

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-08903-6 - The Selected Letters of Thomas Babington Macaulay

Edited by Thomas Pinney

Excerpt

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I · FROM CLAPHAM TO WESTMINSTER, 1813–1833

These letters begin with the first moment of crisis in Macaulay's life, his departure at the age of twelve for Matthew Preston's school at Little Shelford, near Cambridge. Until that moment his life had been happily restricted to the circle of family and friends at the village of Clapham, near London. His father, Zachary, a London merchant engaged in trade with Sierra Leone, where he had once been governor, was a leader in the campaign to abolish the British slave trade and, later, to abolish slavery itself within the British dominions, campaigns whose most prominent name was William Wilberforce and whose unofficial headquarters was the circle of houses around Clapham Common where the Evangelical families of Wilberforce, Thornton, Venn, Stephen, and Macaulay made up the ranks of the 'Clapham Sect'. The Sect, which was extended to include such figures as Hannah More at Barley Wood, and the Evangelicals associated with Charles Simeon at Cambridge, determined the whole character and style of Macaulay's young years: domestic in its habits, strenuous in its religious practices, high-minded and public-spirited in its outlook. Balancing the austerity of this influence was a lively and happy family life in which Macaulay, despite the remarkable precocity which obviously set him apart from the ordinary, had no favored role beyond what belonged to his position as eldest son. By 1813 Zachary Macaulay and his wife Selina were the parents of nine children – in addition to their eldest, three other sons, and five daughters. Macaulay delighted in his family life and though as he grew older he came into some conflict with his father's strict views, he was always a dutiful and self-sacrificing son. Towards his mother, brothers, and sisters he was unflinchingly loving and generous, always eager to be with them, whether at Clapham or at the Brighton house where they frequently stayed between 1814 and 1823.

Being sent off to school and separated from home was a cruel wrench to Macaulay, but he survived his homesickness at Little Shelford and at Aspenden, where the school later moved, to become a rather pedantic schoolboy (see, *e.g.*, [20^o October 1817]). In October 1818 he entered Trinity College, Cambridge, a far happier move. Macaulay thoroughly

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enjoyed the freedom of undergraduate life, responded to the illustrious tradition of the college, and formed a lifelong pride in his connection with it. It is remarkable how high a proportion of Macaulay's friends and chosen counsellors were, to the end of his life and after all his varied associations, Trinity men whom he had known in his undergraduate days. He earned considerable literary distinction at Trinity, taking the Chancellor's Prize for English verse with 'Pompeii' in 1819 (see 5 February 1819) and again with 'Evening' in 1821. But the principal study of the place was mathematics, and for this, despite a summer devoted to the subject on a reading party in Wales (9 August 1821), Macaulay had neither taste nor aptitude. He attempted, but gave up on, the examination for an honors degree, to the scandal of Clapham. All was forgotten, however, when in 1824 he was elected to a Trinity fellowship.

Meantime, he had to think of a career, for his father's business was failing and it became clear while Macaulay was yet an undergraduate that he would have to take a large part of the care of his brothers and sisters. He chose to study law, was called to the bar from Lincoln's Inn in 1826, and in that year joined the Northern Circuit (2 April 1826). Macaulay's legal career hardly amounted to anything; he had few briefs, seems not to have made much effort to obtain practice, and quit the profession without regret as soon as he could. Yet for nearly four years the practice of law was his official business, and certainly contributed to his development. He was for some months in each of those years out of London, travelling over the roads of northern England in all weathers to such circuit towns as York, Appleby, Leeds, and Lancaster. There he would be in daily company with a crowd of judges, barristers, solicitors and their clients. Often, going to and from London, he would break his journey at the ancient estate of Rothley Temple, his birthplace in Leicestershire, the home of the uncle for whom he was named, Thomas Babington, and of a large cousinhood. It was on the Northern Circuit that Macaulay met his most intimate friend, Thomas Flower Ellis, and where he encountered the formidable Lord Brougham, maverick of the Whig party and for a time a rival of Macaulay within the literary and political world that both inhabited. Finally, such legal learning as Macaulay acquired in his barrister's career was his sole formal qualification for the appointment he received in 1833 as legal member of the Council of India; the crucial Indian episode in his career could not have come about otherwise.

