It was not until the end of the 17th century that Ireland acquired its first secular thinker. John Toland (1670-1722), who has been called the ‘founding father of modern Irish philosophy’, made a huge contribution to the development of Freethought in Ireland and was a prolific author and polemicist, but his writings have been sadly neglected in his own country and in Britain. Despite his importance as an independent thinker, his work has been largely published in France, Holland and Germany, leaving him almost unknown in the English speaking world.

He was born in the peninsula of Inishowen, Co Donegal, and brought up in the Catholic faith. His exact birthplace was probably the townland of Ardagh in the parish of Clonmany. Nothing is known of his parents, though some sources suggest that he was the bastard son of an Irish priest and a prostitute (see Philip McGuinness etc, Christianity Not Mysterious, Lilliput Press, 1997, p262). His addiction to literature and learning led him to be known in his youth in Donegal as 'Eoghain na Leabhar' (Eoin of the Books, Eoin being an alternative to Sean or John). He later jokingly claimed that his baptismal name was ‘Janus Junius Eoganesius’. Janus was the two-faced Roman God, Junius Brutus was the founder of the Roman Republic, and Eoganesius refers to his birth area of Inishowen (‘Inis Eoghain’ in Irish). Next to this pseudonym, near his death in 1722, he signed the word ‘cosmopoli’, a citizen of the world. This, along with his use of Latin, his allusion to ancient Rome, his reference to his Irish roots, and his own secular evolution indicate a man who ultimately transcended all borders and all faiths.

He enrolled as a scholarship student at the Protestant school in Redcastle where, at the age of 15 or 16, he threw off Catholicism, having been “educated, from my cradle, in the grossest superstition and idolatry”, as he wrote in the Preface to Christianity Not Mysterious (1696). Catholicism he described as “the insupportable yoke of the most pompous and tyrannical policy that ever enslav’d mankind under the name or shew of religion” (his own Apology for Mr Toland, 1697). In 1686 he went to study divinity at Glasgow University, where he aligned himself with the
Presbyterians and gained notoriety as an anti-papal firebrand. From Glasgow he went to the University of Edinburgh where he obtained an MA in theology in 1690. His knowledge of classical languages by this time was extensive and he spoke most European languages fluently.

Toland then moved to London seeking sponsorship and became friendly with a group of dissenters including Dr Daniel Williams, a leading London nonconformist, through whom he made contact with the Huguenot savant Jean Le Clerc, who had taken refuge in Holland. Toland sent him a copy of *Gospel Truth Stated and Vindicated* by Williams with a covering letter explaining that a controversy had developed over the book. On Toland’s suggestion, Le Clerc published an extract, along with his letter, in *Bibliothèque Universelle* of which he was editor. Williams and his friends were so impressed with Toland's zeal that they collected money in 1692 to send him to study at Leiden. His exposure to the freethinking, tolerant atmosphere of Holland and his encounters with heretical organisations there caused him to reject all forms of 'spiritual authority' from then on.

In 1693 Toland returned to England and spent some time at Oxford, using its library facilities ostensibly to write an Irish dictionary. In Oxford he soon became known as “a man of fine parts, great learning, and little religion”, as one anonymous correspondent put it. He then went back to London where he became involved with John Locke, who published his *Reasonableness of Christianity* in 1695. It is still not certain whether Locke’s book was written in reply to Toland’s *Christianity not Mysterious* (which Locke may have seen in manuscript) or whether Toland was responding to Locke’s work. Toland’s book, though dated 1696, came out around Christmas 1695, so which was written first is not clear. But one thing is not in doubt: Toland’s work caused greater hostility than Locke’s, even though it embraced the same concept: Christianity is a rational and comprehensible creed. There was, however, one crucial difference in that Locke, wanting to have his cake and eat it, also believed in revelation, whereas Toland rejected it altogether, except purely as a ‘means of information’. Locke thought that revelation is a kind of expanded or
heightened reason which enables us to grasp the mysteries of Christianity, whereas Toland more radically believed that there were no Christian mysteries.

Toland argued that the churches do not allow people to think for themselves, claiming that faith is so complex that only authorised persons may expound it. He defined as ‘mysterious’ any doctrine that is beyond human comprehension and asked: why would God, who had given us the power of reason, expect anyone to believe a doctrine that we could not understand? Thus his aim in Christianity not Mysterious was stated in the subtitle: “A Treatise Shewing that there is Nothing in the Gospel Contrary to Reason, nor Above It”. The so-called ‘mysteries’, enhanced by the trappings of images, garments, altars, rites and rituals, were therefore deliberate mystifications imposed upon Christianity by competing sects and churches after its inception. As clerics sought to enhance their own power and the Christian Church tried to win over converts, it copied pagan religious mysteries and ceremonies, yet “there is nothing so naturally opposite as ceremony and Christianity”.

