion of the king's secretly pro-French foreign policy, and the fear engendered by the allegations in 1678 of a 'popish plot' to murder the king and replace him with his Catholic brother, the Duke of York. He would also have followed closely the events of the so-called Exclusion crisis of 1678-81, in which the parliamentary faction headed by the first Earl of Shaftesbury sought in vain to exclude the Duke of York from the succession and introduce limitations on the power of the monarchy.

Without a parliament in Dublin to focus discontent, Ireland escaped the political turmoil that engulfed England in the late 1670s. However, as the English body politic became bitterly divided between loyalists and exclusionists, or, as they became known, whigs and tories, Irish Protestants like Molesworth were inevitably drawn in to the events they were watching at a distance, and began to develop political sympathies along whig or tory lines. Throughout 1679 and 1680 Irishmen were confidently expecting that a parliament would finally be called in Dub-

lin: presumably King Charles's advisers lost their nerve at the prospect of criticism on the grounds (real or imagined) of Irish ministerial leniency towards Catholics.⁸⁷ Then in the immediate aftermath of the defeat of the exclusionists, the lord lieutenant, Ormond, instigated repressive action against Presbyterians in Ulster, suspecting them of sympathising with Covenanting rebels in Scotland and whiggish conspirators in England.⁸⁸ In this tense atmosphere the loyal addresses sent in to the crown from Irish counties, boroughs and corporate bodies showed a distinct party-political bias, aligning their sentiments with the views of English whigs or, less often, with the tories.⁸⁹

The Exclusion crisis may not, however, have been as important a formative experience for Molesworth as its aftermath. In England after 1681 Charles II's government conducted a systematic campaign against its whig opponents, resulting in a series of high-profile judicial killings, including the influential political writer Algernon Sidney (who had of course also served as an envoy to Denmark, and with whom Molesworth may subsequently have identified⁹⁰). In Scotland the suppression of the covenanter rising was followed by a similar reaction: punitive fines, arrests, the torturing of detainees, and a significant number of executions. Research by Tim Harris has demonstrated the impact of these events across the three kingdoms.⁹¹ It is at this point that we find the first tentative indication of Molesworth's political predilections, though the evidence is allusive. In a later autobiographical fragment he claimed to have begun to travel to the continent in the 1680s, and to have made a point each time of visiting Holland.⁹² If this was the case he would have come into contact with a number of English and Scottish political exiles and presumably also with the court of William of Orange, for whom, in this document, he also professed to have acted as a courier, bringing messages to Orangist sympathisers in England at the time of the Glorious Revolution. It is difficult to know how seriously to take these assertions. But there must surely have been some form of prior contact between Molesworth and Prince William for such a comparatively obscure Irishman to have been chosen as envoy to Denmark. It has been suggested that the link may have been through members of his wife's family, which is perfectly possible.⁹³ But the real significance of Molesworth's claim of an pre-revolutionary association with Prince William lies in the suggestion of an early commitment to a whig, or at least whiggish, political position before the crisis that developed in England and Ireland with the accession of King James II.

Irish Protestants had found themselves in a rapidly worsening predicament following Charles II's death in 1685. James II's reign began with the Anglican loyalist, Clarendon, the king's brother-in-law, retained as viceroy in Dublin Castle, but within two years Clarendon had been replaced by a Catholic lord deputy, Richard Talbot, Earl of Tyrconnel, who embarked upon nothing less than a political revolution. Tyrconnel suspended the penal laws against Catholics, remodelled the Irish army so that it became a largely Catholic force, appointed Catholic officials to places in central and local government, and interfered with the government of borough corporations to promote Catholic interests and ensure that when a new Irish parliament was elected it would be dominated by Catholics. When William of Orange landed in England in November 1688 Molesworth, along with the majority of his co-religionists outside Ulster, left for the security of England. Whatever political views Irish Protestants might have entertained previously, the events of James II's reign and the ensuing revolution rendered all but a handful into staunch supporters of the whig and Williamite cause. After the defeat of James II, when a Protestant parliament was summoned in Dublin in 1692, it was clear that there were very few tories as such in Ireland and almost no Protestant Jacobites. Subsequently, for reasons unconnected with the revolution, a tory political interest did arise in Ireland, but it would be fair to say that Irish Protestants in 1689 and 1690 were naturally whiggish in their political inclinations.⁹⁴