As a lawyer based in London Macaulay was free for the first time since he had been sent off to school in 1813 to spend as much time as he liked with his family; he always looked back to these years when the family was still intact, and while he was yet a young man, as the happiest of his life. Something of the playfully affectionate style of the big brother appears

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in his letters to his brother Henry (26 May 1824) and his sister Hannah (20 March 1827 and 28 June 1830). It was during these years too that he discovered his special affection for his two youngest sisters, Hannah and Margaret. Both were infants when he left for school; in the years of his legal career they grew into young ladies, and by the time of his first parliamentary successes they had become the two whom he loved beyond all others, a relation ended only by death.

Macaulay's main ambition was to succeed in literature, and it was as a writer rather than a lawyer that he identified himself, even before leaving the university. Indeed, his publications went back to his schooldays, when he had contributed a defense of novel-reading to the severe pages of the *Christian Observer*, edited by his father (5 February 1819). While still at Cambridge he contributed essays and verses to *Knight's Quarterly Magazine* (7 and 20 June 1823), an enterprise directed by his Cambridge contemporary Praed. In 1825 he began contributing to the leading Whig journal, *The Edinburgh Review*, where, for the next twenty years, appeared the dazzling series of essays on history and literature that at once made his name and kept it before the public. The connection with the *Edinburgh Review* also brought him the friendship of literary Whigs like Sydney Smith (26 July 1826) and Francis Jeffrey (15 April 1828), for many years editor of the *Review* until succeeded by Macvey Napier.

Literature very soon led to politics; Lord Lansdowne offered him the seat for the pocket borough of Calne (10 February 1830), just on the eve of the conflict over the Reform Bill, and for most of the next quarter of a century Macaulay was an active Member of Parliament, several times holding office in Whig administrations, and, by his oratory, adding almost as much luster to his contemporary reputation as by his essays. His first, sensational, success came in the debates over the Reform Bill (7 March and 6 July 1831), marking him out at once as a rising hope of the liberal Whigs. It also put him in direct conflict with the Tory John Wilson Croker (7 March 1831), who became one of Macaulay's lifelong detestations. The atmosphere of reform in those days when Macaulay entered politics had been heavily charged by the French Revolution of 1830, and Macaulay, like other eager young men, was quick to make a visit of inspection to the scene itself (19 August and 14 September 1830).

Macaulay's ascent to the highest level of Whig society was made secure by his introduction to Holland House (30 May 1831), where the good-natured Lord Holland and the imperious Lady Holland brought together in their Kensington mansion all the lions on the Whig side of things, from Lord Grey, the prime minister, to Tom Moore, poet and diner-out. His experiences in the novel and exciting life of Holland House and its satellites in London society gave Macaulay a new set of scenes to describe

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to his adoring sisters, and the letters of 1831 abound in some of his most amusing accounts of the great world at work and at play, rendered in the way most likely to interest two home-keeping sisters: in this way we see Lady Holland laying down the law on points of English usage (30 May 1831), Talleyrand telling stories in his inimitable manner (11 July 1831), the leaders of the Reform movement exchanging recipes for bedtime drinks (29 August 1831), and poor William IV behaving awkwardly at his coronation (9 September 1831). In the same letters we also see Macaulay's delight in his sisters' affection for him and his free and intimate relation to them, quizzing them over their taste in novel-reading, sharing in their concerns on their frequent visits to cousins and friends, and talking to them in Swift's 'little language' (6 July 1832, 17 June 1833).

Macaulay's political services were first rewarded by appointment to the Board of Control, the government body regulating the East India Company's management of India (6 July 1832); from this position he piloted through Parliament the important India Charter Act (30 July and 14 August 1832). Following the passage of the Reform Bill he was singled out as Whig candidate for the newly enfranchised borough of Leeds and triumphantly elected over his opponent, Michael Sadler, at the end of 1832. The triumph was mingled with bitterness, created by his sister Margaret's engagement and marriage to Edward Cropper, son of a Liverpool Quaker family. Macaulay objected not to Cropper but to what he took as the 'loss' of Margaret, strangely and unrestrainedly expressed in the letters of 26 November and 12 December 1832.

