

Sir Isaac Newton's enlightened chronology and inter-denominational discourse in eighteenth-century Ireland

In the advertisement prefacing Charles O'Connor's *Dissertations on the antient History of Ireland* (1753), the editor challenged an unnamed gentleman who had, apparently, smeared the good name of the author. The editor, Michael Reily (who went under the cognomen 'Civicus') was intricately involved in this dispute from its early stages and did not spare any criticism for the individual he deemed responsible, Dr John Fergus, the erstwhile friend and associate of both Reily and O'Connor. 'A Gentleman of great Reputation' alleged Reily, had branded O'Connor with 'the meanest Species of Immorality'. The dispute did not centre on some esoteric point of Irish mythology or any disagreement over issues of interpretation. It was not even, at least not in any direct way, a rift over political issues regarding the penal laws and the status of papists in the Irish polity, a tendency quite prevalent among the fissiparous Catholic organisations and pugilistic personalities of this period. Rather, it was wholly concerned with those most pertinent aspects of existence for an eighteenth century gentlemen – credit and honour. The disagreement was about Newton's *Chronology* and its application to the Irish annalistic corpus as a means of validating the latter – not about the principle of its applicability, nor regarding the minutiae of dates or similar arcana, but to who should gain the credit for appropriating Newton's prestige to such a particularly Irish topic.¹

When one thinks of Newton, Ireland is unlikely to figure in any account of his existence or output, nor did he publish any writings on Ireland. His private letters reveal little consideration for the sister kingdom; even the monumental confrontation between William of Orange and James II, finally resolved at the Boyne and Aughrim, elicited only one known reference in his correspondence when he was one of the members of parliament who voted supplies for the war in Ireland.² Setting aside material arising from his duties at the Mint one more substantial piece of writing exists – a critique of William Molyneux's *The case of Ireland* to be found among Newton's private papers.³ In terms of association, his Irish acquaintances are few and far between. Swift had what one biographer describes as a 'single bleak encounter' with the natural philosopher, but famously preferred the company of Newton's niece, Catherine Barton, and Newton seems

¹ [Charles O'Connor,] *Dissertations on the antient history of Ireland* (Dublin, 1753), 'Advertisement'.

² Sir Isaac Newton to John Covel, 28 Feb. 1688/9 in H. W. Turnbull (ed.), *The correspondence of Isaac Newton: 1688–1694* (7 vols, Cambridge, 1959–77), iii, 14.

³ Isaac Newton, 'The case of the Parliament of Ireland' (T.N.A., Mint 19/III.456–7); I am thankful to Patrick Kelly for this reference.

to have made little impression upon the querulous dean.⁴ They would appear on opposite sides in that quintessentially Irish dispute, the Wood's halfpence controversy, when Newton, in his capacity as Warden of the Mint, vouched for the quality of the coinage being sent to Ireland.⁵ Newton's intimate, John Locke, had many personal and epistolary relationships with Irishmen, the denominationally promiscuous John Toland being a famous and somewhat embarrassing one. A far closer friendship was that between Locke and William Molyneux, who first articulated the famous 'Molyneux problem' in a letter to Locke – a philosophical problem as to whether a blind individual, if restored to sight, would be sure of objective reality. It was an exercise in speculation that would become 'the root metaphor ... of Irish philosophy' according to David Berman.⁶ Ireland, it would seem, was simply not something that impinged upon Newton's consciousness to any extent whatsoever.

But Newton *in* Ireland, rather than Newton *on* Ireland, is a different matter entirely. The enlightenment in Ireland is frequently understood as a 'Counter-Enlightenment' reaction to the ideas of Sir Isaac Newton and John Locke – with the two understood as counterparts 'forming a single vision composed of natural and moral philosophy'.⁷ Irish reaction to this depiction is one which foregrounds scepticism about faith in pure reason, opposition to voracious anti-clericalism and unease with immutable physical laws that locate God's place in the cosmos upon distinctly shaky territory and that might relegate the deity's role to a less significant status. Such a dismissal of Christian mysteries is also reckoned as perceived by members of the Irish Anglican Ascendancy as undermining their establishment in church and state. Newton and Locke are integral to this depiction of an Irish Counter-Enlightenment, insofar as their ideas formed the basis of a challenge for Irish philosophy to 'criticize and creatively reinterpret' in order to sustain the primacy of God in the universe.⁸

It is well known that Trinity College, Dublin was one of the first institutions to embrace Lockean philosophy by making his *Essay on human understanding* a required text on the curriculum.⁹ Yet, despite this apparent initial enthusiasm, many aspects of these natural and political philosophies were not well received by worthies such as Archbishop William King and Peter Browne, provost of

⁴ A. Rupert Hall, *Isaac Newton: adventurer in thought* (Cambridge, 1992), pp 391–3; A. Rupert Hall, *Isaac Newton: eighteenth-century perspectives* (Oxford, 1999), p. 5.

⁵ Jonathan Swift, *The Hibernian patriot: being a collection of the Drapier's letters to the people of Ireland, concerning Mr. Wood's brass half-pence ...* (Dublin, 1730), p. 37; Isaac Newton, 'Detailed report on the trial at London of Wood's copper coinage for Ireland, which was found satisfactory, with an account of the amount of Wood's coinage up to 28 March 1724' (T.N.A., Mint 19/II.467).

⁶ William Molyneux to John Locke, 2 Mar. 1693 in *Familiar letters between Mr. John Locke, and several of his friends* (London, 1708), pp 32–8; David Berman, *Berkeley and the Irish philosophy* (London, 2005), p. 87; David Berman, *George Berkeley: idealism and the man* (Oxford, 1994), p. 10.

⁷ Graciela de Pierris, 'Newton, Locke and Hume' in Andrew Janiak and Eric Schliesser (eds), *Interpreting Newton: critical essays* (Cambridge, 2012), p. 257.

⁸ Berman, *Berkeley and the Irish philosophy*, pp 80–1.

⁹ E. S. De Beer (ed.), *The correspondence of John Locke* (8 vols, Oxford, 1976–89), iv, 602; Berman, *George Berkeley*, p. 7; Ian McBride, *Eighteenth-century Ireland: isle of slaves* (Dublin, 2009), p. 67.

Trinity College and later bishop of Cork and Ross. Indeed, it appears that on everything from time to anti-Trinitarianism to monetary theory to non-conformity Irish writers can be found who disagreed with Newton and Locke. Most famously, Bishop Berkeley in particular engaged in such an effort and the tone and drive of the Irish Enlightenment is often exemplified by his pithy comment, in reference to Newton and Locke, that ‘we Irish men can conceive no such lines’.¹⁰ Certainly, Berkeley’s *Alciphron* and *The Analyst* evidence scepticism about any excessive belief in the objective power of mathematics and physical laws to fully comprehend the majesty of the universe or the applicability of such laws to human society and religion. Newton, too, was the only author directly revealed as a recipient of Berkeley’s criticism in the *Principles of human knowledge*. Amidst the ‘modern philosophers’ and ‘materialists’ thus denigrated, the author of the *Principia* is indicated specifically.¹¹

However, one might question how representative Berkeley was of Irish opinion generally. Even for Berkeley, as for Newton, the theory of gravity was evidence of a divine and directing intelligence in the universe and several scholars have posited a ‘social Newtonianism’ behind Berkeley’s social ideas.¹² Furthermore, one of the most scathing critiques of *The Analyst* came from the pen of Dublin mathematician, Jacob Walton.¹³ Similarly, James Arbuckle (known by the pseudonym ‘Hibernicus’) wrote a short satirical piece on Berkeley’s immaterialism in *The Tribune* in 1729.¹⁴ Likewise, John Toland used Newtonian theory to argue for his unique variety of Pantheism, prompting a virulent reaction among Irish writers – indeed, much of the reaction to Newton and Locke is explicable in reference to the mediation of their ideas by Toland into an anti-Trinitarian christology.¹⁵

The high-church stance displayed by many Church of Ireland clerics, presumed to stem from insecurities related to the large numbers of dissenters in Ireland (Ulster in particular) could not have easily coalesced with Locke’s works on toleration. Nor would Newton’s unusual brand of anti-Trinitarianism have been acceptable – though it is not clear how well-known Newton’s heterodoxy was in the period. Given the adulation that accrued to Newton during the century, his

¹⁰ George Berkeley, *Philosophical commentaries generally called the Commonplace book*, ed. A. A. Luce (London, 1944), pp 392–4, 398; Colin M. Turbayne, ‘Berkeley and Molyneux on retinal images’ in *Journal of the history of ideas*, xxvi, no. 3, (June 1955), pp 339–55.

