importance of these subjects to communities larger than the people she has identified. How typical was Clement Draper? The Lime Street naturalists? Thomas Hood and other mathematical practitioners? Research into the social life of science in this early modern period must always be to a certain extent speculative. But this book and this research open a window to a completely new world, and one that is every bit as important to changing ideas about nature as the Royal Society would be.

But is this book really about the scientific revolution, as the title suggests? Not exactly. The vibrant story of sixteenth-century London tells us that many of the characteristics of the scientific revolution—experimentation, communities of thinkers, practicality, and, above all, the model of Francis Bacon’s Salomon’s House, were present in this teeming and vital city. Harkness shows that Bacon did not create some new organization of knowledge collection, but rather was describing a structure already in place in London—and described in a far more egalitarian guise in the first place by Hugh Platt. Mercantile London did not, of itself, however create the ‘new science’. It added a necessary component to the structure, but not a sufficient one. The more canonical thinkers still have their place in this story, but, as Harkness herself says, our conception of the Scientific Revolution should now include both Newton and London.


This volume is a collection of papers which in earlier versions were presented at a conference held by the Centre for the History of British Political Thought at the Folger Shakespeare Library. As such, the contributions are largely devoted to the so-called “Cambridge school” approach to the study of political thought. The authors are mostly in agreement in their commitment to a contextualist approach to the study of political thought, though there is some debate concerning the object and scope of British political thought in the early
modern period.

The editor’s introduction sets out the purpose of the volume: to inform readers of contemporary developments in the study of political thought from multiple perspectives: historical, literary, and theoretical. The contributors were thus asked to bring their disciplinary perspectives to bear on the study of British political thought, not only to “offer an array of models and methods” for this study (3), but also to show areas of overlap and convergence between the disciplines. Thus historians “have […] become more alert to questions of language and meaning at a time when scholars of literature have been more eager to write historically and when at least some social scientists have returned to history and to hermeneutics” (2).

Despite this interdisciplinary focus, the authors tend to stay within their disciplinary boundaries. This tendency is evident throughout the contents of the volume. The first chapter, by J.G.A. Pocock, Gorden Schochet and Lois G. Schwoerer, addresses the contextualist challenge to traditional “canonical” approaches to the history of political thought. These authors, along with other scholars such as John Dunn, Peter Laslett, Richard Tuck, and especially Quentin Skinner have interpreted the history of political thought not through the lens of “great books” and the men who write them, but rather through the histories of political languages. The thought of a political writer—both philosopher and polemicist—is “presented as a series of speech acts performed in linguistic and circumstantial contexts” (11). Early modern political thought will necessarily consider texts in the “context of more popular and vernacular literature” (13) as studied by historians; it will bring in the efforts of the “new” British history to broaden the geographical scope of British political thought (including both the British isles and Britain’s Atlantic colonies); and it will attend to literary form and technique to elucidate political languages. These areas correspond to the three-fold division of subsequent chapters: “British Political Thought and History,” “British Political Thought and Literature,” and “British Political Thought and Political Theory.”

The chapters in part one consider the relevance of the new British history for the study of political thought. John Morrill surveys the various frames of reference and movements within British historiography from the seventeenth century to the 1970s, culminating in the new
historical approach heralded by John Pocock. Morrill raises complications with Pocock’s approach and calls for a comparative European approach to enrich the new British history. Colin Kidd discusses the “contours of British political thought,” focusing particularly on the Anglo-Scottish relationship in the early modern period. Kidd asserts the need to draw from the “materials of the past” as opposed to “Procrustean approaches to the history of political thought” (66), e.g., concepts of sovereignty as determined by the disciplines of philosophy, political science, and jurisprudence. Nicholas Canny examines the interactions between Irish and British political thought, pointing to the impact of Irish political opinions on British politics instead of the more conventional preoccupation with constitutional relations between Ireland and Britain, and between Ireland and the continent. Finally, Tim Harris uses the Exclusion Crisis to reveal the questionable and problematic nature of the idea of “British” political thought. Tory and Whig thinking across the isles often defied easy categorization as local, national, pan-archipelagic, or continental; Harris suggests we “get beyond such compartmentalizations” (108). Taken together, these four chapters convey a sense of what the new British history is about, thus situating much popular political thinking of the time, but do not explicitly engage the textually-focused interpretations of political literature and philosophy as treated in the following sections.