A fresh crisis arose through the struggles over the bill for the abolition of slavery in the British dominions, when Macaulay, out of loyalty to his father and to the Clapham Sect's long labor in the cause of abolition, repeatedly offered his resignation to the Whig ministers in protest against unsatisfactory provisions in the bill (11, 22, and 27 July 1833). At the end of this year came the culmination of the rapid climb that began in 1830; he was offered appointment as legal member of the Council of India – the supreme government – at the princely salary of £10,000 a year. Though acceptance meant long separation from England, an interruption – perhaps final – to his political career, and a considerable risk to his health in those unantiseptic days, Macaulay at once determined to take the chance. His reason was simple enough: he wanted the money. But not merely for himself, since his father, three of his sisters, and his youngest brother were all entirely dependent upon him. The opportunity of exercising power in a constructive way, according to the new currents of reform, was not lost on his imagination either. This section of the letters closes, then, with the prospect of a sharp turn in his fortunes, in an unknown direction, as the departure for India draws near.

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TO SELINA MILLS MACAULAY, 3 FEBRUARY 1813

MS: Trinity College.

Shelford February 3d. 1813

My dear Mamma

I do not remember being ever more gloomy in my life than when I first left Clapham. We got into the Cambridge Stage and at Chelmsford took a Post-Chaise which carried us on to Shelford where we arrived about 5 o'clock. Mr. Preston had put off the dinner hour till our arrival and here I met William Wilberforce who came but the day before; after dinner I got a little acquainted with the boys and after tea arranged my books in my shelves put my clothes in the drawers and began to shift for myself.

After prayers I went very sorrowfully to bed and in the morning went down expecting to be called instantly to work, but Papa was so kind as to take me with him to Cambridge on Mr. Preston's horses.

Of the boys only nine are come and there is but one more coming. William Wilberforce is as agreeable and as mischievous. One boy at table was thought by Mr. Simeon who dined here to day to be a striking resemblance of Harry Venn upon which William as soon as dinner was over fastened the name of "Little master Wenn" upon him mimicking the boy's Cockney accent.

Added to the advantage of every boy's having a separate [room] is that Mr. Preston imposes a shilling fine upon every one who intrudes without leave into another boy's room. Give my kindest love to Selina Jane and John; tell Henry that I had rather be sitting by the fireside with him on my knee than seeing sights at Cambridge.

You cannot conceive with what pleasure I look forward to the holidays and in the mean time I ever remain

Your affectionate and dutiful Son
 Thos. B Macaulay

TO ZACHARY MACAULAY, 22 [FEBRUARY] 1813

MS: Trinity College. *Address*: Mr. Macaulay / 26 Birchin Lane / London. *Mostly published*: Trevelyan, 1, 40-1.

Shelford. Monday October 22nd. 1813

My dear Papa

As this is a Whole Holiday I cannot find a better time for answering your letter, and with respect to my health, I am very well, and tolerably cheerful, as Blundell the best and most clever of all the scholars is very

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kind and talks to me, and takes my part. He is quite a friend of Mr. Preston's. The other boys, especially Lyon, a Scotch boy, and Wilberforce are very goodnatured, and we might have gone on very well had not one Clayfield a Bristol fellow come here. He is unanimously allowed to be a queer fellow, and is generally characterized as a foolish boy, and by most of us as an ill-natured one.

In my learning I do Xenophon every day, and twice a week the Odyssey; in which I am classed with Wilberforce, whom all the boys allow to be very clever, very droll, and very impudent. We do Latin verses twice a week and I have not yet been laughed at, as Wilberforce is the only one who hears them being in my class. We are exercised also once a week in English compositions and once in Latin composition, as letters from persons renowned in history to each other. We get by heart Greek Grammar, or Virgil every evening. As for sermon writing, I have hitherto got off with credit, and I hope I shall keep up my reputation.

We have had the first meeting of our debating Society the other day, when a vote of censure was moved for, upon Wilberforce, but he getting up said, "Mr. President, I beg leave to second the motion" by this means he escaped. The kindness which Mr. Preston shows me is very great, he always assists me in what I cannot do, and takes me [to] walk out with him every now and then. Miss Preston is very kind: she comes now and then into my room to get me to read to her. My room is a delightful, snug, little chamber, which nobody can enter as there is a trick about opening the door. I sit like a king, with my writing desk before me, for (would you believe it) there is a writing desk in my chest of drawers, my books on one side my box of papers on the other with my armchair, and my candle for ev'ry boy has a candlestick snuffers and extinguisher of his own. Being press'd for room I will conclude what I have to say [to] morrow and ever remain my dear Papa,

your affectionate Son
Thomas B Macaulay

TO ZACHARY MACAULAY, 26 APRIL 1813

MS: Mr Gordon N. Ray. *Address:* Mr. Macaulay / Clapham. *Partly published:* Trevelyan, 1, 42-3.