Whatever his party-political affiliations in 1689, by the time Molesworth returned from Denmark he was indisputably a whig. From the evidence of parliamentary lists and reports of debates it is clear that he was reckoned as such after his election to the English parliament in 1695.⁹⁵ But whiggism was undergoing a fundamental change in the decade after the revolution. When the English whig leaders, the so-called Junto, became the party of government in the mid-1690s, they began to distance themselves from those aspects of the programme of the first whigs that were uncongenial to government, opposing measures to restrict court influence over parliament or in some cases to preserve individual and popular liberties against encroachment by the state. Not all their followers could stomach this reversal of principles, and a distinct group of unreconstructed 'old' or 'country' whigs soon appeared, some of them gathered around the third Earl of Shaftesbury. It was among these 'country' whigs that Molesworth was to be found in the mid-1690s, voting in the House of Commons for electoral reform, for the exclusion



Anthony Ashley Cooper, 3rd earl of Shaftesbury (1671-1713), and his brother Maurice Ashley (1675-1726), by John Closterman, c. 1702 (National Portrait Gallery, London)

of office-holders from parliament, and against the maintenance of a standing army in peacetime.⁹⁶ He followed a very similar line when attending the Irish parliament in Dublin, to which he had also been returned in 1695, supporting the adoption in Ireland of habeas corpus, the passage of an Irish bill of rights, and the ending of government interference in the Irish legislative process.⁹⁷

IV

This is the side of Molesworth's thinking that historians know best. His credo as a 'country' whig (or as contemporaries might also have put it, an 'old', 'true' or 'real whig'), was set out most clearly in the preface to Hotman's *Franco-Gallia*, the history of the flowering of the Gothic constitutions in the medieval west.⁹⁸ This was in effect a manifesto justifying the right of resistance against a tyrannical ruler and calling for the preservation of individual liberties, religious toleration, annual parliaments, electoral reform, and the disbanding of a professional standing army in favour of an armed citizen militia. In its bitter opposition to absolute monarchy and idealisation of civil liberty, the *Account of Denmark* is entirely consonant with this constitutional outlook. In the preface to the *Account*, for example, Molesworth observed that all monarchies were traditionally elective, and in chapter 6 he described the ancient Danish constitution, before the recent institution of absolute monarchy, as "the same which the Goths and Vandals established in most, if not all parts of Europe", with a king chosen by the "states of the realm", who might then depose him should he prove "cruel, vicious, tyrannical, covetous or wasteful", or at the very least "make him answer before the representative body of the people".⁹⁹

Such statements place Molesworth firmly within the 'country whig' tradition. They recall not only Algernon Sidney's *Discourses concerning government* (1664; reprinted in 1698), but the ambitions of surviving whig radicals who had hoped to use the occasion of King James's deposition in 1689 to establish the English kingship on the same foot.¹⁰⁰ In the same way, Molesworth's denunciations of the Danish standing army – that particularly obnoxious manifestation of the French system of government to which King Christian V aspired – as a mortal danger to liberty and a pernicious influence on the social and economic fabric of the kingdom,¹⁰¹ echoed the arguments that had been used against the maintenance of a significant peacetime military establishment by

Charles II and James II (though in the latter case by some Tories as well as Whigs), and prefigured the views of fellow country Whigs in the pamphlet and parliamentary debates about a standing army in England in 1697-9. It may well seem odd that someone who owed the survival of his estate in Ireland to the actions of an army largely made up of foreigners, most of them mercenaries and a significant contingent among them Danes, should have insisted that such soldiers have “no concern for the natives of a kingdom and their welfare”, and that the proper defenders of the state should be the old aristocracy and yeomanry.¹⁰² In this respect, however, Molesworth’s political beliefs transcended his own personal circumstances, and indeed his ‘national’ identity, whatever that might have been. (In any case he was not noticeably of an ironic disposition and would not have been alone in failing to see the contradictions in his standpoint.)

