

The Lives of John Locke

Epitaph to the Costive Philosopher

On the wall of the dankest toilet in Oxford University there was an unusual graffito. With strained effort and retentive care a name was written neatly onto the very stone fabric of that august institution. And generations of students – easing themselves during their lunch-breaks – had employed the time passing by scratching, chalking, drawing, and scrawling their own additions. Some profound, some profane, many poignant, all lyrical.

An officious dean or proctor has since destroyed the poem. Doubtless he was motivated by the usual utilitarian considerations which are deployed to justify cultural vandalism. How else could he have failed to admire the ingenious rhyme-scheme of ‘ball-cocks’, ‘dry-docks’, ‘sedimentary bedrocks’, ‘flintlocks’, ‘fetlocks’, ‘Mynocks’, ‘two o’clock cocks’, ‘unblocks’, ‘mock-shocks’, ‘Baron Ochs’, and ‘ad-hoc aroma-airlocks’. How else could he have obliterated the scatological stream of verse, running in torrents through the years, stretching back who knows how far. Perhaps even to the time when the subject of the graffito - that worthy alumnus John Locke - was a yet unknown but already constipated adolescent.

Thomas Jefferson would one day rate Locke as one of the ‘three greatest men who ever lived’. Scholar, Man of Letters, sometime Spy, Physician, Theologian, Educationalist, Royal Societitian, Economist, Public Servant, Revolutionary, Founder of British liberalism, Anal Erotic, and the most important English philosopher of all time. John Locke would be all these people. In his different personas he could claim to be at least two of the greatest men who ever lived. In every guise he suffered terribly with his bowels.