¹¹ George Berkeley, *The principles of human knowledge* (Dublin, 1710), pp 110–16; Richard Kearney, *Postnationalist Ireland: politics, culture, philosophy* (London, 1997), pp 145–8, 169–72.

¹² Scott Breuninger, *Recovering Bishop Berkeley: virtue and society in the Anglo-Irish context* (New York, 2010), p. 49; McBride, *Eighteenth-century Ireland*, pp 74–5.

¹³ Jacob Walton, *A vindication of Sir Isaac Newton’s principle of fluxions against the objections of the Analyst* (Dublin, 1735).

¹⁴ [James Arbuckle.] ‘A dream representing the world to be better’ in *The Tribune*, part 2, no. 21, (London, 1729), pp 149–55 in David Berman (ed.), *George Berkeley: eighteenth-century responses* (London & New York, 1989), pp 127–33.

¹⁵ Margaret Candee Jacob, ‘John Toland and the Newtonian ideology’ in *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, xxxii (1969), pp 307–31; David Berman and Patricia O’Riordan (eds), *The Irish Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment* (2 vols, Bristol, 2002), ii, x–xxi; Berman, *Berkeley and the Irish philosophy*, pp 118–19; Andrew Janiak, *Newton as philosopher* (Cambridge, 2008), p. 166.

discretion and regular church attendance as well as the emphasis upon his piety after his death, it is unlikely that it was common knowledge. Indeed, Thomas Rundle, the bishop of Derry, who chastised philosophers 'ridiculous with their Insolence of Learning, [who] have sat in their idle Libraries, and written down their Dreams, how the Universe, and all its beneficent Wonders arose by Matter variously figured and modified by Motion' in what might be considered the expected Irish Counter-Enlightenment mode, referred to Newton as 'the greatest uninspired Man that ever lived' with 'a Life well-spent to the noblest Purpose'.¹⁶

Anglican Dublin could harbour doubts about the rectitude of the Glorious Revolution but, tainted by association with James II's Dublin regime, suppressed such qualms. This sentiment is, nevertheless, evinced by the high number of non-juring clergymen; Charles Leslie is one famous example, but Berkeley is more representative of the sentiment in Ireland. One historian surmised that Berkeley 'maintained the doctrine of passive obedience hardly less emphatically than Filmer' and Ian Campbell Ross has described this position as Berkeley (and, by extension, Protestant Ireland) having 'his cake and [eating] it'.¹⁷ In theorizing time, too, Berkeley dissented from the Lockean–Newtonian concept of 'absolute time' and implied that gravity had an occult quality.¹⁸ Yet again, Berkeley's earnest espousal of money being a mere 'ticket or counter' functioning to 'excite industry' is at odds with the efforts of Newton to restore the face value of English coinage to its precious metal content and Locke's polemical insistence upon the same.¹⁹ Even Newton's recommendation for William Wood's coinage and his representation stating the same to the lords commissioners of the treasury was ignored in Dublin during the controversy.²⁰

Newton and his theories can be readily represented as a challenge to Irish Anglican sensibilities and to a clerisy supported by the state, a challenge that mobilized members of the Dublin intelligentsia to commence the project known to us as the Irish Counter-Enlightenment. This interpretation, however, seems to marginalise the ways in which Newton's writings were mobilized to support the orthodoxy of a variety of stances. This article addresses a distinctly Irish, if not specifically Anglican, response to Newton by means of the inclusion of Charles O'Connor within the Irish Enlightenment and by looking at the use of Newton in eighteenth-century Ireland as a bulwark for received opinions, across the religious divide.²¹ Integral to this, and often sidelined, was the role that Newton's

¹⁶ Thomas Rundle, *A sermon preach'd in Christ Church, Dublin, on Thursday the 23rd of October 1735* (Dublin, 1735), pp 5–6.

¹⁷ W. E. H Lecky, *A history of Ireland in the eighteenth century* (5 vols, London, 1913), i, 422; Ian Campbell Ross, 'Was Berkeley a Jacobite? Passive obedience revisited' in *Eighteenth-Century Ireland*, xx (2005), p. 30; Berman, *George Berkeley*, pp 27, 81–97.

¹⁸ Berman, *George Berkeley*, pp 63–9; Janiak, *Newton as philosopher*, pp 89–90.

¹⁹ George Berkeley, *The Querist*, (Dublin, 1735–7); Lecky, *History of Ireland*, i, 301; Patrick Kelly, 'Berkeley's economic writings' in Kenneth Winkler (ed.), *Cambridge companion to Berkeley* (Cambridge, 2005), pp 339–69.

²⁰ Isaac Newton, *The present state of Ireland: being Sir Isaac Newton's representation about gold and silver coins to the right honourable the lords commissioners of his majesty's treasury* (Dublin, 1729).

²¹ Sean D. Moore, 'Introduction: Ireland and Enlightenment' and David Berman, 'The birth of Scottish philosophy from the golden age of Irish philosophy' in *Eighteenth century studies*, xlv, no. 3, (spring 2012), pp 347, 381.

non-scientific writings played. It is an aspect of Newton's output that has, to quote the novelist John Banville, 'so embarrassed his biographers'.²²

For if Newton's writings and Locke's epistemology appeared to threaten God's omniscience in the eyes of Irish writers, Newton's chronological and antiquarian output undoubtedly found a receptive audience in Ireland. There was a pre-existing and vibrant tradition of chronology and biblical exegesis in Protestant Ireland, best exemplified by Henry Dodwell and James Ussher, which was continued into the nineteenth century by William Hales.²³ Dublin seems to have acted as a magnet for English chronologists – like Henry Winder (1693–1752) and Thomas Lydiat (1572–1646), the former settling in the city for life. John Leland, the anti-deist pamphleteer born in Wigan and a Presbyterian minister in Dublin, was a keen defender of the chronologists. Given a Gaelic annalistic tradition that ranked historical events and developments on a year-by-year basis stretching back many centuries beyond the birth of Christ and the use of the Bible in Gaelic histories such as Keating's *Foras feasa ar Éirinn*, chronology as a relatively value-free arena of ecumenical historical cooperation has been noted occurring as early as the 1620s.²⁴ It should also be remembered that chronology was an eminently intellectual pursuit for the learned gentlemen of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – compared to the recent academic vogue for alchemy and how it informed the thought of some of the most eminent thinkers of the seventeenth century, chronology has been forgotten as a reputable discourse.²⁵

The unimpeachable respectability of antiquarianism during the Enlightenment is similarly marginalised today. Rosemary Sweet has highlighted how antiquarianism was not only a component of the Enlightenment but – through its emphasis on exegesis, trial and error, saturation into the learned classes and public contestation – directly contributed to the Enlightenment's popularity.²⁶ Frequently viewed as its counterpart, chronology was more respected as the pure meat of intellectual activity, held in higher esteem than gentleman excavators and somewhat pedantic, if erudite, scavengers among the physical and textual remains of the ancients. Nevertheless, that both of the textual sub-disciplines enjoyed something approximating to a parity of esteem is evinced by the fluidity between practitioners in each and in how antiquaries and chronologists frequently collaborated or saw little distinction between these activities. This is

²² John Banville, *The Newton letter* (London, 1999), p. 6; Frank E. Manuel, *Isaac Newton, historian* (Cambridge, 1963), p. 6.

²³ Ussher's schema and Newton's 'flagrantly contradicted each other': Manuel, *Isaac Newton*, p. 29.

²⁴ Bernadette Cunningham, *The world of Geoffrey Keating: history, myth and religion in seventeenth-century Ireland* (Dublin, 2004); pp 39, 77; Joep Leerssen, 'Archbishop Ussher and Gaelic culture' in *Studia Hibernica*, xxi/xxiii, (1982–3), pp 50–8.

²⁵ Ted McCormick, *William Petty and the ambitions of political arithmetic* (Oxford, 2009); idem, 'Alchemy in the political arithmetic of William Petty' in *Studies in history and philosophy of science, part A*, xxxvii, no. 2, (June 2006), pp 290–307; Carl Wennerlind, 'Credit-money as the philosopher's stone: alchemy and the coinage problem in seventeenth-century England' in *History of Political Economy*, xxxv (2003), pp 234–61.

²⁶ Rosemary Sweet, *Antiquaries: the discovery of the past in eighteenth-century Britain* (London, 2004), pp 3–5.

apparent from the précis of Newtonian chronology in O'Connor's work and the synthesis of chronology, scripture, antiquarianism and travelogue displayed by Clayton's *Journey to Mount Sinai*.