By concentrating on the themes of Gothic constitutionalism – the accountability of monarchy to the people, and the paramount importance of safeguarding liberty – historians have been able to present the *Account of Denmark* as not only an expression of the political values of ‘country Whiggism’, but as an implicit commentary on domestic political conditions, that is to say principally in England but perhaps in Ireland too. The publication of the *Account* in 1694 would have been loaded with political meaning for Molesworth’s readers. The destruction of liberty in Denmark might be taken as an object lesson to the possible fate of the Gothic constitution at home; indeed, in describing the former constitution of the Danes Molesworth drove home the point himself by remarking that this “ancient form of government in England is retained to this day for the most part”.¹⁰³ Moreover, the threat came not only from the possible return of the exiled King James but from within the newly ensconced Williamite regime. The most controversial political issues of the period 1689–95 arose from what appeared to be the continuance of corrupt practices from the pre-Revolution monarchy – leading to campaigns for frequent elections and the exclusion of placemen from parliament to prevent the “debauching” of elected representatives with pensions and offices – and from the new dangers posed by the expansion of King William’s fiscal-military state. Recent Danish history thus offered a very disconcerting instance of the way in which absolute monarchy could develop under a Protestant dynasty just as easily as under a popish tyranny such as France.

V

The little we know of the publication history of the *Account of Denmark* seems to confirm a didactic, even propagandist, purpose, in so far as Molesworth himself considered the timing of its appearance in print to be crucial to serve some particular end. His own family archive has nothing significant to say about the *Account*, but in the papers of the opposition whig politician (and future chief minister) Robert Harley are two letters from John Stanley, a connexion of Molesworth, which cast some new light on the background to the preparation of the book for the press. In the first, which is undated, Stanley excused himself for not sending a manuscript copy of the *Account* which was in his possession, on the grounds that he had been afraid that Molesworth would suddenly arrive at his house and ask for it back.¹⁰⁴ Evidently a scribal version had been circulating privately, with Molesworth anxious (justifiably, one might think) that it should not go beyond a few trusted hands. The second letter, dated 3 October 1693, explained the situation more clearly: once more Stanley had to apologise for not sending the text, but the reason this time was not mere caution.¹⁰⁵

Mr Molesworth came to town and took them out of my hands to prepare them for the press, being importuned by some of his friends to publish an account of the state of Denmark upon this juncture. He is not yet fully resolved whether to let it come out in print, but if it does, he intends it shall be ready to come out at the meeting of Parliament. If he alters his design, I will take care to procure you the whole copy when you come to town; and will endeavour to borrow one I saw of the present state of Sweden in manuscript.

These letters confirm that Molesworth's decision to publish the account of Denmark was closely related to the contemporary political context; but they do not explain the precise nature of that relationship. The way in which Stanley links Molesworth's work with a contemporary account of the other great Baltic power, Sweden, offers a clue, but not one that is easy to interpret. It may simply be that both texts were feeding the natural curiosity of the English political classes about a region of Europe which was giving cause for concern. The developing diplomatic crisis in the Baltic region might easily have had repercussions on

the conduct of the war against France, and the recent renewal of the alliance between Denmark and Sweden could thus have created a demand for information about these monarchies, their nature and their political intentions. But the mention of Sweden alongside Denmark would not necessarily weaken the case for Molesworth's *Account* as a political tract for the times, in the sense in which its publication has generally been understood. Sweden was another example of a Protestant monarchy with potentially absolutist ambitions, and a Gothic constitution under threat: after all, it was only in 1693 that the Riksdag had proclaimed that the King of Sweden was responsible to no human agency other than himself.

In the absence of direct evidence, either from Molesworth's own private papers, or from the correspondence of friends or connexions, like Stanley, any attempt to elucidate the purpose, or purposes, behind the publication of the *Account* requires a close examination of both the context and content of the work: the precise political circumstances in which it first appeared, together with the author's personal situation and recent experience; and the various political messages that can be read into it.

In the autumn of 1693, as the next parliamentary session approached, the balance of forces of English politics was about to receive a decisive shift.¹⁰⁶ The coalition or 'mixed' administration that King William had constructed in 1689, under the leadership of the Marquesses of Carmarthen (the former Lord Danby) and Halifax, had never achieved stability. Conciliar government was beset by factional conflict, between high Tories like the Secretary of State, Nottingham, and Whigs like Admiral Edward Russell – recently removed from command of the fleet though still Treasurer of the Navy – and the Lord Keeper, Sir John Somers. Parliamentary management, left in the hands of Carmarthen and his creatures, was confused and feeble. At this point Whigs were divided in their attitude to government: some, like Russell, Somers, and their colleagues among the emerging 'Whig Junto', were anxious to take control of the administration themselves, and drive out the Tories; others, of the old stamp, were by nature suspicious of the court, whatever its factional complexion, and more concerned at what seemed to be a return to the methods of bribery and corruption associated with Danby's previous tenure of high office in the 1670s.



