

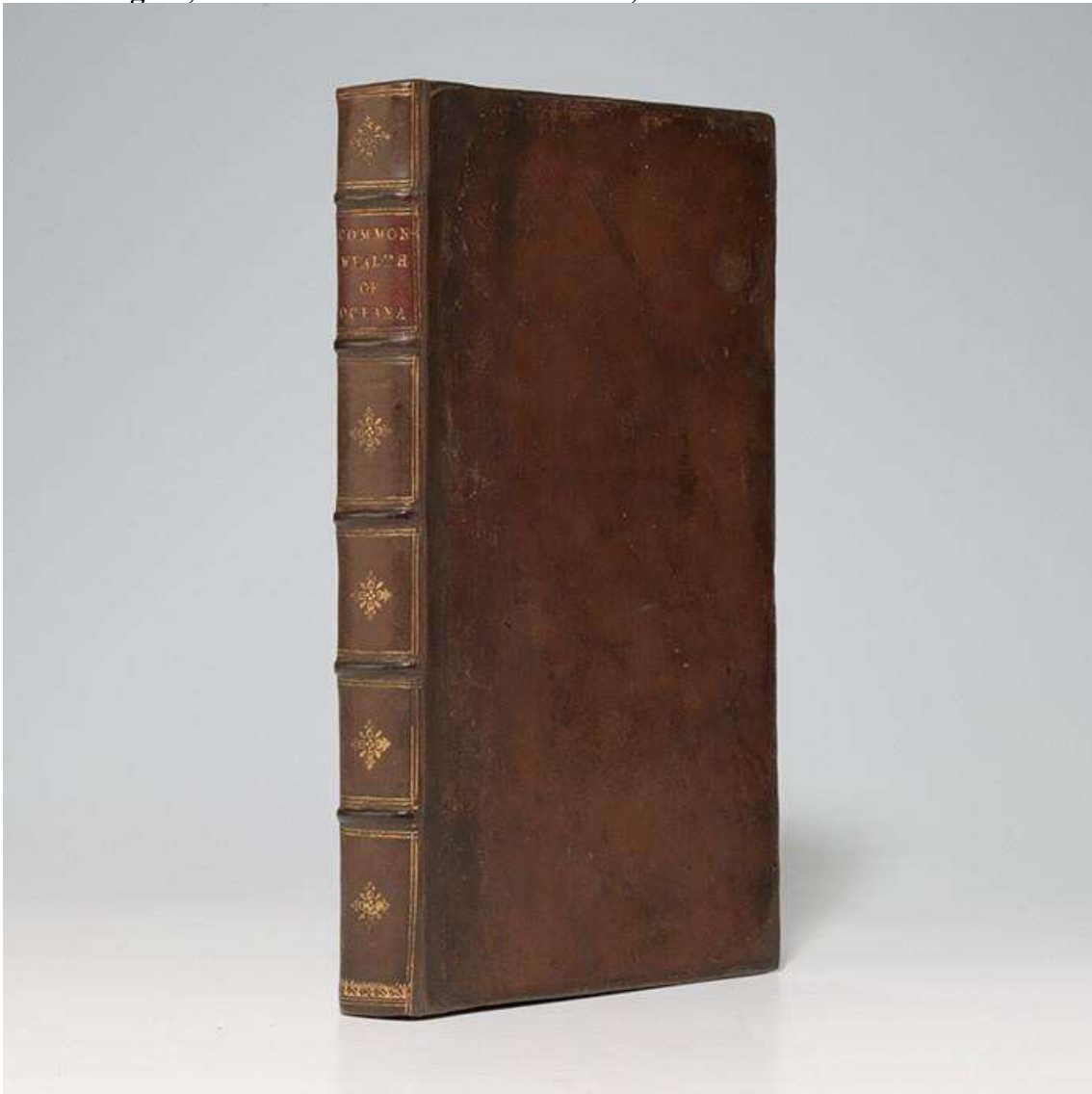
"Common-Wealth of Oceana" (1656), by James Harrington: A Canonical Publication.

Curated by Stephen A Batman

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Summary of this Particular Rare First Edition

James Harrington, The Common-Wealth of Oceana, 1656



THE
Common-Wealth
OF
OCEANA.