As Colin Kidd has observed, 'chronology was socially as well as intellectually respectable' and 'scriptural chronology remained an integral and unembarrassing feature of the British Enlightenment'. Furthermore, the 'findings of the new astronomy were fused with sacred history in such works as Isaac Newton's *Chronology*'.²⁷ In fact, Newton's admirers usually used his antiquarian works to stress his capabilities in any discipline in which he deigned to concentrate his unparalleled talents.²⁸ O'Connor hoped to harness the mid-century apotheosis of Newton, enabled by the hagiographies of Voltaire, Pemberton and Fontenelle, to the timeline of Irish antiquity for the greater glory of the latter. His effort to exploit Newton's repute was inextricably intertwined with the wider question of 'Enlightenment' in Ireland and facilitated an association and creation of texts, that does much to spread light on its interdenominational aspects.

If Newton's clockwork universe could cause discomfort in Hibernia Anglicana, his *Chronology* had potential to reinforce revealed religion and scriptural salience. Thus, we must perceive two or more different responses to Newton, one of which was antipathetic to him and to Locke on philosophical grounds (and to a lesser extent, in economic theory), while on antiquarian and theological grounds he was enlisted to reinforce established ideologies and narratives. In terms of the latter it is argued here that it was the preservation of the veracity of scripture and the protection of revealed religion rather than an overriding ambition to maintain the privileges of the Church of Ireland that actuated the intellectuals in question. This concern, shared across denominational boundaries, is evinced by the cooperation, correspondence and shared interests of two individuals; one with Arian predilections obnoxious to Ascendancy religious sensibilities and the other, whose Catholic faith marginalised him from Irish political life. Their acquaintanceship highlights the complex interplay of chronology, denominational relations and the enlightenment in Ireland.

II

Newton's output of antiquarian speculation and biblical interpretation surpassed that of his natural philosophy – at least in terms of word count.²⁹ That makes it one aspect of his legacy that is worth analysing, particularly in light of a current paradigm that stresses the unease with which his work was greeted in Ireland. Additionally, in light of the Irish obsession with optics as a means of discussing the presence or absence of innate ideas (an obsession which Charles O'Connor shared), it is interesting that a cursory, and by no means compressive, glance at Newton's works in Irish libraries reveals something interesting.³⁰ By far

²⁷ Colin Kidd, *British identities before nationalism: ethnicity and nationhood in the Atlantic world, 1600–1800* (Cambridge, 1999), p. 36.

²⁸ Hall, *Isaac Newton*, p. 9.

²⁹ Manuel, *Isaac Newton, historian*, p. 2.

³⁰ Charles O'Connor, S.J., 'Charles O'Connor of Belanagare: an Irish scholar's education, part II: a visit to Dublin 1727–1728' in *Studies*, xxiii, no. 91, (Sept. 1934), pp 456–7.

the most visible Newtonian works in these collections are those mediated by others such as the accounts of Gravesande, Voltaire and Pemberton. However, a perusal of book auctions in eighteenth-century Dublin indicates the two most popular of Newton's works after hagiographies by third parties are the *Opticks* and his *Chronology*; *Principia mathematica* and *Arithmetica universalis* are rarely listed.³¹

Amidst these published auction catalogues, the list of one man is an exception to this trend and exceptional in his consumption of Newton; namely, Dr John Fergus. The contents of his library were publicly sold after his death in 1766 and contained three copies of the *Principia mathematica*, three of the *Opticks*, two of Newton's *Chronology*, and one each of the *Observations on Daniel*, the *System of the world* and the *Arithmetica universalis*. Additionally, there were six general accounts of Newton's philosophy, bringing the number of his Newtonian works to seventeen.³² Regardless of Fergus's interest in Newtonian science, he was keen enough upon the *Chronology* to be one of the subscribers when it was published in Dublin a year after Newton's death in 1727.³³ This is at least suggestive of a credible claim on Fergus's part to be the originator of the comparison between Newton's timescale and the Irish annalistic chronology.

Fergus was the descendant of a bardic family and became a medical doctor, a profession still accessible to Catholics under the penal laws.³⁴ Charles O'Connor, too, was from an old Gaelic family that had remained recusant after the Williamite War – his father had managed to salvage one hundred acres in Roscommon from an estate that was once the patrimony of the kings of Connaught. He was instrumental in restoring the study of ancient Ireland as a subject of respectable discourse. Furthermore, his activism in the Catholic cause extended to both informed polemics and fraternal organisation; he founded the first Catholic Committee and his pamphlets are an indispensable source for the political thought of the period. His friendship and occasional collaboration with Edmund Burke in mitigating the penal laws and the onerous

³¹ Thomas Sheridan only had two copies of the *Opticks*, in English and French; Swift the *Chronology*; Thomas Lloyd owned copies of *Opticks* and Pemberton's account of Newton, and Burgh of Pemberton, the *Chronology* and the *Observations on Daniel*; Bishop Pocock possessed Pemberton and the *Opticks*; only for the lawyer Samuel Card is there evidence of ownership of the *Arithmetica Universalis*, along with Voltaire's and Pemberton's accounts of Newton. See *A catalogue of books the library of the Rev. Dr. Thomas Sheridan, deceased; to be sold by auction on Monday the 12th of this instant November, at the Parliament-House*, (Dublin, 1739); *A catalogue of books, the library of the late Rev. Dr. Swift, Dean of St. Patrick's, Dublin. To be sold by auction*, (Dublin, 1745); *Catalogue of books: being, the library of Samuel Card, Esq; counsellor at law, deceased*, (Dublin, 1755); *A catalogue of books. Being the library of doctor Thomas Lloyd, deceased*, (Dublin, 1758); *A catalogue of books. Being the libraries of the Rev Mr. Burgh, and an eminent physician deceased*, (Dublin, 1769); *A catalogue of the library of the late Right Revd. Dr. Richard Pococke, lord bishop of Meath deceased*, (Dublin, 1766).

³² *A catalogue of the libraries of John Fergus, M. D. and son, both deceased*. (Dublin, 1766), pp 3–58.

³³ Isaac Newton, *The chronology of the antient kingdoms amended* (Dublin, 1728), 'List of subscribers'.

³⁴ Diarmuid Ó Catháin, 'John Fergus M.D.: eighteenth-century doctor, book collector and Irish scholar' in *R.S.A.I.Jn.*, cxviii, (1988), p. 139.

position of Catholics in the British Isles is another noteworthy part of his life.³⁵

The two men's friendship had been a long and congenial one; the first letter ascribed to O'Connor is to Dr Fergus in 1731, enquiring about the possibility of acquiring old Irish manuscripts in the libraries of Paris. However, it is probable that they met when O'Connor was a student in Dublin in 1727–8; a letter from Fergus to O'Connor from 1730 survives.³⁶ Additionally, both are mentioned as members of the Ó Neachtain circle in Dublin and Tadhg Ó Neachtain, in his poem *Sloifeadh scothadh na Gaodhhilge grinn* (1726–8), includes the 'generous Fergus, the doctor without fault' and 'Charles O'Connor from Cruachan of Conn'.³⁷ They also lent books to one another, Fergus receiving a copy of the *Annals of the Four Masters* from O'Connor and O'Connor receiving a copy of Lhuys's *Archeologia Britannica* from the doctor.³⁸

Their dispute began when O'Connor sent his manuscript to Fergus for approbation and approval, probably in early 1749, indicative of the trust then prevailing between the two men and his respect for Fergus. Fergus, however, prevaricated and gave a number of excuses for not returning the document – which, in an age with few copyright laws, and almost none in Ireland, understandably worried O'Connor.³⁹ Several years earlier he had been the victim of attempted fraud when Henry Brooke seemingly purloined a manuscript of 'Ogygian tales' O'Connor had written with Robert Digby, a down-at-heel member of Dublin's Grub Street.⁴⁰ O'Connor claimed, through Reily's 'Advertisement', that the *Dissertations* had been completed in 1748 but that Fergus's procrastination had postponed its printing by five years.⁴¹ Certainly, Fergus seems to have been in possession of the *Dissertations* in March 1749, when Reily pestered him to return it, but only received the vague reply that he 'liked both the Matter and the Stile of it'.⁴² At first, O'Connor presumed the absence of response was innocent and was merely 'impatient to see the Doctor's criticism'.⁴³ When he started getting anxious, Reily was dispatched to Fergus's house 'to hasten his examination of the book, wch I thought he had sufficient time for, if he had seriously set himself about it'. A further representation was made in April 1750, but Fergus pleaded for another fortnight for consideration. In any event, Fergus did not return it until September 1750, with an accompanying and non-committal letter in which he expressed some unease that, while the contents of the work might impress O'Connor and Fergus, they might not impress others; this may be an oblique reference to O'Connor's innovative use of Newton.⁴⁴ At this stage, and

³⁵ Walter D. Love, 'Charles O'Connor of Belanagare and Thomas Leland's "philosophical" history of Ireland' in *I.H.S.*, xiii, no. 49 (Mar. 1962), pp 1–25.

