Almost every day, the long eighteenth century seems to be getting longer. And wider. It’s all a matter of where to draw the artificial boundaries between the stages of time over which human culture continues to change. This volume offers just one version of a period of history many refer to as the ‘long eighteenth century’, especially as it relates to the literature and culture of England.

This version of the long eighteenth century begins in 1660, when a particularly momentous historical event offers a convenient place to begin this story. The Restoration of Charles II marks a point when the nation – or, at least, some of the most powerful and influential individuals alive at the time – decided to ‘restore’ to England a form of national government which combined monarchical rule with an elected parliament. The cultural impact of the Restoration, and how authors anticipated its effect on the country’s future, is widely evident in contemporary literature. So, too, are authors’ meaningful reflections on previous periods of English history, and how depictions of that history could be refashioned to suit new ideas about England’s national culture.

Looking back to the beginning of the long eighteenth century, it is worth noting that the Restoration of Charles II in 1660 itself presents the culmination of ongoing political debates from earlier periods in English history, notably the period of religious and civil unrest which erupted into civil war from about 1642. The long eighteenth century
starts to get a little bit longer, in other words, as soon as we seek to understand specific events in relation to cultural developments over time. In Part Two, a more detailed overview of such events is provided to give a fuller sense of this period’s rich, but necessarily complex, cultural history as a whole.

**A Cultural Overview**

Different strands of religious, economic, political, artistic and social issues are woven together throughout this volume to give a broad understanding of the long eighteenth century. It would not be an exaggeration to say that religion plays a fundamental role in all of the momentous cultural events of the period (the English Civil War, the Restoration and even the Industrial Revolution), but each event also has its political, economic and – vital to our understanding of the period’s literature – its artistic dimension.

We must also consider precisely what it is we mean by the term ‘literature’ (the primary focus of artistic consideration in this volume). Several decades of critical debate about the *kinds* of writing that scholars should study in order to understand the past have questioned the formal boundaries that have long existed between ‘history’ and ‘literature’. There is no doubt that the imaginative writing of the past (poetry, fictional narratives, essays and so on) help us to understand past cultures, but so, too, do other forms of extant writing (including, but not restricted to, private correspondence, household accounts, ecclesiastical records, menus, legislation and so on). The increasingly recognised value of these alternative sources of cultural history, sometimes referred to as ‘historicism’, is one that is taken for granted in this volume although the principal subjects for discussion here are works of imaginative literature in the traditional sense.

This book is intended to help students gain a better understanding of the long eighteenth century but also invites its readers to think about the ways in which we study the past, and past literature, in order to understand our own culture. The period between 1660 and 1790
witnessed the acquisition of many aspects of daily life that we now take for granted as ‘modern’. This is a cultural feature of the period which makes its study especially interesting to social historians and others keen to explore what ‘modernity’ really means. Indeed, the end of our period is also frequently described as the culmination of the ‘Early Modern Period’ of English history. Already apparent, in the last stages of our long eighteenth century, are some of the social and economic developments that enable further profound cultural changes to be wrought by England’s Industrial Revolution from early in the nineteenth century. Such developments include the much-improved social status of the mercantile and middle classes and the huge growth of urban centres of population.

In 1688, another momentous event in English political history occurred when the Roman Catholic King James II abdicated from the throne and was replaced by his Protestant son-in-law and daughter, William III and Mary II. Although this event did not incur the devastating losses of life that took place in the country between 1642 and 1649, it is still referred to as a ‘revolution’ because of its profound impact in shaping the structure and balance of political power in English government. The roots of the ‘Glorious Revolution’ (as it is sometimes called) go back to the Protestant Reformation which began during the reign of Henry VIII. The Bill of Rights brought in under William and Mary (and further ratified by the passage of the 1701 Act of Settlement) stipulated that no Roman Catholic could succeed to the English throne. Though under government review, at the time of writing this legislation remains in force.

Moving beyond the topic of English government and monarchy to consider other important aspects of the long eighteenth century, the period’s ‘boundaries’ remain fluid. Consider, for example, England’s enormous economic expansion through the acquisition of colonial territories and global trade during this period. This version of the long eighteenth century might instead begin in 1632, when Charles I granted a licence to a group of London merchants to undertake the transportation of enslaved people from West Africa to labour on plantation colonies in the Caribbean. Indeed, a discussion of the long
eighteenth century which does proper justice to the history of England’s participation in the international slave trade might not end until full legislation abolished the trade in 1833. The full extent of England’s history as a leading colonial empire might not end until 1947, when India achieved independence.

Both the beginning and the end of the long eighteenth century, therefore, should and do remain subject to scholarly debate. The period formally covered by this volume ends in the year after the French Revolution – just after the point when many literary scholars discern the beginning of the Romantic period with the publication of the *Lyrical Ballads* of Wordsworth and Coleridge in 1798. An extensive consideration of the profound impact of these events on English literature and culture is the subject of the *Romantic Literature* volume in this series. Inevitably and usefully, however, there are points of overlap between the long eighteenth century and the periods which come before and after it in chronological order.