Daniel Finch, 2nd Earl of Nottingham and 7th Earl of Winchilsea (1647-1730), secretary of state 1689-93 and 1702-04, attributed to Jonathan Richardson, 1726 (National Portrait Gallery, London)

During and after the winter of 1693-4 these differences between whigs were to assume major proportions, as the king came to terms with the need for a more clearly partisan administration and (on the advice of Lord Sunderland) handed power to the Junto and their friends. Nottingham and most other tories relinquished office, or were dismissed, leaving only a small minority of Carmarthen's followers to leaven what was henceforth a solidly whig ministry. Some 'old whigs', led by Paul Foley and Robert Harley, eventually drifted into an opposition alliance with country tories; others, including the future third Earl of Shaftesbury (then Lord Ashley) and Molesworth, remained loyal to their party but took a sceptical view of the Junto ministry and a resolutely 'country' position on issues of principle, such as place bills and electoral reform.

What is important for our purposes, however, is timing. Undoubtedly some of the fissures that were to open up between 'old' and 'new' whigs were already visible in 1693. The very presence of whigs in office would probably have been poison to some men of principle, but the Junto had yet to demonstrate the true extent of their flexibility over the party's traditional ideals, and indeed in preceding sessions had occasionally reverted to type, in supporting place legislation for example, when they thought that voting in this way would add to the pressure on Carmarthen, and the King.¹⁰⁷ At the beginning of the 1693-4 session Molesworth and those who thought like him would have been far more worried about the activities of tories in high office.¹⁰⁸ Following Russell's removal, leadership of the fleet had passed into the hands of a coterie of tory admirals, three of whom, Sir Ralph Delaval, Henry Killigrew and Sir George Rooke, were suspected by the whigs of being closet Jacobites. The loss of the Smyrna convoy in the summer was blamed on the admirals, and their political master, Nottingham, who were accused by M.P.s of incompetence or treachery, or both. The Commons also directed its fire against another tory office-holder, Lord Falkland, for alleged malversation in administering naval funds, and – in a move which would have had particular resonance for Molesworth – impeached the Irish lords justices Porter and Coningsby (the former a strong tory) on a variety of charges, among them the accusation that they had favoured Catholics in corrupt dealings over Irish forfeited estates.

Thus Molesworth's prime political concern at the time that he was deciding to send his manuscript to the press would not have been the danger of nascent neo-whig authoritarianism, in the shape of the Junto ministry, whose arrival still lay in the future, but the persistent presence in government of a powerful Jacobite or quasi-Jacobite element. For all the virtues imputed to King William (who certainly remained a hero to Molesworth), his accession had not by itself proved enough to transform the English political establishment. The absolutist tendencies that whigs associated with the Catholic or crypto-Catholic pre-revolutionary regimes, remained influential after 1689. Put another way, it seemed that the political manifestations of 'popery' could still flourish under a Protestant king.

VI

A central plank in English and Irish whiggery was its fear and hatred of 'popery'. This does not simply equate to fear and hatred of the Catholic Church. Whig objections to 'popery' were not in this way sectarian. Molesworth himself was of course to some degree anti-Catholic, in that he despised the superstitions of Romanists, and was a strong supporter both of penal laws against Catholics in Ireland and of schemes – none of which were very successful – to settle foreign Protestants (including German Lutherans) on Irish soil. But his essential objection to 'popery' was on political rather than doctrinal grounds. Like many of his contemporaries Molesworth distinguished between Catholicism as a set of theological doctrines and 'popery' as a political system. What he objected to in the Roman Church were the claims of pope and priests to a secular jurisdiction, to their exercise of authority over laymen, their assumption of a monopoly over truth and understanding and intolerance of dissent, and their demand of obedience, which overruled one of his own defining principles, that of religious toleration. The connexion between authoritarianism and corruption in church and state was obvious. Moreover, it was not confined to Catholics. Whigs like Molesworth argued that the overstrained claims of Anglican clergymen were a kind of Protestant 'popery'.¹⁰⁹