³⁶ Fergus to O'Connor, 1730 (R.I.A., O'Connor papers, MS 1159, B.i.1, f. 79).

³⁷ T. F. O'Rahilly, 'Irish scholars in Dublin in the early eighteenth century' in *Gadelica*, i (1912–1913), p. 161.

³⁸ Ó Catháin, 'John Fergus', pp 140–4; *Catalogue of the libraries of John Fergus*, p. 53.

³⁹ Mary Pollard, *Dublin's trade in books, 1550–1800* (Oxford, 1990).

⁴⁰ Rev. Charles O'Connor, *Memoirs of Charles O'Connor of Belanagare* (Dublin, 1796), pp 186–97.

⁴¹ Robert Digby to O'Connor, 24 Jan. 1743; Rev. Thomas Contarine to O'Connor, 13 May and 17 June 1743; Digby to O'Connor, 18 June 1743 (R.I.A. MS B.1.i, ff 27–36).

⁴² Reily to O'Connor, '1749' (*ibid.*, f. 147).

⁴³ O'Connor to Reily, 10 Nov. 1749, (*ibid.*, f. 153).

⁴⁴ Fergus to O'Connor, 21 Sept. 1750 (*ibid.*, f. 163).

despite Fergus's delay, the friendship was still relatively intact – as late as November 1751 O'Connor asked his Dublin-based son to 'challenge his friendship and give ... my service' to Fergus.

Whether this indicated a rift that O'Connor wished to repair is uncertain, but it was Fergus's behaviour after returning the manuscript that resulted in the estrangement. According to Reily, he had insinuated to their mutual friends in Dublin that O'Connor purloined the idea for Newtonian reinforcement from him, without any corresponding acknowledgement. What especially alienated O'Connor was Fergus's dissimulation – his professions of friendship in correspondence to O'Connor and his efforts to blacken his name in the company of their peers. Fergus, according to Reily, was telling people 'that he furnished you with the hint of paralleling the Accts of Sir Isaac Newton with those of our ancient Fileas'.⁴⁵ At first, Reily was willing to ascribe this merely to the 'peevish effects of old age'. However, it soon became apparent that Fergus harboured motives less personal than pecuniary – Reily was 'informed that the Dr will publish an history & in his Preface complain of you as to ill-treatment'. Reily's role in this was somewhat ambiguous. As O'Connor gifted the profits of the work to Reily, he may have been instrumental in provoking the controversy – certainly, he did not challenge Fergus's criticism and his letters are exculpations of his conduct in the affair, particularly his insistence upon faithfully retailing the doctor's activities.⁴⁶ Reily also insisted that the 'Advertisement' denigrating Fergus should be attached to the *Dissertations* arguing 'that it defends the Author and is a fair challenge to his Accuser'. The veracity of the doctor's version came to hinge upon when he had first known O'Connor – if it was 1727, when O'Connor was in Dublin and Newton's *Chronology* was published, he was sure he had told O'Connor about it. Later still, Fergus stated to Reily that

with respect to his showing you Sir I Newton's Book, which he now says he did not show you, but in Conversation observed to you the use that an Historian could make of it in treating of the antiquities of this Kingdom, and that he communicate in that manner some observations to you with respect to the Parallels he insists upon.⁴⁷

But the argument was really about credit – Fergus's only demand was to be recognised as the originator of the scheme. Given that this 'curious discovery' was the main novelty of the work, O'Connor and Reily found this impossible.⁴⁸

The 'Advertisement' to the *Dissertation* of O'Connor was somewhat defensive on this point, demanding whether 'any Extracts, from one or more old Authors, should be called any Man's Property'. Furthermore, Fergus's point was invalid, as 'the compiler, in truth, claims no property in the parallels and is glad, for the sake of his readers, that he cannot; because they are extracted and he still insists upon it that he extracted them from *Leabhar gabhala* and Sir Isaac Newton.' 'It is', they nevertheless insisted, 'of no consequence to the public who extracted

⁴⁵ O'Connor to Denis O'Connor [17 Nov. 1751], in *The letters of Charles O'Connor of Belanagare* eds Catherine Coogan Ward and Robert E. Ward (2 vols, Ann Arbor, MI, 1980), i, 6 [hereafter *Letters*]; Reily to O'Connor, 10 Nov. 1752, (R.I.A. MS B.1.i, f. 62).

⁴⁶ Reily to O'Connor, 27 July 1753, (ibid., f. 203); Reily to O'Connor, 20 Dec. 1751 (ibid., f. 180).

⁴⁷ Reily to O'Connor, 27 July 1753, (ibid., f. 203); Reily to O'Connor, 12 June 1753 (ibid., f. 201).

⁴⁸ Reily to O'Connor, 10 Nov. 1752 (ibid., f. 178).

them.' Fergus's work never appeared, but O'Connor nursed a grievance for years afterward, complaining to Dr John Curry of an 'uncharitableness in saying of me what he was not previously generous enough to say to me', adding, 'I parried his thrust in the face of the world and ... have little to fear from him as a public adversary'.⁴⁹ Despite this, O'Connor wished that Fergus be sent a copy upon publication, something that Reily strenuously resisted, arguing that it might be perceived as a provocation, or supply him with ammunition to counter or smear.⁵⁰

But what was the quality of the plagiarism that Fergus alleged and why was it so contentious? Obviously, on a personal level, both wished to gain the esteem of fellow Catholics and antiquaries for discovering a validating text for the Irish past in so reputable a scholar as Sir Isaac Newton. Clare O'Halloran has pointed out that O'Connor's comparison 'succeeds' to some extent because Newton and O'Connor are sharing the same sources, mediated through medieval chroniclers and classical writers. But its significance inheres in the use itself and the aspects of Irish intellectual life thus illuminated.⁵¹ The passages in question were a side-by-side comparison of Irish annals with the timeline adumbrated by Newton in his *Chronology*, whereby O'Connor exploited superficial similarities in nomenclature between the two. In particular, he argued that the Danann mentioned in Newton's account represented the Tuatha de Danann – a group of Bronze Age nomads that colonized Ireland. Likewise, the Ogygia and the Ogyges were conflated into an early reference to Ireland. Similarities like this granted, according to O'Connor, 'an unexpected degree of Credit ... without the least knowledge of the great Author who gave it!'⁵²

More conclusive still, in O'Connor's eyes, was Newton's assertion that the Phoenicians had reached and traded with Spain – something that correlated with the annalistic tradition in which Ireland was settled by Milesians journeying from the Near East. There were additional appeals in Newton's methodology, particularly his stress upon myth being the mere euhemeristic manufacture of scribes retailing the acts of temporal rulers and martial heroes. Euhemerism – the process whereby mythological or theistic figures are rationalized into real, though retrospectively deified historical personages – was primarily used to historicize pagan deities in order to integrate them, without friction, into Christian historical traditions. Likewise, euhemeristic techniques allowed O'Connor to apply the same criteria to Irish mythology, turning fantastic protagonists into legislators and monarchs who have a suspiciously prosaic concern with triennial parliaments and religious toleration. Thus O'Connor wondered 'Who can behold in the foregoing parallel Relations (so long buried in the Rubbish of Fable) the true Original of this ancient Spanish Nation ... synchronizing with the Newtonian Computation?'⁵³ Newton's *Chronology* had, simply, 'brought our earliest records into Repute'. Newton was obsessed with defending the basic truth contained in the Mosaic history (those accounts in the early Hebrew scriptures ascribed to Moses). O'Connor was able to exploit this in

⁴⁹ O'Connor to Curry, 16 July, 1756 in *Letters*, i, 16.

⁵⁰ Reily to O'Connor, 5 May 1753 (R.I.A., O'Connor papers, B.i.1, f. 197).

⁵¹ Clare O'Halloran, *Golden ages and barbarous nations: antiquarian debate and cultural politics in Ireland, 1750–1800* (Cork, 2004), pp 25–6.