*Tantalus a labris sitiens, fugientia captat
Flumina : quid rides? mutato nomine, de te
Fabula narratur. — Hor.*

LONDON,

Printed by *J. Streater*, for *Liverell Chapman*, and are to be sold at his Shop at
the *Crown* in *Popes-Head-Alley*,

1656.

“THE SUPREMACY OF REASON OVER PASSION”: FIRST EDITION OF HARRINGTON’S *OCEANA*, “A SIGNIFICANT INFLUENCE ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF AMERICAN CONSTITUTIONALISM”

Scarce first edition of “one of the most celebrated early studies of a model state,” a noted influence on the U.S. Constitution (Rosenbach).

Harrington's *Oceana*, begun shortly after the death of Charles I, calls for a government based on "the supremacy of reason over passion, which makes the true commonwealth 'an empire of laws, not of man' (Coker, 499-500). In Harrington's ideal state a legislative body proposed laws, the people ratified them, and a magistracy enforced them.

Oceana introduced classical republicanism into English political thought, and Harrington's tenets were carried undiluted to the colonies: "It was in America that Harrington's influence was strongest. The written constitution, the unlimited use of elective principle and the separation of powers are all points which may have been derived directly from the *Oceana*, while all the minor points seem to have been first formulated by (him). His influence is best seen in the early constitutions of the proprietary colonies, Carolina, New Jersey, Pennsylvania" (*Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*).

"Other than *Utopia* [*Oceana*] is perhaps the most famous attempt at envisioning a model commonwealth" (Pforzheimer 449).

A Covenanted People 39. Goldsmith 1385. Wing H809.

(HARRINGTON, James). The Common-Wealth of Oceana. London: Printed by J. Streater, for Livewell Chapman, 1656. Small folio, contemporary full brown calf rebacked in calf-gilt, red Morocco spine label. Housed in a custom clamshell box.

Mild embrowning to text, expert restoration to contemporary boards.

Introduction

James Harrington's "The Commonwealth of Oceana," published in 1656, represents one of the most significant political treatises to emerge from the tumultuous period of the English Civil War and Commonwealth. The book was written during Oliver Cromwell's Protectorate, following the execution of King Charles I in 1649 and the subsequent establishment of a republican government in England. Harrington composed "Oceana" in a period of profound political transformation, as England grappled with the unprecedented reality of governance without monarchy.

The publication of "Oceana" was itself dramatic. The book was initially seized from its printer by Cromwell's government, and it required the intervention of Cromwell's daughter, Elizabeth Claypoole, to secure its release and publication¹⁶. This censorship reflected the controversial nature of Harrington's ideas, which, while ostensibly supportive of republican governance, presented a vision that diverged from Cromwell's increasingly autocratic rule.

Harrington's motivation for writing "Oceana" stemmed from his belief that England's political troubles were not merely the result of factional strife or monarchical misrule but rather reflected a fundamental shift in the balance of property ownership within the nation¹. The work was conceived as a response to the political instability of the time, offering a blueprint for a stable commonwealth based on principles of balanced government, rotation of offices, and the distribution of landed property.

The economic and political climate surrounding the publication was characterized by uncertainty. The English Commonwealth was still a novel experiment, and Cromwell's Protectorate represented an attempt to stabilize governance following the dissolution of the Rump Parliament in 1653. Internationally, England was engaged in conflicts with Spain and the Netherlands, while domestically, religious, and political tensions remained high. It was in this context that Harrington offered his vision of an ideal republic, using the fictional setting of "Oceana" as a thinly veiled representation of England, with Scotland referred to as "Marpesia" and Ireland as "Panopea"¹.

The Author

James Harrington (or Harington) was born on January 3, 1611, in Upton, Northamptonshire, England, to a family of considerable standing. He was the eldest son of Sir Sapcote Harrington of Rand, Lincolnshire⁹. His early life was marked by privilege and education, and following his father's death in 1630, he inherited sufficient wealth to fund several years of continental travel⁹.

During his travels through the Netherlands, Denmark, Germany, France, Switzerland, and Italy, Harrington developed a deep appreciation for republican governance, particularly as practiced in Venice⁹. His visit to the Italian republics significantly influenced his political thinking and would later inform his vision for England's government.