Molesworth was really an opponent of 'priestcraft', anticlerical in his outlook rather than just anti-Catholic. He was equally concerned about the excessive claims of Anglican parsons – or for that matter Presbyterian ministers – as he was about the Pope and his bishops. Hence

his stinging criticism of the Lutheran established church and clergy in Denmark. Many of his sharpest insults, in print or in parliament, were aimed at Protestant clergymen. His political career in Ireland, especially, was noted for sharp exchanges with apologists for the clergy, and several vehement attacks on the claims of the convocation of the Church of Ireland to a separate jurisdiction from parliament.¹¹⁰ In this attitude he was of course, far from unusual. The work of Professor Justin Champion has amply demonstrated the vitality of English anticlericalism in the literature of this period, both scholarly and popular, and Molesworth could also look to parliamentary colleagues of a similar disposition, including the freethinking author Sir Robert Howard and the eccentric ‘country whig’ back-bencher Sir Richard Cocks.¹¹¹

When Molesworth was writing his *Account of Denmark* and deciding whether or not he should publish it, he would have been particularly exercised by the threat posed to the principles of the Glorious Revolution by rampant ‘priestcraft’ – as represented by high-flying tory parsons and their lay brethren in the tory party. Members of the ‘high’ party in the Church of England, to whom he likened the Danish clergy, had advanced claims about the authority of monarchy and the established church which would imperil the liberty of the subject even under an Orangist regime.¹¹² Worse still, they were suspected – in some cases justly – of entertaining Jacobite sympathies. For a loyal whig, these Protestant fifth-columnists – sharing the ‘popish’ predilections of Roman Catholics in their constitutional attitudes, and conspiring for the restoration of a Catholic monarch – were a formidable threat to the maintenance of the Revolution settlement.

The *Account* is at its most vehement when attacking priestcraft, which appears as the real enemy of liberty and constitutional well-being. For example, in discussing the education of the young, Molesworth observed that the priests of the established church in Denmark, entrusted with this responsibility, have “made it their business to undermine” notions of civic virtue and have created a narrow university curriculum that has hampered rather than fostered the growth of public spirit. Clerical obscurantism also stood in the way of the social and economic improvement to which Molesworth was dedicated, and once again Danish history furnished an illustration.¹¹³ In the conclusion he opined that it would be a grave error to presume that the Roman Catholic Church was the only Christian sect proper to introduce slavery.¹¹⁴ The



Molesworth's parish church, at Swords, co. Dublin, the recipient of a bequest in his will (The Irish Architectural Archive)..

Danish Lutheran clergy had been highly effective handmaidens to the absolutist state. Indeed, he went on to suggest that the very existence of an established church was a guarantee that absolute monarchy would be able to sustain itself. The imposition of unity in religion and priestly authority had “cut away the root of sedition” and therefore all potential for change.¹¹⁵ A forced uniformity in religious belief deterred freedom of thought in every sphere. In his preface to Hotman's *Franco-Gallia* he was to reiterate this commitment to religious toleration, and not merely as a principle in itself, but as a means to an end in promoting political maturity among the people. Although an Anglican by preference, he said, he was convinced that “all opinions purely spiritual and

notional” should be indulged, and would show charity to all who differ in religion, whether Quakers, Socinians, Turks, Jews, Catholics, or pagans.¹¹⁶ This was an extreme conception of what religious toleration might entail, since most advocates of toleration drew the line at those religious groups who were themselves intolerant, but it was probably intended to provoke his opponents and is really indicative of the depth of Molesworth’s detestation of what he saw as the dead hand of the clerical estate – of whatever persuasion.

VII

A second important influence on the construction of the *Account*, alongside this fear and loathing of priests and priestcraft, was Molesworth’s profound anxiety about a further manifestation of the political power of ‘popery’: French military power, as wielded by the great monarch, Louis XIV. The evidence of his surviving correspondence suggests that while he was in Denmark, it was this which most agitated him. Given the political background of the 1670s and ‘80s this is hardly surprising. Historians like Professors Robert Bosher and Steven Pincus have amply demonstrated just how pervasive in English political culture in the Restoration period was the fear that King Louis was aiming at a ‘universal monarchy’ which would bring all of Europe, including England, under its sway.¹¹⁷ The years in which Molesworth was growing up were a period of French military triumph, and English ineffectualness, if not downright collaborationism. The events of the 1680s, culminating in the Glorious Revolution in England and the beginning of a major European war, can only have accentuated this sense of crisis. On the military successes of the allies depended not only the maintenance of the Revolution settlement in England, but the preservation of a Protestant state and Protestant landed society in Ireland. Indeed, Molesworth and his class in Ireland had more to lose than anyone from the failure of the Grand Alliance.