⁵² O'Connor, *Dissertations*, p. 16.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

his defence of the Milesian descent from Gomer, son of Japhet, one of the three sons of the biblical Noah, a descent which placed the Gaelic Irish alongside the other peoples of western Europe. In conformity with contemporary antiquarian practice, O'Connor ignored that which contradicted or inadequately reinforced his stance, particularly Newton's vague statement that the British Isles were slowly populated after the Phoenician arrival in Iberia.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, there was much to commend itself to O'Connor's schema: an euhemerism that facilitated a re-writing of Irish history along Whiggish lines, the apparent support for the Milesian thesis, the reassertion of Noahic ethnology that reaffirmed the position of Irish people in the European ethnic firmament. There was also the bonus of reinforcing the validity of sacred ethnology and scriptural supremacy. The latter was indispensable if O'Connor hoped to reach his intended, Protestant, audience.⁵⁵

However, O'Connor and Fergus were being less innovatory than they assumed – similar chronologies had been utilized previously and Newton's ideas in this regard had themselves been used numerous times, not least in their main intended function, to buttress the primacy of scripture against attacks from assorted sceptics. It was so prevalent a practice that *The Reformer* could complain, in 1748, that 'if you would strengthen any Notion of your own, you may say, HOMER, AULUS GELLIUS and Sir ISAAC NEWTON were of such or such an Opinion'.⁵⁶ Cornelius Nary, a Gallican priest, published his own *Chronology* in 1720. Though it therefore predated Newton's *Chronology*, it shares many themes and influences. Like Newton, he used the famous convention of 'standing on the shoulders of giants' – in Nary's case to express his indebtedness to such previous chronologists as Ussher.⁵⁷ Nary asserted the primacy of the Mosaic account of history against the oppositional records of older civilizations of the Near East, as Newton would do in his *Chronology*, and utilized the euhemerism that so marks that latter work. In its opposition to free-thinking and deism his work conformed to that strain of the Irish Counter-Enlightenment, keen to defend Christian mysteries and revealed religion, but written by a Catholic. Nary steered clear of the sophisticated fideism of orthodoxy's defenders, relying instead upon the self-evident veracity of scripture. But the similarities are tangible and extend beyond superficially analogous phraseology, not least in Nary's stress upon euhemerism and his belief that the Greek and Chaldean chronologies and lineages are derivatives of Egyptian mythology.⁵⁸ Even earlier still, John Toland, who provoked other Irish writers into a conservative defence, anticipated Newton's *Chronology* with the argument that the Greeks and Chaldeans had usurped Egyptian learning for the same nefarious ends.⁵⁹ Toland's

⁵⁴ Newton, *Chronology*, p. 176.

⁵⁵ O'Connor, *Dissertations*, p. 213; Reily to O'Connor, 30 Mar. 1752 (R.I.A., MS B.i.1, f. 183).

⁵⁶ [Beaumont Brennan/Edmund Burke?], *The Reformer*, 21 Apr. 1748 in T. O. McLoughlin and James T. Bolton (eds), *The writings and speeches of Edmund Burke, i: the early writings* (Oxford, 1997), p. 126.

⁵⁷ Cornelius Nary, *A new history of the world, containing an historical and chronological account of the times and transactions, from the creation to the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, according to the computation of the Septuagint; which the author manifestly shews to be that of the ancient Hebrew copy of the Bible* (Dublin, 1720), p. ii; Newton to Robert Hooke, 5 Feb. 1676, in Jean-Pierre Maury, *Newton: understanding the cosmos* (London, 1992).

⁵⁸ Nary, *A new history of the world*, p. 4.

⁵⁹ Jacob, 'John Toland, and the Newtonian ideology', p. 318.

usage was, however, designed to abolish God as an immediate presence in the lives of the faithful and replace with his unique brand of pantheistic God-as-reason – something Newton, along with later Irish philosophers such as Browne, Berkeley and Burke found obnoxious.

A direct utilization of Newton, and one which threads together the Irish Counter-Enlightenment and Irish antiquities, is found in the *Defence of the antient historians* by Francis Hutchinson, the Church of Ireland bishop of Down and Connor. In this, Hutchinson invoked Newton as a worthy antiquarian, whose research and output was entirely compatible with the chronology of Irish history. Furthermore, he called for an alliance of Catholics and Anglicans in the face of the mutual threat posed by deism and ‘those Atheistical Principles, and that Wickedness that proceeds from them’.⁶⁰ Hutchinson’s attempt to draw on Newton differed from O’Conor’s; rather than using Newton and sacred ethnology to prove the veracity of Irish annals, he presumed the integrity of the Irish accounts in order to buttress perceived attacks on the Mosaic history of the Bible. However, Hutchinson’s proposed alliance was scorned in a scathing and sardonic answer by Robert Clayton, bishop of Clogher, who took exception to Hutchinson’s invocation of Newton as a crutch for the validity of Irish antiquities. According to Clayton, ‘Newton, for whom you have expressed some Regard in this Preface, not only differs from your Lordship ... but seems to prove the Peopling of Ireland is more modern, than is consistent with your Lordship’s Scheme’ and upbraided Hutchinson for pinning his argument upon ‘Sir Isaac Newton’s PERHAPS’.⁶¹ Clayton was not attacking the credibility of Newton’s writing, but abusing Hutchinson for such flagrant misuse. Clayton, as we shall see, had his own axe to grind; he was one of those anti-Trinitarians who represented the left-wing Lockean branch of the Irish Enlightenment that Hutchinson criticized.

Clayton, still a closet Arian, also mined Newton for the persuasive weight his prestige would give. His *Rejoinder* to a pro-Catholic pamphlet set out his core contention at the start, that ‘the Independency of the Church upon the State is ... as dangerous a Doctrine as any that is supported by the Church of Rome’. It is an archetypal product of the Irish Counter-Enlightenment in its narrower, anti-Catholic manifestation – and uses Newton’s *Daniel* to support its depiction of Rome’s corruption of Christianity.⁶² Two more works, heavily influenced by Newton, were Clayton’s *Vindication* of the Hebrew bible and his dissertation on prophecy.⁶³ But it was not only anti-Trinitarians who used Newton; the right-

⁶⁰ Francis Hutchinson [bishop of Down and Connor], *A defence of the antient historians: with a particular application of it to the history of Ireland and Great-Britain, and other northern nations in a dialogue between a Protestant and a Papist, an Englishman and an Irishman* (Dublin, 1734), p. 115.

⁶¹ [Robert Clayton,] *A letter to the Right Reverend the Lord Bishop of *****, concerning his defence of the ancient historians, &c.* (Dublin, 1735), pp 6–7.

⁶² [Robert Clayton,] *A replication to the rejoinder: being a state of the case, together with the history of Popery; containing an account of its rise, progress and decay* (Dublin, 1743), pp 6, 56–8.

⁶³ Robert Clayton, *The chronology of the Hebrew bible vindicated: the facts compared with other ancient histories, and the difficulties explained, from the Flood to the death of Moses. Together with some conjectures in relation to Egypt, during that period of time. Also two maps, in which are attempted to be settled the journeyings of the children of Israel* (Dublin, 1747); Robert Clayton, *A dissertation on prophecy, wherein the coherence and connexion in both the Old and New Testament are fully considered* (Dublin, 1749).

wing Lockean Patrick Delany trotted out the *Chronology* frequently in his history of King David – a work that essentially functioned as a vehicle to critique Pierre Bayle, famous for his espousal of religious toleration and scepticism about sacred history.⁶⁴

This was the intellectual atmosphere in which Fergus and O’Conor squabbled over credit due – it was, quite obviously, one in which Newton’s non-scientific writings were esteemed, and this is the taproot of the disagreement. The individual claiming the honour of mobilizing Newton as a buttress for Irish antiquarianism would reap praise from their peers. O’Conor eventually received the plaudits from the *Dissertations* and, by the end of his life, was universally known as the Venerable Charles O’Conor for his expertise in the field he had rehabilitated. The friendship with Fergus was never repaired, despite O’Conor’s protestations that he was amenable to reconciliation.⁶⁵ Fergus passed away in 1761 and when his books were auctioned five years later, O’Conor bought some of the stock.⁶⁶

III

The O’Conor–Fergus disagreement had a postscript that alerts us to the power of Newton’s writings to act as a pillar of orthodoxy and underscores the role his reputation had in bridging religious divides in penal-era Ireland. In the same year as O’Conor’s *Dissertations* utilized Newton to prove the Whig qualifications and ethnological pedigree deriving from ancient Ireland, the above-mentioned Robert Clayton published in London his *Journal from Grand Cairo to Mount Sinai*. There was, it must be admitted, little in the personalities of O’Conor and Clayton conducive to acquaintanceship. Given the bishop’s publicly expressed disdain for Irish antiquities, it is unlikely that this had the potential to become an arena of cooperation. Their religious stances are likewise antithetical. There were, however, some common traits, not least that both were religiously alienated from the Ascendancy; Clayton by his Arianism and O’Conor by his Catholicism. But their association has to be rooted in the intellectual environment of the 1750s, particularly as part of the backlash against Bolingbroke and the mid-century ‘apotheosis’ of Newton during which his ‘achievements were perceived to be unprecedented’.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Patrick Delany, *An historical account of the life and reign of David King of Israel: interspersed with various conjectures, digressions, and disquisitions. In which (among other things) Mr. Bayle’s criticisms upon the conduct and character of that prince, are fully considered* (Dublin, 1740), pp 239–53; Berman, *George Berkeley*, p. 9. William King’s *De origine mali* (Dublin, 1702) was a response to Bayle’s scepticism: McBride, *Eighteenth-century Ireland*, p. 67.