Despite his republican sympathies, Harrington maintained a personal devotion to King Charles I. Following the king's capture, Harrington served as a "gentleman of the bedchamber" to Charles during his imprisonment at Holdenby House and later at Carisbrooke and Hurst Castles⁹. This service ended when Harrington was dismissed for voicing support for the king's position regarding the Treaty of Newport. Some contemporary accounts even place Harrington on the scaffold with Charles during the king's execution, though these remain unverified⁹.

After the Stuart Restoration in 1660, Harrington's political views led to his arrest in November 1661 on charges of conspiracy against the government. Without formal trial, he was imprisoned in the Tower of London, where he was reportedly mistreated⁹. Later transferred to St. Nicholas Island off Plymouth, his health deteriorated significantly during his imprisonment, possibly exacerbated by the administration of the addictive drug guaiacum⁹.

Following his release, secured by his brother and uncle posting a substantial bond, Harrington's physical and mental health continued to decline. He suffered from various ailments, including gout and palsy, before experiencing a paralyzing stroke. At some point between 1662 and 1669, he married "a Mrs. Dayrell," described as his "old sweetheart"⁹.

Harrington died at Little Ambry, Dean's Yard, Westminster, and was buried next to Sir Walter Raleigh in St. Margaret's, Westminster⁹. His life and work represent the complex interplay of republican idealism and personal loyalty that characterized many intellectuals during this pivotal period in English history.

Why this is a Canonical Book

"The Commonwealth of Oceana" merits inclusion in the canon of essential political texts for several compelling reasons. First, it represents one of the earliest and most comprehensive attempts to articulate a vision of constitutional republicanism in the English language.

Harrington's work goes beyond mere critique of monarchy to offer a detailed blueprint for a functioning republic, complete with specific institutional arrangements designed to preserve liberty and prevent the concentration of power.

Harrington's influence on American political thought is particularly significant. His ideas regarding the separation of powers, bicameral legislature, and the importance of property rights in maintaining political stability resonated deeply with the American Founding Fathers. Thomas Jefferson's democratic agrarianism and the antitrust policies later developed by Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson all bear the imprint of Harrington's thinking². Moreover, Harrington's concepts are said to have been partly responsible for such fundamental American political developments as written constitutions, bicameral legislatures, and the indirect election of the president².

The text was widely read in colonial America and was among the works circulated by Thomas Hollis, an important distributor of republican literature in the North American colonies⁷. This circulation helped ensure that Harrington's ideas became part of the intellectual foundation upon which American governance would later be built.

Harrington's emphasis on the rule of law rather than the rule of men—what he termed the difference between "ancient prudence" and "modern prudence"—articulates a principle that would become central to American constitutional thought⁸. His insistence that government should be "the empire of laws, and not of men" anticipates similar language in the Massachusetts Constitution of 1780, which John Adams helped draft⁸.

Furthermore, Harrington's analysis of the relationship between economic power and political stability offered a sophisticated understanding of how property distribution affects governance—a concept that would influence American thinking about the importance of a strong middle class to democratic stability. His belief that "democracy is most stable where a strong middle class exists and that revolution is a consequence of the separation of economic and political power" remains relevant to contemporary American political discourse².

In sum, "The Commonwealth of Oceana" deserves canonical status not merely as a historical curiosity, but as a foundational text that articulated principles of republican governance that would later be embodied in American political institutions and continue to shape American political thought to this day.

Five Timeless Quotes

1. "Government (to define it de jure, or according to ancient prudence) is an art whereby a civil society of men is instituted and preserved upon the foundation of common right or interest; or, to follow Aristotle and Livy, it is the empire of laws, and not of men."[10](#)

This quote encapsulates Harrington's fundamental distinction between legitimate government based on law and common interest versus government serving private interests. It resonates powerfully in our current political climate, where concerns about the rule of law and the proper limits of executive power remain central to democratic discourse. The tension between governance through established legal frameworks versus governance through personal authority continues to shape debates about democratic institutions and their resilience. This principle underpins the American constitutional system's emphasis on checks and balances and the supremacy of law over individual will.