Molesworth’s private correspondence during his Danish embassy, much of it directed to the English diplomat Sir William Dutton Colt, reeks of his anxiety over the outcome of the war.¹¹⁸ His letters were always impatient with news of failures and sometimes almost frantic in their distribution of blame. The English tory ministers were incompetent, if not traitorous – for example, the “shameful” naval defeat off Beachy Head in the summer of 1690 prompted him to call for heads to roll;¹¹⁹ and

the allies were well-nigh useless: inefficient, corrupt, and lacking any kind of backbone. At one point in 1690 he berated the slowness of the “confederates” and added, “they must needs have been eaten up by the French ... by this time, had not our master’s successful expedition into England rescued them from eternal slavery”.¹²⁰ Without English courage, and especially the efforts of King William, all would be lost:¹²¹

Good God, what were become of the liberty of Europe, if he were not in the world, or not in the post where he is? I see no remedy but that the Emperor and the Allies (as they order their own affairs) must have sat down quietly and submitted to the French yoke, and such conditions as he [Louis XIV] pleased to impose on them, and this will never be mended while they have such licentious armies and covetous generals, who put no distinction between their friends and foes, unless it be that they use their friends a great deal worse.

The *leitmotiv* of these letters is Molesworth’s distrust of the Danish court and what he saw as the ascendancy of the pro-French party there. The ministers were “Frenchified”,¹²² the court full of plots and tricks: nothing was to be regarded or trusted. All the general weaknesses that he identified in the Danish monarchy in these letters were related to the possibility that the Danish court would either fail to support the alliance or actively support the French. His criticism of the king himself, as vain, ambitious and petty, took its edge from the fear that these defects of character would make him vulnerable to French blandishments. The attacks on the corruption and extravagance of the court reflected a fear that corrupt and self-interested courtiers will not listen to the voice of reason but will allow themselves to be bought by the French. What he saw was a country devoted to self-interest rather than the concerns of Europe: the Danes were entirely self-interested, whether it be to further their territorial ambitions in North Germany, or simply to make commercial and financial gains through illicit trade while they remain officially neutral. In an echo of what were later to be the standard complaints of English Tories against the Dutch during the Nine Years War and the War of the Spanish Succession, he wrote in May 1691: “the humour of this people is always aspiring and endeavouring to profit themselves by their neighbours’ damage”.¹²³

Much of what Molesworth had to say to Colt and to his other correspondents prefigured what he went on to write in the *Account of Denmark*. The selfishness and untrustworthiness of courtiers and aristocracy, the drunken habits of polite society, the squalor in which the ordinary people lived: all were reported in his private letters before being incorporated into the *Account*.¹²⁴ The accusation that so angered King Christian, that the Danish monarchy had taken its principles of government from the French,¹²⁵ was an extension of Molesworth's fear, while resident in Copenhagen, that the Danes would throw in their lot with King Louis rather than King William. The characterisation of the Danish aristocracy as feeble and corrupt, lacking the moral fibre to defend its country and its liberties, may well have been encouraged by the anxiety under which Molesworth constantly laboured while in Copenhagen about the likely success of French intrigues. Much of the negative portrayal of Denmark in the *Account* can be boiled down to the idea of a country which had become weak and self-seeking through the adoption of a system of absolute monarchy, the rising power of the clergy and the enervation of its ancient families, and was thus unable to discharge its responsibilities in the European state system: unable, that is, to fight for the liberties of Europe against a galloping French tyranny.