**Texts, Writers and Contexts**

Literary genre, as we now conceive of it, is itself the product of social and critical consensus, and therefore subject to debate. The six chapters in Part Three provide a detailed overview of four literary genres during the course of this period: drama, satire, poetry and novels. There is analysis of individual literary texts and explanation of the dominant themes which extend across specific considerations of genre. The closer analysis of a single text in each Extended Commentary will help readers to further their understanding of how genre, culture and literature really interact in this period.

Most new readers of eighteenth-century literature are surprised to find that all of its best-known authors – including Alexander Pope, Jonathan Swift, Daniel Defoe and Samuel Johnson – published copious works of literature in both verse and prose (the latter in forms ranging from essays and fiction to pamphlets and literary criticism). Others such as Dryden also translated or adapted Classical works of literature into
English prose and poetry, and some (including Henry Fielding) wrote plays.

Though many of the period’s best-known texts are given full consideration in Part Three, the versatility of certain authors means that their names pop up in other, sometimes unexpected, places. In addition, this volume tries to balance its discussion and analysis of familiar texts (e.g. Pope’s *Rape of the Lock* or Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa*) with lesser known works (e.g. George Crabbe’s poem *The Village* or Eliza Haywood’s ‘novella’ *Fantomina*). It is worth noting, at this point, that the key criteria for the selection of less familiar texts in this volume is their current popularity with undergraduate students and their ‘usefulness’ in uncovering a specific cultural aspect of the long eighteenth century. The range of texts on offer is intended to convey effectively the key themes and cultural concepts of this volume. At the same time, and equally importantly, it provides tried-and-tested suggestions for further reading in primary texts.

The advent of one of the most important genres in English literary culture, the novel, is associated with this period; different strands of its development over the course of the long eighteenth century are considered in two of Part Three’s chapters. The lengthy consideration of the novel reflects not only the prevalence of the genre itself – from late eighteenth- to twenty-first-century literary culture – but the complexity of how the novel developed over this period. This volume Assumes that novels are, essentially, long(ish) works of prose fiction which often depict the development of an individual human being over a period of time. This loose definition in itself reflects some of the ongoing critical debates about what novels are.

A cultural period of nearly one and a half centuries necessarily witnesses enormous diversity in its output of poetry, the subject of two more chapters in Part Three. As was also the case during the Renaissance, readers in the long eighteenth century looked to poetry as perhaps the highest form of literary expression. The writing of poetry was also seen, particularly in the earlier decades of the period, as a suitably genteel and learned recreational pursuit for gentlemen and the proper channel through which to commemorate or glorify public institutions. By the
end of the period, however, some of the most notable and popular works of poetry anticipate not only the subject matter, but many of the aesthetic and artistic concerns of the Romantic period. These include, increasingly, an inward and very personalised sense of poetic perception. None of these transitions occurred quickly, however, and detailed discussion of key texts and subjects across the period helps to illuminate these developments over time.

The beginning of the long eighteenth century coincides with the rejuvenation of English theatre after a period of relative inactivity. This is not only apparent in the extensive number of new plays which were staged in Restoration London (and, progressively, elsewhere in the kingdom). The period benefited from the introduction of movable stage scenery and – most significant of all – the presence of females on the stage. Now best remembered for the witty repartee and lively plots of its comedies of social manners, English drama during the long eighteenth century constantly reinvented itself to meet the changing demands and tastes of its audience. Perhaps more than any other genre, drama reflects the changing moral standards that were progressively applied to popular literature over the course of this cultural period.

Also covered by Part Three is satire – a literary form which extends across both prose and poetry and occupies such a predominant cultural role during the course of the long eighteenth century that it merits consideration as a genre in its own right. Satire is neither ‘invented’ nor confined to this cultural period but, in the long eighteenth century, it constitutes a way of perceiving external reality equally as vital as that presented by novels, plays or poems (all of which, in this period, contain elements of satire).

**Critical Theories, Debates and Resources**

One of the most rewarding ways that students can explore cultural and literary developments is not to focus merely on a single literary text, or even a single genre, but to consider how certain themes or debates run right through a period of time, like a bright thread in a piece of woven
fabric. How and why, for example, did the depiction of women and sexuality change over the course of the long eighteenth century? How did the enormous expansion of the print trade affect the quality and content of ‘popular’ literature? Questions such as these often emerge, quite rightly, from the reading of primary texts but deserve further investigation in their own right. It is therefore intentional that some of the material in Part Four, which looks at critical theories and debates across the main genres, overlaps with, and extends, thematic and contextual ideas first raised in relation to specific texts or genres in Part Three.

The topics in each chapter of Part Four could easily command book-length consideration, or even multiple-book consideration (and have done so). It is only possible here to provide a general ‘bill of fare’ which touches on the principal areas of critical study, theories and debates that have interested scholars over the past few decades. The subjects on offer are selected as four of the most prevalent (and therefore useful) thematic areas for undergraduate study.

Lists of anthologies and websites are provided in Part Five to give students a truly useful resource for further independent investigation. In addition, Part Five offers an extensive list of annotated suggestions for further reading on the subject, together with a detailed timeline of key literary and historical events during the long eighteenth century.

Penny Pritchard