Little Shelford. April 26th. 1813.

My dear Papa,

I received yesterday a letter from Mamma, and an enclosed one from John, to whom I enclose an answer, with which I hope he will be satisfied; I am glad that Mamma is satisfied with my defence on the topic of exer-

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cise; and I assure her that though the current opinion here is that I shall grow tall there is not much suspicion of my being thin.

I am very much concerned to hear of the death of old Mrs. More; and I should be afraid it would put a stop to Miss H. More's intended journey. I am pleased however to hear of Mr. Venn's recovery; and I should be glad to know what illness he was labouring under.

Since I have given you a detail of my routine of weekly duties, I hope you will be pleased to be informed of my Sunday's occupations. It is quite a day of rest here, and I really look to it with pleasure through the whole of the week; after breakfast, we learn a chapter in the Greek Testament i.e. with the aid of our bibles, and without doing it with a dictionary etc. like other lessons. We then go to Church. We dine almost as soon as we come back, and we are left to ourselves till church-time; during this time I employ myself in reading; and Mr. Preston lends me any books for which I ask him, so that I am nearly as well off in this respect as at home, except for one thing; which though I believe it is useful is not very pleasant; I can only ask for one book at a time; therefore I am limited to one at a time; and cannot touch another till I have read it through; we then go to church, and after we come back I read as before till tea-time; after tea, we go in to sermon; and write it out as you were before told by Stainforth; I cannot help thinking that Mr. Preston uses all imaginable means to make us forget the sermon. For he gives us a glass of wine a-piece on Sunday, and on Sunday only, the very day when we want [to] have all our faculties awake; and some do literally go to sleep during the sermon, and look rather silly when they wake; I, however, have not fallen into this disaster.

My love to Mamma, and all at home. / I ever remain,
 My dear Papa
 Your affectionate Son,
 Thos. B. Macaulay

TO SELINA MILLS MACAULAY, [12 AUGUST 1813]

MS: Trinity College. *Address:* Mrs. Macaulay / 26 Birchin-Lane / London.

Shelford. Thursday

My dear Mamma.

I arrived here safe and sound, but as low-spirited as can well be imagined. I cannot bear the thoughts of remaining so long from home. I do not know how to comfort myself, or what to do. There is nobody here to pity me or to comfort me, and if I were to say I was sorry at being from

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home, I should be called a baby. When I am with the rest I am obliged to look pleasant, and to laugh at Wilberforce's jokes, when I can hardly hide the tears in my eyes. So I have nothing to do but to sit and cry in my room, and think of home and wish for the holidays. I am ten times more uneasy than I was last half year. I did not mean to complain, but indeed I cannot help it. Forgive my bad writing, for indeed, in the state in which I am it is a great deal for me to write at all. Pray write as soon as possible. I ever remain / my dear mamma

Your affectionate Son

T B Macaulay

P S My love to Papa and all at home.

TO SELINA MILLS, SELINA, AND JANE MACAULAY,
[29 APRIL 1814]

MS: Trinity College. *Address:* Mrs. Macaulay / No 26 Birchin / Lane / London.

[Little Shelford]

My dear Mamma,

I mean by this single letter to pay off all that I owe to Selina, Jane, etc. and shall therefore split it into 3 parts, one for each of you. What would I have given to see the King of France enter London. It was a day of triumph indeed, and crowned most gloriously the Events of the Year. What a scene for future Historians and Poets. It is a scene, however, I fear which we shall never see again.

I am much obliged to you for your kindness in offering me Lord Byron's Ode. Stainforth made me a present of it Yesterday; – this is only one of the many instances of Kindness I have received from him; – I hardly ever saw such Kindness united with such Talents and Knowledge.

The Ode pleases me exceedingly. The passages that please me most are

“If thou hadst died as honour dies,
Some new Napoleon might arise,
But who would climb the Solar Height
To set in such a starless night.”