The authors in part two examine literature as it relates to British political thought. Andrew Hadfield’s essay is devoted to considering sixteenth and seventeenth-century British republicanism as a literary phenomenon, as exemplified by works written by Eulke Greville and Shakespeare. Jean E. Howard considers Shakespeare as a political thinker insofar as he offered “the dramaturgy of politics in action” (132), i.e., the use of dramatic techniques both to depict and criticize multiple strands of political thinking. Steven N. Zwicker champions the role of literature, in its usage of irony, disguise, and deceit, in revealing political languages; historians of political thought should turn to poems, novels, and plays in addition to treatises to uncover the “life of politics endowed with all the subtle inflections of the voice and contradictions of the psyche” (149). This approach is demonstrated in the next chapter by Karen O’ Brien, who interprets
Restoration and eighteenth-century poetry in terms of the language of benevolence in the context of the growing British empire. The authors in part two make a convincing case for expanding the texts studied by political theorists to include works of literature, though as Quentin Skinner rightfully points out in the afterword, a “work of philosophy will inescapably be a literary artifact” (280).

The third part addresses British political thought and political theory, though it is not wholly clear from the findings of the first two parts if such “political theory” is really a separable discipline from history or literary studies. Duncan Ivison’s thoughtful chapter on the language of rights in relation to the history of empire connects the Lockean language of rights with early modern British imperialism. Ivison admirably if naively seeks a conception of rights which take social and cultural difference into account. Joanne H. Wright argues that the language of public and private are appropriate and useful for understanding the works of Margaret Cavendish. Her thesis is unexceptionable, though her apology for Cavendish as not quite a Second Wave feminist because there was “no existing discourse for Cavendish to fall back upon” (227) is questionable. Drawing upon Mikhail Bakhtin’s conception of texts as “utterances,” Kirstie M. McClure traces the print histories of the anonymous *Vindiciae Contra Tyrannos*, Locke’s *Two Treatises of Government*, and Burke’s *Vindication of Natural Society*. McClure’s efforts to counter the privileging of authors over readers lead to tenuous applications: it seems that the future of political theory in this idiom may well take place on the internet, “where the reading of historical texts and the theorizing of future possibilities is likely to take shape” (253). Richard E. Flathman returns to the themes of the first chapter in sketching out the contextualist challenge to canonical approaches to the history of political thought. Flathman utilizes Michael Oakeshott’s distinctions between the present “practical past” and the present “historical past” to clarify the perspectives of canonicists, contextualists, and political theorists, helpfully contrasting the (idealized) contextualist’s lack of interest in the bearing of the past upon the present with philosophers’ attempts to seek a truth which is universal and timeless. Flathman suggests that while the contextualist challenge has been fruitful for thinking about text and context, the contextualist approach should be considered
as complementary to other, more canonical outlooks, especially as contextualists have in some respects been interested in the “practical past” as much as the “historical past.”

Skinner’s afterword reviews all of the chapters in the volume, and welcomes the alternative perspectives offered by the authors in parts one and two as well as Flathman’s gentle critique of the contextualist approach. Skinner concedes that no “single set of hermeneutic principles can ever hope to capture more than a fraction of what we want to know about the texts we study,” and that we “need to remain in constant dialogue with each other about the rival merits of different approaches” (284-5). But apart from the interdisciplinary voices in the volume, and Flathman’s cautionary comments, nothing is heard from such non-contextualist political theorists as Hegelians, Marxists, Arendtians, Foucauldians, and Straussians. The contextualist dialogue is open only to invited guests.


In this deeply-researched and provocative book, Harold J. Cook combines intellectual, cultural, social, religious and political history with the history of science and medicine to investigate the development, in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic, of strikingly new ways of thinking about the material world. Drawing on numerous carefully contextualized case studies from the United Provinces, Cook argues that expanding interests in global commerce and trade during the seventeenth century supplied the Dutch not only with a plethora of fascinating new objects, such as exotic specimens from far-flung continents, but also with concepts and metaphors (like that of commerce itself) which likewise helped to spur increasingly materialistic modes of thinking. As a result, a newly object-centered, and thus “objective” knowledge arose, increasingly seen as derived not so much from reason as from the “passions” that physicians and folk-healers strove to control, as well as from the body itself.