2. "Government is no other than the soul of a city or nation."[10](#)

In this succinct statement, Harrington captures the profound relationship between governance and national identity. Today, as nations grapple with questions of civic purpose and collective values, this quote reminds us that government is not merely an administrative apparatus but embodies the character and aspirations of a people. The ongoing debates about the proper role and scope of government in American society reflect this understanding that governance systems express fundamental values about liberty, community, and national purpose.

3. "What convenience is there for debate in a crowd, where there is nothing but jostling, treading upon one another, and stirring of blood, than which in this case there is nothing more dangerous?"[10](#)

This observation on the challenges of democratic deliberation speaks to contemporary concerns about polarization and the quality of public discourse. In an era of social media echo chambers and partisan news consumption, Harrington's warning about the dangers of unstructured mass debate seems prescient. The quote underscores the importance of well-designed institutions that can channel public participation constructively while avoiding the pitfalls of mob mentality—a concern that remains central to discussions about democratic stability and the health of civic discourse.

4. "Give us good orders, and they will make us good men, is the Maxime of a Legislator and the most infallible in the Politickes."[5](#)

This quote highlights Harrington's belief in the power of institutions to shape civic character. Rather than relying solely on the virtue of individual leaders ("Give us good men and they will make us good Lawes"), Harrington argues that well-designed systems can cultivate civic virtue among citizens. This insight remains relevant to contemporary debates about institutional design and reform, suggesting that addressing systemic problems requires structural solutions rather than simply electing "better" individuals to office.

5. "The perfection of Government lyeth upon such a libration in the frame of it, that no man or men, in or under it, can have the interest; or having the interest, can have the power to disturb it with sedition."[5](#)

Here Harrington articulates his vision of a perfectly balanced government, where institutional arrangements prevent any faction from having both the motivation and the capability to overthrow the system. This principle of balanced powers designed to prevent tyranny influenced the American constitutional framework and continues to inform discussions about institutional safeguards against authoritarian tendencies. In an era where democratic backsliding has become a global concern, Harrington's emphasis on structural protections against tyranny remains acutely relevant.

Five Major Ideas

1. The Balance of Property Determines Political Power

Harrington's most innovative contribution to political theory was his argument that political power ultimately follows property ownership, particularly land. He maintained that "the determining element of power in a state is property, particularly property in land"[6](#). This insight led him to propose an "agrarian law" limiting land holdings to prevent the concentration of wealth and, consequently, political power. For Harrington, a stable republic required a broad distribution of property to ensure that political power remained widely shared rather than concentrated in a few hands. This economic understanding of political power anticipated later Marxist analysis while offering a distinctly republican solution focused on property distribution rather than abolition.

2. Rotation of Offices and Term Limits

Harrington firmly believed that "the executive power ought not to be vested for any considerable time in the same man, men, or class of men"[6](#). To implement this principle, he advocated for a system of rotation by ballot, where a third of the executive or senate would be voted out annually and would be ineligible for re-election for three years. This mechanism was designed to prevent the entrenchment of power and ensure a constant flow of new perspectives into government. Harrington's emphasis on rotation influenced American thinking about term limits and the dangers of perpetual office-holding, reflecting a deep concern with preventing the emergence of a permanent ruling class.

3. Bicameral Legislature with Separated Functions

One of Harrington's most influential institutional innovations was his proposal for a bicameral legislature with distinct functions: "In a commonwealth consisting of a single council, there is no other to choose than that which divided"[8](#). He envisioned a system where the Senate would propose and debate legislation (the "dividing" function), while a popular assembly would vote on these proposals (the "choosing" function). This separation of deliberative and decision-making powers was designed to harness the wisdom of the elite while preserving ultimate authority in

the hands of the people. This concept significantly influenced the structure of American legislative bodies, with their division between Senate and House of Representatives.

4. The Rule of Law Over the Rule of Men

Central to Harrington's political philosophy was the distinction between government according to "ancient prudence," which he defined as "the empire of laws, and not of men," and "modern prudence," which he characterized as rule according to the private interests of rulers⁸¹⁰. This emphasis on the rule of law as the foundation of legitimate governance resonated deeply with American constitutional thought and found expression in documents like the Massachusetts Constitution of 1780, which explicitly called for "a government of laws and not of men"⁸. Harrington's insistence that legitimate authority must be constrained by law rather than exercised through personal discretion remains a cornerstone of modern democratic theory.