And again

“The tumult and the Vanity,
The rapture of the strife
The EARTHQUAKE VOICE OF VICTORY
To thee the breath of life.”

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What a grand metaphor is that “the Earthquake voice of Victory.” The comparison between the late Emperor of the French, and Sylla I like. I cannot say I admire much that between him and Charles the Fifth. There is one couplet that strikes me

“not till Thy fall could Mortal’s guess
ambition’s less than littleness.”

To take leave of Lord Byron and Napoleon the ci-devant Emperor, I was much concerned to hear of the Battle of Toulouse, and yet I think it was a glorious ending of the Contest too. Lord Wellington’s military talents seem to sink into nothing when compared with the Magnanimity and Forbearance which he displayed. He is indeed a Hero.

After much talking and debating it has at length been all but decided that we shall go to Hayden. This is not the least among the many and great advantages flowing from the peace.

We are now reading Clarkson’s History of the Slave-Trade. It interests me exceedingly. I am highly delighted with the character of Mr. Granville Sharpe. Such noble boldness and zeal! Such self-devotion in the cause of liberty and justice! I think without depreciating the merits of Mr. Wilberforce, he holds a most exalted station among the Abolitionists. Think of a man at a time of life when the habits are formed, and when he was professionally engaged, spending all the time he could in studying the law that he might forward this great cause!

I hear that Mr. Wilberforce is deeply engaged at present in business respecting the Slave-trade and I should be obliged to Papa to acquaint me with the nature of it. / I ever remain, my dear Mamma,

Your affectionate Son

T B Macaulay

To Selina Macaulay. One of the High and Mighty Triumvirate of girls, member of the most Honourable Committee for circulating “the Bride of Abydos,” Greeting. I am much obliged unto thee for thy Epistles, unto me sent, and by me received. I am about to tell unto thee a story which however strange it may appear unto thee, and though thou mayest think it a terry-diddle, is a very true fact.

Mr. Preston hath a gardener, and his name is Jennings. This man hath a sister. This sister hath a friend. This friend had a law-suit. She gained it. The sister of Jennings happening to be telling this story to a Lady whose servant she was, the Lady asked her straitly of her Kinsfolk, and learning that she had a brother named Jennings, said unto her “There is an Estate in Suffolk of six thousand a year named Acton place, that hath been in

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Chancery these 30 Years. The name of the late Proprietor was Jennings." The woman hereupon told her brother, and Jennings is now in a fair way of getting 6000 a year besides large property in the funds. The name of the Estate is Acton Hall. Jennings went to see it, and said that there were a Mort of Windows. Mr. Preston examined into it and thinks that Jennings hath hopes of getting the money.

Farewell. / I ever remain my dear Selina

your affectionate Brother

T B M

Unto Jane Macaulay Greeting

My dear Jane,

I received your letter and made it out with out much difficulty. I think it contains a fine description of my Uncle Colin's taking you to Town. It lays things b[efore] one in so forcible a light. Allow me to paraphrase it. "We had just sate down to lessons," to all that dull stuff [], and geography, and stuff-a-nonsense, "when" O [sur]prize of surprizes, "a coach stopped at the door and in came Uncle Colin;" to crown all this "he took Selina etc. to town in a coach drawn by eight cream coloured horses"! This error amused me a little. You and the rest seemed to have intruded yourself into the Coach of the Regent. I found however that you had only made a little mistake in the Order and stops. I have appropriated so much room to Buonaparte, and Jennings that I have very little more left. You must let me say however that I am much pleased at going to the Isle of Wight. Give my love to Papa etc. / I ever remain / My dear Jane

Your affectionate Brother,

T B Macaulay

TO ZACHARY MACAULAY, II JULY 1814

MS: Mr Gordon N. Ray. *Address:* Z. Macaulay Esqr. (in Selina Mills Macaulay's hand).

[Brighton] July 11. 1814

My dear Papa,

We are arrived at Brighton and comfortably settled there, as I suppose Mamma's letter has before now informed you. We are as well off as we can be without your company. When are we to expect you here? Can you accompany my Aunt Babington and Matthew?

Yesterday we went to Lady Huntingdon's Chapel, and heard two very good sermons from one Mr. Muffin, a travelling Minister, I believe, who now officiates at Brighton.