⁶⁵ O’Conor to John Curry, 3 Oct. 1760 in *Letters*, i, 99.

⁶⁶ Minute book of the Dublin Society of Antiquarians committee: ‘A catalogue of the Irish books in the library of John Fergus, M.D., deceased c.1772’ (R.I.A. MS 24.e.7): O’Conor bought ‘A novel in the Irish character’, ‘Irish poems’, ‘Lives of saints’ and ‘Irish genealogy’.

⁶⁷ Robert Clayton, *Journal from Grand Cairo to Mount Sinai and back again* (London, 1753); Eric Schliesser, ‘The Newtonian refutation of Spinoza: Newton’s challenge and the Socratic problem’ in Janiak and Schliesser (eds), *Interpreting Newton*, p. 306; Mordecai Feingold, *The Newtonian moment: Isaac Newton and the making of modern culture* (New York & London, 2004), pp 169–91.

Another, probably equally significant imperative, was the bishop's own personal circumstances. Clayton was once a friend of Bishop Berkeley, but they had fallen out over Clayton's lackadaisical involvement in Berkeley's Bermuda scheme and had a relationship approaching to enmity by 1752. He had also alienated Sir Richard Cox, John Perceval (later the second Lord Egmont) and many others with his truculent personality.⁶⁸ The Cox disagreement would have been a potentially fecund area of common ground; O'Connor intensely disliked Cox, for reasons mainly confined to historiographical controversy.⁶⁹ Both disliked David Hume; Clayton on a philosophical level, O'Connor for depicting the rebels of 1641 as inherently barbarous and bloodthirsty murderers of Protestants.⁷⁰ Furthermore, in 1751 Clayton published what would become his most memorable work, the *Essay on spirit*.⁷¹ This work, as its subtitle 'with some remarks on the Athanasian and Nicene creeds' suggested, was filled with sympathetic Arian exposition – more pertinently, it departed from the rigorous fideism expected from Irish philosophers in this period.⁷² Clayton, who had heretofore been discreet with his anti-Trinitarianism, faced the expected Counter-Enlightenment backlash. William Warburton, bishop of Gloucester was foremost among his detractors and the lord lieutenant, the duke of Dorset, refused to prefer him to the see of Tuam on account of it. The *Journey from Grand Cairo* was a different work entirely and was probably written in order to repair the damage wrought upon Clayton's reputation by the *Essay* – so he exploited Newton's reputation to do so. Before publication, he sent a letter to the archbishop of Canterbury offering to edit any part the primate found objectionable. Clayton also proposed that he sponsor an expedition to the Sinai to verify the supremacy of the Hebraic bible by inscriptions there that allegedly confirmed scriptural integrity.⁷³

The work itself was an attack on Warburton's refutation of Newton in the *Divine legation of Moses*; the opportunity to humble one of his most ferocious critics and ingratiate himself back into the Anglican establishment resulted in Clayton's support for the Newtonian chronology. In Warburton's book, Clayton

⁶⁸ Berman, *George Berkeley*, pp 102, 108; Clayton to Cox, 3 Apr. 1738 (B.L. Add MS 21138, ff 77–83); Clayton to Perceval, 9 Feb. 1737, (B.L. Add. MS 47013, f. 60).

⁶⁹ One of O'Connor's first publications was during the Lucas affair, when his *Counter-Appeal* was published to criticize the *Appeal* of William Henry; however, it is probable that the real target was Cox – certainly, O'Connor's biographers and intimates seemed to think so. The Wards state that the *Counter-Appeal* was written 'because Cox distorted the ancient history of the Irish' (*Letters*, i, 5); it was, in fact, Henry who did so. O'Connor was virulently opposed to Cox's grandfather's treatment of the Irish past in his *Hibernia Anglicana* (London, 1689–90).

⁷⁰ Robert Clayton, *Vindication of the ... Old and New Testaments* (Dublin, 1752).

⁷¹ [Robert Clayton,] *An essay on spirit, wherein the doctrine of the Trinity is considered in the light of nature and reason; as well as in the light in which it was held by the ancient Hebrews* (Dublin, 1751); David Berman, 'Berkeley, Clayton and an essay on spirit' in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, xxxii, no. 3 (July–Sept. 1971), pp 367–8.

⁷² C. D. A. Leighton, 'The enlightened religion of Robert Clayton' in *Studia Hibernica*, xxix (1995–7), p. 169.

⁷³ Lady Llanover (ed.), *The autobiography and correspondence of Mary Glanville, Mrs. Delany*, (3 vols, London, 1861) iii, 85; Clayton to Thomas Herring, archbishop of Canterbury, (B.L. Add. MS 4301, f. 258).

found an apt vehicle for highlighting his orthodoxy – even though Warburton’s critique of the *Chronology* was purely technical and he fully shared in the almost universal respect for Newton, going so far as to call him an ‘Ornament of human kind’ – though adding that ‘the strongest Mind has its Foible’.⁷⁴ Clayton’s work detailed the perambulations of some Catholic clergymen and Arab merchants around the Sinai and aimed to restore scriptural integrity by extolling the greatness of Newton’s *Chronology*. Another significant component involved criticizing William Warburton’s interpretation of zoolatry; Warburton insisted that the earliest forms of monotheism manifest themselves as zoolatry – animal worship – before God decided the vulgar were ready to receive revealed religion. Clayton, anxious about the theological and philosophical implications of this argument, adopted a commonsensical, quasi-empirical approach to this difficulty. He proposed that the Hebrew alphabet had formerly used, in common with all ancient alphabets, animalistic figures to represent sounds and letters. They weren’t ‘worshipped’ at all – they were merely representative of a timeless scriptural truth that was merely visually different.

Similarly, Clayton wished to dispel the doubt cast on scripture by Lord Bolingbroke’s assertion that the Hebrew alphabet was a later arrival – that is, that universal and monotheistic truths within scripture could not have existed without a language to record them. Scripture must, therefore, be of a later date. Clayton explained these arguments away by insisting that the characters found in the Sinai were jettisoned during the Babylonian captivity and there was a swift but smooth switch from glyphic to grapheme letters, thereby leaving the dignity of the Pentateuch intact. This original glyphic alphabet was visible in the Sinai.⁷⁵ Clayton’s admiration for Newton was not unqualified and while he agreed in whole with his conclusions, he expressed reservations about the naming of Osiris and some minor aspects of brute-worship stemming from hieroglyphs. He also debunked Warburton by highlighting the similarities between his and Newton’s interpretations of zoolatry, insinuating hypocrisy or plagiarism on Warburton’s part. While the text might seem fanciful in its proposals, it buttressed Newton’s *Chronology*, utilized the same euhemerism and stressed the same Egyptian influence upon the surrounding civilizations of the eastern Mediterranean and Near East. Indeed, the work received a serious and sympathetic review from Thomas Birch, secretary to the Royal Society, and was translated into Dutch and published in Amsterdam the following year.⁷⁶

Whatever its effect upon Clayton’s reputation, the work was followed by a burgeoning acquaintanceship between O’Conor and Clayton. Both had, it seems, mobilized Newton to exploit an existing audience predicated on the great esteem in which he was held. But there was another imperative to write in the early 1750s. This threat imperiled the validity of both their discourses, a threat inherent in the posthumously published works of Henry, Viscount Bolingbroke.

⁷⁴ William Warburton, *The divine legation of Moses, on the principles of a religious deist, from the omission of the doctrine of a future state of reward and punishment in the Jewish dispensation* (2 vols, London, 1738), ii, 206–7.

⁷⁵ Clayton, *Grand journey*, pp 77–9, 105.