VIII

The evidence of Molesworth's disgruntled correspondence during his embassy could certainly support the emphasis placed in some discussions of the genesis of the *Account* on the particular personal difficulties he had encountered, and his disappointment at the failure of this important posting to inaugurate a distinguished official career.¹²⁶ As early as October 1690 he was giving vent in private letters to expressions of bitterness at the way in which the English ministers appeared to be neglecting him, and the longer he stayed in Denmark the more put upon he felt himself to be.¹²⁷ Clearly, he was also uncomfortable in the court society of Copenhagen, despite the fact that he was according to his own testimony an experienced European traveller, and, as Hugh Mayo has shown, he may have enjoyed access to the viceregal court at Dublin in Charles II's reign.¹²⁸ He was, however, indisputably a provincial, and may have been keenly conscious of this fact. Whatever the cause of his social and political failures, his experience as envoy had left him frustrated and despondent. Molesworth was ambitious,

and not particularly well-to-do: the returns from his Irish estate had suffered during the Williamite war and were slow to recover. He needed the profits of office.¹²⁹ And his later history is not without its careerist tinge, especially during Anne's reign, when he actively sought government appointments, first attaching himself to Lord Treasurer Godolphin and then to Godolphin's successor Robert Harley.¹³⁰ So it is not surprising that after 1692 he had some bile to expel.¹³¹

This does not mean, however, that the *Account* was merely a piece of personal spite. Molesworth's experiences in Denmark, his fears and tribulations for the Protestant and Williamite cause, produced their particular effects because of the nature of the mind and character they acted upon. In common with the vast majority of Irish Protestants he was a strong Williamite, an unequivocal supporter of the Glorious Revolution and a resolute anti-Jacobite. He shared the principles of other 'old whigs', for whom the great enemy was 'popery', whether Catholic or Protestant, and its instruments – the institutions of absolute monarchy, the morally defective courtiers who served that monarchy, and the overbearing and authoritarian clergy of the established Church. The fact that these instruments still existed, even flourished, in England (and Ireland) after 1689, and might be used either to pervert or to overturn the revolution settlement, were the lessons he wished his readers to draw by analogy from his disdainful description of the Danish monarchy.

When considering what Molesworth intended by writing and publishing his *Account*, we need to be careful to concentrate on the years 1689–94. If we cast our eyes too far ahead, to a point at which the Junto had elaborated the philosophy and practice of court whiggism (or "new" whiggism as writers such as Charles Davenant called it), and Molesworth had emerged as a prominent 'country whig' and Irish patriot ideologue, and interpret the *Account* in this context, we risk misunderstanding the author's purpose. It may well be safe to presume that the *Account* was meant as an indirect commentary on English politics, and a warning that a Protestant king – even such a hero as William of Orange – might turn into an absolutist. It may also be true that Molesworth's book served in due course as an inspiration to those 'country whig' authors – such as Moyle and Trenchard during the 'standing army' controversy of 1697–9 – who denounced the illiberal tendency of Williamite and succeeding governments.¹³² But when the *Account* was writ-

ten it was not principally an expression of disillusionment with William or an indictment of his character. Criticism was aimed at ministers, not at the King who had chosen them. It was only *after* William's use of the royal veto during the 1693-4 session, and his subsequent attempts to retain a standing army following the peace of Rijswijk, that real concerns began to be voiced about the nature of his personal kingship.¹³³ Molesworth's letters from Copenhagen show not the slightest glimmer of doubt about the man whom he saw as the saviour of Europe. Where the *Account* did bear upon contemporary English politics directly was in its comments on court corruption (although Molesworth's stress here on the risk of relying on "new men" rather than the old aristocracy must count as another of its manifold personal ironies); and its condemnation of Protestant 'priestcraft'. English readers exposed to the truth about the government of Denmark were expected to deduce that the influence of tory politicians and high church clergy threatened the downfall of the surviving Gothic constitution of the Anglo-Saxons.

Molesworth had travelled to Copenhagen with a particular set of political principles, and reacted according to those principles. He was temperamentally as well as politically averse to the flummery of court life, and regarded it as the antithesis of the rugged political virtues of classical republicanism; and was deeply suspicious of 'priestcraft' in whatever robes it appeared. He was also – and this I would regard as critical – deeply committed to the idea of a European crusade to diminish the power of France. As he wrote in the preface to the *Account*, "our late kings [Charles II and James II] half-undid us, and bred us up as narrow-spirited as they could make us consider ourselves as proscribed from the world, but now we have a prince [William III] that has raised us to our natural station, the eyes of most part of the world are now upon us, and take their measures from our councils". There can be little doubt that it was the Danish monarchy's failure to live up to this high calling that provoked his disdain. And it seems likely, in the context of the autumn of 1693, that the determining factor in his decision to publish was the apprehension that not even King William, despite his immense personal integrity, could be proof against the machinations of those Jacobites and tories, clerical and lay, who conspired to bring the English monarchy to the same degraded state.