

During the twentieth century and especially over the past thirty years, intellectual historians have developed an increasingly sophisticated appreciation of the richness and complexity of this heritage. In doing so they have engaged in lively debate over which of its several identifiable and allegedly discrete strands was most influential in forming the underlying intellectual predispositions and shaping the thought of the founding generation. Although historians have long appreciated the role of English jurisprudential, classical, and Enlightenment ideas in contributing to the thought of the Founders, they have traditionally emphasized the primacy of the work of the great English philosopher John Locke and the liberal tradition with which he was associated.

But a new and more penetrating interest in the political culture of the larger early modern British world of which the Revolutionary generation was a part has produced a much more complex picture in which several alternative sets of ideas have been seen to have had a major influence. Since the early 1960s, scholars have uncovered, explored, and assessed the influence of a vital opposition and/or republican tradition deriving from the civic humanism of the Italian Renaissance; a voluminous literature generated within Britain's Protestant religious community; and the moral and historical tradition associated with the Scottish Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. But even these discoveries do not exhaust the range of ideas and intellectual influences upon which the founding generation drew.

What recent work strongly suggests, in fact, is that these several strands of thought were so tangled and interdependent that the quest to determine intellectual primacy among them over the entire Revolutionary period is a waste of intellectual effort. A major difficulty in trying to sort out which strands of this intellectual heritage were most influential for the Founding Fathers derives from the fact that they did not think of knowledge as organized in that way. Certainly, they valued some individual works much more highly than others and found some streams of thought more congenial and more explanatory of their general situation and circumstances than others. No less than people of the present era, however, they thought of knowledge—and the individual works that were the repositories of that knowledge—as being part of an ongoing and cumulative effort to uncover the mysteries of the material world and comprehend the nature of the human experience.

The specific way they conceptualized knowledge is perhaps nowhere

better revealed than in the classification of the holdings of the Library Company, in which works were organized not according to author or place of publication or point of view but according to the specific area of knowledge to which they primarily contributed. In turn, these several *subject* areas were grouped into three broad categories—*Memory*, *Reason*, and *Imagination*—which together included about 80% of the collection, the remaining volumes being either sufficiently broad or sufficiently peculiar as to require listing under the heading *Miscellaneous*.

*Memory*, which included roughly 35% of classified titles, contained six subcategories: sacred history; ecclesiastical history; civil history, including biographies, ancient history, and naval and military history; natural history “in all its branches”; voyages and travels; and geography and topography, with maps, plans, and charts. *Reason*, which accounted for about 56% of classified titles, had twenty-two categories: theology; mythology; ethics, “or the *Moral System* in general”; grammars, dictionaries, and treatises on education; logic, rhetoric, and criticism; general and local politics; trade and commerce, including treatises on annuities and insurance; law; metaphysics; geometry; arithmetic and algebra; mechanics; astronomy, astrology, and chronology; optics, pneumatics, hydrostatics, hydraulics, phonics, and gnomonics; navigation and naval architecture; civil architecture; the military art; heraldry; anatomy, medicine, and chemistry; agriculture and gardening; arts and manufactures; and experimental and natural philosophy, including “*elementary Treatises* on the *Arts* and *Sciences*.” Comprising only 9% of classified titles, *Imagination* consisted of just three subcategories: poetry and drama; fiction, wit, and humor; and the fine arts.

However they organized and conceived of their intellectual heritage, the Founding Fathers were not merely passive recipients of imported ideas. To the very great extent that they used their heritage, they refracted it through their own experience and drew, eclectically, from one intellectual tradition or another as it seemed relevant and appropriate to their immediate needs. In the rapidly changing situation that obtained between 1760 and 1800—a situation in which men moved quickly from protesting against what they regarded as oppression from the center of the British Empire between 1764 and 1775, to justifying the decision for independence in 1775–76, to reorganizing their several state polities after 1776, to coping with the problems of war, independence, and cooperation in the late 1770s and 1780s, and to fabricating a more effective national government in 1787–88—they found that ideas that illuminated one situation