⁷⁶ Manuel, *Isaac Newton*, p. 181; Thomas Birch, review of *A journey from Grand Cairo to Mount Sinai* (B.L. Add MSS 4254, f.69); Robert Clayton, *Dagverhaal van eene reize van Groot Cairo na den Berg Sinai* (Amsterdam, 1754) (N.L.I., LO 6075).

Bolingbroke's scepticism about the merits of scripture as a trustworthy historical source, combined with his denigration of the Noahic peopling of the world, alarmed both O'Connor and Clayton – and their works were part of an Irish reaction to Bolingbroke that also included work by John Leland, the first (hostile) historian of deism, and Edmund Burke.⁷⁷ Leland's work reinforces the link between Newton's writings and conventional chronological systems, sacred ethnology and scriptural integrity and he defended 'the labours of a Scalinger, a Petavius, and Usher [*sic*]' as 'highly useful and commendable'. Additionally, Leland pointed out that Bolingbroke omitted Newton from his list of antiquarian pedants and described reliance upon or use of the Bible as a historical source as 'an employment that even a Sir Isaac Newton judged not to be unworthy of his great genius'.⁷⁸

The offending passages were contained in Bolingbroke's *Letters on the study and use of history*, wherein he asserted 'that the genealogies and histories of the Old Testament are in no respect sufficient foundations for a chronology from the beginning of time, nor for universal history'.⁷⁹ This was repugnant to both orthodox Christians and antiquaries insofar as they believed the dignity of scripture depended on its literal truth, while this literal truth was the basis of several of the historical and ethnological narratives of the eighteenth century. Should such central truths be allegorical, fanciful or invention, both these groups' claims on historical and religious truth would be compromised. Bolingbroke's insistence that the ancient Hebrew alphabet (that is, the one present in pictographic form in the deserts of the Sinai) was lost in the 'Babylonish captivity' and, hence, so too were the learned books and histories of the Jews. This was objectionable to Clayton on several grounds.⁸⁰ In 1752, he published a defence of Mosaic history entitled *An answer to the objections of the late Lord Bolingbroke*, and the *Grand journey* should be seen as a part of an Irish effort to challenge Bolingbroke's scepticism.⁸¹ Like Clayton, Leland insisted that there was a continuum between the older Hebrew and the Chaldean-Hebrew acquired in Babylon that ensured veracity for scripture.⁸² For O'Connor, Bolingbroke's scepticism about sacred ethnology, which could relegate the ancient Irish from their purported ethnogenesis in the Near East, threatened

⁷⁷ [Edmund Burke,] *A vindication of natural society: or, a view of the miseries and evils arising to mankind from every species of artificial society. In a letter to Lord **** by a late noble writer* (London, 1756); David Berman, 'The culmination and causation of Irish philosophy' in *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* lxiv (1982), p. 273; [Edmund Burke,] *A philosophical enquiry into our ideas of the sublime and beautiful*, (London, 1757), pp 118–19.

⁷⁸ John Leland, *Reflections on the late Lord Bolingbroke's letters on the study and use of history; especially so far as they relate to Christianity, and the Holy Scriptures* (2nd edn., Dublin, 1753), pp viii, 18.

⁷⁹ Henry St John, Viscount Bolingbroke, *Letters on the study and use of history*, in Bolingbroke, *The works of the late Right Honorable Henry St. John, Lord Viscount Bolingbroke* (5 vols, London, 1754), ii, 303, 313.

⁸⁰ Henry St. John, Viscount Bolingbroke, *Letters on the study and use of history* (2 vols, London, 1752), i, 78, 84, 101.

⁸¹ Robert Clayton, *An answer to the objections of the late Lord Bolingbroke against the histories of the Old and New Testament* (Dublin, 1752).

⁸² *Ibid.*; Leland, *Reflections on the late Lord Bolingbroke's letters*, pp 43–7.

Gaelic antiquarian integrity. As Clayton had also done, O'Connor, in the *Dissertations*, dismissed Bolingbroke's assertions by insisting upon the Gomerian descent of the Irish – that is, their descent from Noah via Japhet, the father of the European peoples. Later still, he recommended that Noël-Antoine Pluche 'in defence of Moses is an antidote to Lord B'.⁸³ Both found a ready tool in Newton for opposing Bolingbroke's innovations; indeed, it appears to have facilitated cooperation between them.

In the same year as they published their defences, O'Connor amended the second edition of his pamphlet *Seasonable thoughts* to state 'While we have a Clayton, a Foster, or a Madden, amongst us, this must be remembered with Gratitude'.⁸⁴ They were certainly known to each other by 1756, when O'Connor, after receiving a letter from Dr Johnson praising his *Dissertations*, thanked the printer George Faulkner for having 'brought me acquainted with the Bishop of Clogher!' So close did the relationship become that, early in the same year, O'Connor could have 'a conversation for an hour with him in his closet' during which, 'he gave me a commission which I have executed as well as I could'.⁸⁵ Given that O'Connor's *Case* and *Vindication of the case* appeared the previous year and was answered by Clayton's *Matters of fact* it is possible that this assignment was part of an ongoing and orchestrated pamphlet 'war'. O'Connor is clear that this 'commission' took the form of some piece of literature, having 'reserved a copy for the inspection of my friends'.⁸⁶

If so, it would explain the scrupulous politeness observed by both parties when referring to their polemical opposite during their pamphlet exchange. In his *Matters of fact*, Clayton stressed that he was addressing 'a sensible and an honest Man' and sought to avoid 'a disagreeable Controversy'. Elsewhere, O'Connor is 'the ingenious Author', 'a Man of Religion' and 'a good Subject'.⁸⁷ O'Connor returned the compliment in his response, asserting that there were 'some rare Spirits, who, like a Berkeley, or a Clayton, take the lead in human Knowledge'.⁸⁸ There is also a peculiarly Newtonian and antiquarian topicality to the pieces; Warburton's pontifications upon toleration, along with Montesquieu, are the rock upon which O'Connor builds his argument in the first pamphlet. Isaac Barrow, Newton's tutor, was mobilized in the second.⁸⁹ The chronological disputations that attended the *Dissertations* and the *Grand journey* are not articulated here.⁹⁰

⁸³ O'Connor to Curry, 22 Aug. 1758 in *Letters*, i, 61.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*; [Charles O'Connor,] *Seasonable thoughts relating to our civil and ecclesiastical constitution* (Dublin, 1753), p. 46.

⁸⁵ O'Connor to Faulkner, 4 May 1757; O'Connor to Daniel O'Connor, 7 Feb. 1756 in *Letters*, i, 10, 31.

⁸⁶ [Charles O'Connor,] *The case of the Roman-Catholics of Ireland*, (Dublin, 1755); [Charles O'Connor,] *A vindication of a pamphlet lately published intituled, The case of the Roman-Catholics of Ireland* (Dublin, 1755); O'Connor to Denis O'Connor, 7 Feb., 1756 in *Letters*, i, 11.

⁸⁷ [Robert Clayton,] *A few plain matters of fact humbly recommended to the consideration of the Roman-Catholics of Ireland* (Dublin, 1756), pp 5, 15, 78.

⁸⁸ [Charles O'Connor,] *The principles of the Roman-Catholics of Ireland, exhibited in some useful observations on a pamphlet intituled Plain matters of fact* (Dublin, 1756), p. 8.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁹⁰ [O'Connor,] *Case*, pp 17, 28, 39, 40, 64–5; [O'Connor,] *Principles*, p. 21; Ian McBride, 'Catholic politics in the penal era: Father Sylvester Lloyd and the Delvin address of 1727' in *Eighteenth Century Ireland*, xxvi (2011), pp 115–48; [Clayton,] *Matters of fact*, p. 75.

But Clayton and O'Connor met on 7 February 1756 and Clayton's pamphlet was published on 13 March. O'Connor's *Principles of the Roman Catholics* was printed at some stage between 21 May and 2 June 1756, shortly after a sojourn touring the west of Ireland and recuperation from injuries sustained there.⁹¹ This narrow timeframe and their intimacy indicate some consultation, if not cooperation. Indeed, the collaboration, deduced from their consultation, their scrupulous politeness and timing seems to have been fruitful for both of them. O'Connor's output during the period after 1753 is significant and is more fecund than at other periods. This period also saw Clayton resume the intellectual boldness (or foolishness) he exhibited in 1751 – outspokenness that would lead to his disgrace and downfall. But for the time being, this apparent agreement to engage in public disputation endured.