The first edition of Christianity Not Mysterious had been published anonymously. Toland then brought out a second, signed, edition and in the spring of 1697 went to Dublin where perhaps he hoped that publicity from the book might help him obtain patronage or employment. But he soon found that the book had infuriated the Church of Ireland hierarchy. It was declared heretical by the Grand Jury in the Court of the King's Bench in Dublin at the instigation of Peter Browne, then a fellow of Trinity College, Dublin, and later Bishop of Cork. In August it was brought before a committee of religion in the Parliament, which ordered it to be publicly burned by the common hangman and the author to be taken into custody (some members of the Irish House of Commons demanded that he should be burned with it). The sentence on the book was carried out on 11th September when it was burnt in front of the Parliament House gate in the open street, although Toland himself evaded arrest by fleeing to England. The book and the events surrounding it distinguish him as Ireland's first dissident writer whose criticism of the established religious perception of man, creation and the universe brought him into conflict with both Church and State.
Toland’s *Christianity Not Mysterious* was a late 17th century victim of a long tradition of censorship by the Christian churches of any writing that challenged orthodoxy, stretching back to works such as Martin Luther’s *95 Theses*, banned in 1521, all of Giordano Bruno’s works, banned in 1603, and Galileo’s *Dialogues*, banned in 1632. Nor was it only the Catholic Church that persecuted people for their beliefs: in 1697, the same year as the Irish controversy over Toland’s book, the last person hanged for blasphemy in Britain was Thomas Aitkenhead, a University of Edinburgh student, with the Church of Scotland urging ‘vigorous execution’ to curb ‘the abounding of impiety and profanity in this land’. And of course it was the Church of Ireland that was behind the banning of Toland’s book in his own country.

So, what was all the fuss about? Part of it was that he had written an anticlerical polemic against all forms of priestcraft. William Molyneux, whose own work advocating legislative independence for the Irish Parliament was ceremonially burned at Tyburn by the public hangman a year later and who had told Locke that Toland was ‘a candid free-thinker, and a good scholar’, later wrote that the clergy were “alarmed to a mighty degree against him” and that “the poor man, by his impudent conduct, has raised against himself so universal a commotion that it was dangerous to be known to have spoken with him even once”. Toland made no secret of his antipathy towards ‘the idolatry and tyranny of the Romish clergy’, but he didn’t stop there: a wise and good man, he wrote, “knows no difference between Popish infallibility, and being oblig’d blindly to acquiesce in the decisions of fallible Protestants”. He referred to the Protestant Parliament which banned the book as ‘Popish Inquisitors’ and later wrote that “there may very well be such a thing as Protestant popery” (*A Memorial for the Earl of Oxford*, 1711). To claim that the Irish ruling class were as ‘popish’ as Catholics was to undermine the entire basis of Protestant rule in Ireland.

Controversy also arose from what Toland omitted as much as what he said. He wrote that *Christianity Not Mysterious* was the first in a series of three books he intended to write, and in the second he would specify which Christian doctrines should not be accepted because they contradicted human reason. But of course this only encouraged speculation. Was he denying all miracles? Was he attacking the whole basis of
Christianity? Was the whole idea of the divine nature of Jesus being dismissed as just an invented ‘mystery’? Swift, in his *Argument Against Abolishing Christianity* (1708) denounced Toland as “the great Oracle of the Anti-Christians”. Was Toland indeed out to destroy religion? The answers are not clear, but Toland gave the distinct impression that he was sceptical of the entire Christian myth, although he respected Jesus as a person, and his subsequent writings bear this out. Whatever the truth, the fact remains that if he was trying to undermine traditional Christianity, it was only because he was raising a fundamental question about its rationality.

Back in England after fleeing Ireland, Toland had busied himself in both theological and political controversy. As far as he was concerned, bishops and kings were as bad as each other. In 1700 he published James Harrington’s *Oceana*, which he regarded as a republican textbook. In the Introduction he recommended the careful perusal of Greek and Roman historians as a way of rediscovering republican theory, and he wrote: "I have always been, now am, and ever shall be persuaded that all sorts of magistrates are made for and by the people, and not the people for or by the magistrates ... and consequently that it is lawful to resist and punish tyrants of all sorts ... I am therefore avowedly a Commonwealth's man".

In 1701 he went to Hanover as part of an official delegation to present the Act of Settlement which decreed that Anne, Mary's sister and sister-in-law of William, would succeed William to the throne. William and the Parliament accepted this settlement because it prevented the Stuart princes from demanding the Crown at a future date, while Toland and his supporters were satisfied because it placed most of the real power under the control of Parliament. Another objective of the delegation was to explain the Act to the Electress Sophia of Hanover, who was to succeed Anne (she died months before she would have become Queen), and during his stay Toland developed a friendship with her and her daughter Serena, the Queen of Prussia, and discussed philosophy with Gottfried Leibniz. On his return the following year he recorded his impressions of the courts of Prussia and Hanover and noted that in both there was an absence of sectarian divisiveness and “the clergy seldom appear at court in either Hanover or Berlin".
As a result of his relationship with Sophia and her daughter, he produced a book entitled *Letters to Serena* in 1704, which indicates that by this time he had moved on from the deism of *Christianity Not Mysterious*. In the first three letters he examined superstition, prejudice and notions of an ‘immortal soul’, and sought to demonstrate that the supernatural is shown to be mere human invention. In the final two letters he addressed the ideas of the philosopher Baruch Spinoza, who argued that God and Nature are two names for the same reality. Although Toland criticised Spinoza, it is clear that he too, like the Dutchman, now espoused pantheism, a term first used in Latin as ‘pantheismus’ by the mathematician Joseph Raphson in his work *De Spatio Reali seu Ente Infinito*, published in 1697. Toland had also found and translated Giordano Bruno’s *Lo Spaccio de la Bestia Trifontane*, known in English as ‘The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast’.

