CHAPTER SEVEN
“BEYOND THE SMOKE OF THEIR OWN CHIMNEYS”
TRAVEL LITERATURE AND INNATE IDEAS

The subject of Locke’s Essay Concerning Human Understanding was, as Locke told the reader in his opening epistle, “the most elevated Faculty of the Soul.”1 The Essay emerged, according to his own account, when “five or six Friends meeting at my Chamber, and discoursing on a Subject very remote from this, found themselves quickly at a stand, by the Difficulties that rose on every side.” It occurred to Locke in the course of this discussion that “it was necessary to examine our own Abilities, and see, what Objects our Understanding were, or were not fitted to deal with.” The thoughts that Locke hastily set down for their next meeting were the beginning of the Essay, which he continued at the request of his friends and wrote “by incoherent parcels; and, after long intervals of neglect, resum’d again, as my Humour or Occasion permitted.”2 According to Locke’s friend James Tyrrell the meeting that initiated the Essay took place in Locke’s room in 1673. Tyrrell noted in the margin of his copy of the Essay that he was among those present at the meeting. Tyrrell either misremembered the date or was present at another meeting entirely, since by then Locke had already written the first two draft s of the Essay. Locke dated the manuscripts of the A and B drafts to 1671. Damaris Masham had obviously heard the story from Locke since she agreed with the earlier date. She thought that Locke had begun the Essay in 1670 or 1671.3

It is probable that there were even earlier draft s before the A manuscript which already contains Locke’s mature philosophical arguments.4 Although Locke was certainly studying philosophy during his stay in

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2 Ibid.
4 Ibid. 11.
France he does not seem to have developed the *Essay* any further. On his return to England he was deeply involved in politics and it may not have been until his exile in Holland that he had opportunity to produce a fuller version of the *Essay*. It is possible, however, that he wrote another draft before going to Holland since Robert Ferguson reported discussing Locke’s ideas on Arianism with Shaftesbury on his death bed in 1684. Ferguson claimed that Shaftesbury had adopted Arianism after reading chapter 10 of Locke’s *Essay*. Shaftesbury’s second wife also claimed that Locke “writ his book concerning Human Understanding whilst he lived with my Lord.” Whatever earlier versions may have existed it was in Holland that the *Essay* took on its final form. Locke wrote another draft of the *Essay* soon after going into exile in Holland in 1684. He was able to send Tyrrell a new draft of what appears by then to have been quite a long work for his comments six months after arriving in Holland. During 1686 Locke sent Pembroke Draft C of the *Essay* book by book. In his dedication of the *Essay* to Lord Pembroke Locke referred to it as having “grown up under your Lordship’s Eye.” An abridged version of the *Essay* appeared in the *Bibliothèque Universelle* in 1688 translated by Jean Le Clerc, suggesting that he had seen it sometime before its publication in English.

### No Notion of a Deity

Already by the time of Draft B in 1671 Locke was using travel literature to make the point that practical or moral principles could not be innate because any one who “looked abroad beyond the smoake of their own chimneys” could see that there were whole nations at the bay of Soldania, in Brasil the Caribbe Islands &c amongst whome is not to be found soe much as the notion of a deity without which it is hard to imagin any law or rule of our actions or practicall principles.

He amplified his case by claiming that there were

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5 Ibid. 13.
6 Ibid. 15.
7 Ibid. 15.
8 Ibid. 18.