Certainly, it would be an apt subterfuge for the political negotiations going on elsewhere; at the time, Clayton and O'Connor were discussing the possibility, as representatives of both communities, of a registry bill for Catholic priests. Clayton's reply should be analysed in this light – ostensibly opposing O'Connor's view, he was keen to point out that the author of the *Case* was a layman and that the clergy were unreceptive to the proposals. But, despite appearing critical, Clayton's point is apposite to O'Connor's; his counter-argument highlights the obstinacy of the clergy regarding an oath or toleration, an aspect that recurs in O'Connor's letters. Conflict between lay Catholics and the hierarchy formed an intrinsic part of the agitation for the dilution of the penal laws.⁹² O'Connor was irritated by their clerical caution and often imputed to them a desire to defer to the wishes of the Pretender, rather than securing the wellbeing of their flock. The slide into Anglo–French conflict in 1755–6 presented, in O'Connor's opinion, a unique opportunity to reassure the state, and the chariness of the clergy to endorse such efforts frustrated this ambition. The clergy were excoriated by O'Connor as they 'deviate[d] from the line of prudence ... without deviating in the least from the line of conscience'; he wished to place the responsibility for accommodation 'on the shoulders of the Roman Catholic laity'. Intrinsic to this willful equivocation on the part of the clergy was, according to O'Connor, a mild and lingering Jacobitism twinned with worldly ambition. The laity were loyal and anxious for a toleration, having 'no foreign connections, nor any measure to keep with foreigners'. A frequent object of O'Connor's ire was the recalcitrant archbishop of Dublin, Richard Lincoln, whom he christened the 'Hyper-Doctor', 'with his authoritative gag and foreign whip'. O'Connor spent years persuading the hierarchy of the expedience of an oath, but decided as early as September 1756 (referring to Archbishop Lincoln) that 'our business can be done without his concurrence or assistance'.⁹³

Thus Clayton's contentions were compatible with O'Connor's sensibilities – but, as a Catholic, the latter would have been reluctant to express such sentiments in a public and potentially divisive manner. Despite this, in his reply to Clayton the tone is more strident, though O'Connor still favourably referenced Clayton's

⁹¹ [A Protestant,] *Remarks upon a late pamphlet entitled the Case of the Roman Catholics of Ireland* (Dublin, 1755); Reily to O'Connor, 20 Sept. 1755 (R.I.A. MS B.i.1, f. 77); O'Connor to Denis O'Connor, 13 Mar. 1756 in *Letters*, i, 12; O'Connor to Curry, 2 June 1756 in *Letters*, i, 14.

⁹² Patrick Fagan, *Divided loyalties: the questions of the oath for Catholics in the eighteenth century* (Dublin, 1997).

⁹³ O'Connor to Curry, 22 Sept. 1756, 13 Jan. 1757 in *Letters*, i, 23–6.

ecumenism and ‘the humane Spirit of the Author before me’.⁹⁴ But the fundamental point was that Clayton presented a call entirely conformable to O’Conor’s agenda, placing the onus of accommodation outside the clergy and beseeched ‘the Laity among the Roman Catholicks’ to take the lead.⁹⁵ This debate is interesting for several reasons. Firstly, it appears to have sprung from a shared use of Newton’s writings to legitimize very particular political and religious positions. Secondly, the two protagonists were more than acquainted; O’Conor visited Clayton in that most intimate of eighteenth-century domestic spaces, the bedroom, wherein they formulated a ‘commission’. Thirdly, it took place at a time when both were attempting, in tandem, to alter some of the penal laws. The pamphlet exchange, then, could have acted as a consciously public forum for discourse, couched in civility, outlining areas of agreement and expedience. It was also functional in normalizing such discourse in terms far less acrimonious than previously. Lastly, despite their seeming opposition, the sentiments of both were oriented towards an exclusion of the Catholic hierarchy from influencing such legislative initiatives. What Clayton, exactly, got out of this is harder to discern, but a limited toleration, even for Catholics, could have extended to those, like Clayton, who harboured unconventional attitudes to Trinitarian orthodoxy.

That same year (1756), Clayton gave up any remaining Nicodemite deceptions and suggested in the House of Lords that the Athanasian and Nicene creeds be removed from the liturgy of the Church of Ireland.⁹⁶ O’Conor’s ‘commission’ occurred five days after this event – perhaps implying some tangential involvement of O’Conor in the affair. Clayton was not prosecuted until the following year, when he abandoned circumspection entirely and published the third part of his *Vindication* in an amended form that recommended the same. The backlash was more stringent than that which greeted his *Essay on spirit*, and a hastily convened group of prelates demanded his presence at an inquisition into his orthodoxy. Clayton died before his condemnation. According to contemporary witnesses, ‘his illness [was] universally attributed to the excitement occasioned by the prosecution’.⁹⁷ Newton’s own discreet anti-Trinitarianism is more understandable in light of this persecution. Indeed, by the time of the publication of the *Principles*, it appears that Clayton was becoming a pariah in Dublin; Reily wrote O’Conor that ‘the leaders you have pointed out in Human Knowledge are not much complimented by the receivers, who are not inclined to think that the Author of the Essay on Spirit is a fit Leader’.⁹⁸ While O’Conor’s letters reveal little about the Clayton controversy itself, he lamented Clayton’s death, along with that of Lord Clanbrassil (another Ascendancy member behind the 1755 bill) as the destruction of one of his conduits into the Ascendancy; ‘Is it not an extraordinary circumstance that Clanbrassil should so soon follow Clogher? Two links of the triple chain broken!’⁹⁹

⁹⁴ O’Conor to Curry, 22 Sept. 1756 in *Letters*, i, 24; [O’Conor,] *Principles*, pp 11, 73, 79.

⁹⁵ [Clayton,] *Matter of fact*, p. 96.

⁹⁶ [Robert Clayton,] *The Bishop of C—r’s speech, made in the House of Lords, in Ireland, for omitting the Nicene and Athanasian out of the liturgy* (London, 1757).

⁹⁷ Berman, *Berkeley and the Irish philosophy*, p. 110.

⁹⁸ Reily to O’Conor, 26 June 1756 (R.I.A. MS B.i.1, f. 279).

⁹⁹ Edith Mary Johnston-Liik, *History of the Irish Parliament: Commons, constituencies and statutes*, (6 vols, Belfast, 2002), iv, 342–3; O’Conor to Dr John Curry, Good Friday, 1758 in *Letters* i, 55; [O’Conor,] *Principles of the Roman-Catholics*, p. 81.

This article has suggested that the combined defence of Christian orthodoxy and the Trinity necessitated the use of Newton's chronology and created the conditions for a commonality across the religious divide that resulted in cooperation to reduce the rigours of the penal code. O'Connor's use of Newton was not, for all that, entirely mercenary or political. O'Connor understood his own identity as a member of one of the three kingdoms that made up the British Isles; he was 'a Catholic in a Protestant country' and his use of Newton was a component of this identity. As such, he fully shared in the contemporary respect for Newton's genius and recognised its persuasive capabilities – and, perhaps, its later function as an arena of agreement between two antithetical personalities such as Clayton and himself. It also shows that the response to Newton in Ireland was multifaceted and not totally dependent upon his scientific writings. There was also a distinct function that accrued to Newton's antiquarianism and biblical exegesis in eighteenth-century Ireland, one that was not a threat to established institutions or socio-political structures. It could even, in the case of Clayton and O'Connor, be wielded as a means to placate hostile opinion, mitigate negative perception or act as leverage for legitimizing previously dubious disciplines such as the study of Irish antiquities. At a final remove, it could function in facilitating cooperation between members of different confessions with mutual interests or shared intellectual attitudes. This came to the fore in the use of Newton's *Chronology* as an adjunct to O'Connor's own perspective on Irish antiquity – an antiquity that looked suspiciously akin to a constitutional monarchy with an enlightened Whig ethos. Writing to the Chevalier O'Gorman, another Catholic physician, he explained a point of chronology by stating simply, 'I have the firmest support in Sir Isaac Newton [the] most celebrated antiquarian of the present or any age'.¹⁰⁰

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¹⁰⁰ O'Connor to Chevalier O'Gorman, 21 Jan. 1786 in *Letters*, ii, 234. I am grateful to Patrick Kelly for indicating material relating to Newton and Ireland. I am also thankful to Ian McBride for commenting on the first draft and advising on subsequent drafts. I also wish to acknowledge the assistance of the Eighteenth-Century Ireland Society, at whose conference an early version of this article was presented. Lastly, I wish to thank Mordecai Feingold and Elizabethanne Boran for allowing me to speak on this topic to the 'Reception of Newton' conference in Marsh's Library, Dublin.