In his works Bruno, the first modern pantheist, argued that God is in all things, that the sun is one of an infinite number of stars, and also that life may exist elsewhere in the universe. Bruno’s ideas impressed Toland, but he was not so taken by Spinoza. His preference for Bruno relates to a distinction made by Raphson between atheistic ‘panhylists’ (from the Greek words *pan*, meaning ‘all’, and *hyle*, meaning ‘matter’), who believe everything is matter, and ‘pantheists’ who believe in “a certain universal substance, material as well as intelligent, that fashions all things that exist out of its own essence”. We might say that, in terms of this distinction, Toland believed Spinoza was closer to atheism than pantheism, even though he effectively labels him a pantheist. His beef with Spinoza was over the nature of matter. For Toland, it was not ‘an inactive dead lump in absolute repose’ but instead is active or dynamic. Following the Roman poet and philosopher Lucretius, he suggested that all parts of the universe are in a constant motion, one thing living by the destruction or decay of another. Of course, if motion is essential to matter, then there seems to be no need of a presiding intelligence or First Cause. But this was not Toland’s conclusion because he maintained that motion by itself could not create the order and variety that exists in the world, “nor cause the organization of a flower or a fly”. This appears to be an acceptance of a god through the argument from design.
Yet a year later in 1705 Toland produced *Socinianism Truly Stated*, which included on the title page the words ‘recommended by a pantheist’, and in the work he refers to pantheists, “of which number I profess myself to be one”. This was the first use of the word in English, and Toland later explained in a letter to Leibniz (1710) that a pantheist was someone who believed “in no other eternal being but the universe”. Later again, in *Pantheisticon* (1720), originally published privately in Latin and only translated into English in 1751, he asserted: “The universe is infinite, with infinite stars and inhabited worlds: in an infinite space there can be no up or down, no centre or extremities...There is an infinite number of other worlds similar to the earth we inhabit, circling around their suns (which we call the fixed stars)... The Universe (of which the world we know is only a very small part), is infinite in extent as well as in potential. By the continuity of all and by the contiguity of its parts it is one. In its totality it is immobile, having no space outside of itself, but in its parts it is mobile by infinite intervals. The universe is a unity: Every material thing is in all things... All things come from all, and all is in all things. The universe is divine: The power and energy of all, which has created all and which governs all, having always the best goal as it aim, is God, whom we call the mind, if you please, and soul of the universe”. The title page of the work named ‘Cosmopolis’ as the place of publication, and this is explained later when he told the story that, when asked by an inn-keeper what country he came from, he had replied: “the sun is my father, the earth my mother, the world’s my country, and all men are my relations”.

This early fusion of the Gaia hypothesis with cosmopolitan humanism raises the question whether Toland was really an atheist in disguise. Of course, when accused of irreligion, Toland always denied the charge, but he often wrote about the need for dissimulation in dangerous times, and the fact that *Pantheisticon* was published anonymously and distributed privately supports the view that his public declarations of Christianity were insincere, or at best should be interpreted only in an ethical sense. The fact is that, as we have seen, in at least two (anonymous) writings he called himself a pantheist and expressed a pantheistic philosophy. Whether this, in turn, is a disguise for atheism is a tricky question because some have argued that
pantheism IS atheism. Schopenauer thought it was a euphemism for atheism, and in *The God Delusion* Richard Dawkins writes that “pantheism is sexed-up atheism”. On the other hand, others suggest that pantheism is actually a kind of theism because it claims that the universe is imbued with some of the characteristics normally ascribed to a God and therefore one’s attitude to it is akin to a religious experience. The universe is in a real sense holy or sacred and we should regard it with awe, or even fear. It is unlikely that Toland would have been afraid of the universe and there was nothing supernatural about his God-universe identity. Therefore sexed-up atheism seems a fair description of his philosophical position.

Toland died in 1722 in a carpenter’s house in Putney where he had lodged for the last few years, having lost what little property he had in the financial collapse of the South Sea Company in 1720. One report said that “he died... as he had lived, in great poverty, in the midst of his books, with his pen in his hand”. Just before his death, he composed his own epitaph: "He was an assertor of liberty, a lover of all sorts of learning ... but no man’s follower or dependent. Nor could frowns or fortune bend him to decline from the ways he had chosen”. His writings have been largely suppressed or ignored in his own country for centuries and, whenever mentioned, have often been distorted in order to discredit him. The time is long overdue to recognise him as one of Ireland’s greatest thinkers.