5. Civic Participation as a Source of Civic Virtue

Harrington believed that broad participation in elections and officeholding would contribute to the development of civic virtue among citizens⁸. By involving citizens directly in governance through voting and rotation in office, Harrington's system was designed not only to prevent tyranny but also to cultivate the civic-mindedness necessary for republican government to flourish. This understanding that democratic institutions could help create better citizens, rather than simply requiring virtuous citizens as a prerequisite, offered a practical approach to republican governance that influenced American thinking about civic education and participation.

Three Major Controversies

1. Challenge to Cromwell's Authority

Despite Harrington's dedication of "Oceana" to Oliver Cromwell, the work was widely perceived as a critique of Cromwell's increasingly monarchical style of governance. The initial censorship of the book by Cromwell's government reflected this tension¹⁶. While Harrington presented his commonwealth as an ideal that Cromwell might implement, many contemporaries read it as an implicit rebuke of the Protectorate's deviation from republican principles. Nedham, in his 1657 editorials in *Mercurius Politicus*, criticized Harrington's work as impractically idealistic, arguing for a more pragmatic approach to governance under Cromwell¹¹. This controversy highlights the fundamental tension between republican idealism and practical governance that characterized the Commonwealth period.

2. Radical Property Redistribution

Harrington's proposed agrarian law, which would limit land holdings to prevent the concentration of wealth, represented a radical challenge to existing property arrangements. By suggesting that no individual should own land yielding more than £2,000 annually (or £500 in Scotland), Harrington threatened the economic interests of the landed elite⁶¹¹. This proposal generated significant opposition from those who saw it as an attack on property rights and

traditional social hierarchies. The controversy surrounding Harrington's economic proposals reveals the deep connection between economic arrangements and political power—a connection that continues to generate debate in discussions of wealth inequality and its impact on democratic governance.

3. Religious Toleration and the Role of the Church

Harrington's approach to religion in "Oceana" proved controversial in a period of intense religious conflict. His criticism of "Scots presbyterianism" as a form of "spiritual aristocracy" challenged both the established church and dissenting religious groups that sought political influence¹¹. By advocating for a more secular approach to governance while still acknowledging the importance of religion in civic life, Harrington positioned himself between competing religious factions. This stance generated opposition from those who believed that religious conformity was essential to political stability and from those who sought to use religious institutions as instruments of political power. The controversy reflects the broader struggle to define the proper relationship between religious and political authority in a post-Reformation context—a struggle that would later influence American approaches to religious freedom and church-state separation.

In Closing

Civic-minded Americans should read "The Commonwealth of Oceana" because it provides a foundational understanding of the republican principles that shaped American governance. Harrington's work represents one of the earliest and most comprehensive attempts to design a constitutional republic based on the rule of law, balanced powers, and broad civic participation—principles that would later be embodied in the American Constitution.

The text offers valuable insights into the relationship between economic arrangements and political stability, suggesting that a republic requires a broad distribution of property to prevent the concentration of power. This understanding remains relevant to contemporary debates about wealth inequality and its impact on democratic governance. As Americans grapple with questions about the influence of concentrated economic power on political processes, Harrington's analysis provides a historical perspective that can inform current discussions.

Furthermore, Harrington's emphasis on institutional design over individual virtue offers a practical approach to governance that resonates with the American constitutional tradition. His belief that "good orders" can "make good men" suggests that well-designed institutions can help cultivate the civic virtues necessary for democratic governance—a perspective that encourages thoughtful engagement with questions of institutional reform rather than merely focusing on individual leadership.

Reading "Oceana" also provides historical context for understanding the intellectual foundations of American political institutions. Harrington's influence on concepts like bicameralism, rotation in office, and constitutional constraints on power helps explain why these features were incorporated into American governance systems and why they continue to shape American political life.

Finally, at a time when democratic institutions face significant challenges globally, Harrington's careful consideration of how to design governments that resist tyranny and promote liberty offers valuable lessons. His vision of a republic balanced between popular sovereignty and institutional stability speaks to enduring questions about how to maintain democratic governance in the face of polarization, populism, and concentrated power. For Americans committed to preserving and improving their democratic institutions, "The Commonwealth of Oceana" provides not only historical perspective but practical wisdom that remains relevant nearly four centuries after its publication.

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