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THE SELECTED LETTERS OF THOMAS BABINGTON MACAULAY

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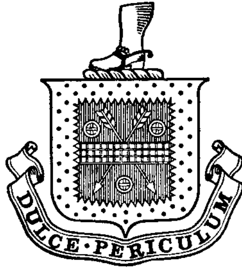

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The title-page device is
the Macaulay coat of arms, taken from Macaulay's seal
on a letter of 17 December 1833;
it was later the basis of Macaulay's arms as Baron Macaulay.
Acknowledgement is made to the Master and Fellows of
Trinity College, Cambridge.

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INTRODUCTION

Thomas Babington Macaulay, first Baron Macaulay, was, in his own time, England's most notable man of letters, distinguished as an essayist for the *Edinburgh Review*, as the poet of the *Lays of Ancient Rome*, as an exciting parliamentary orator, and, most of all, as the author of a *History of England* which rendered the Glorious Revolution in fascinating detail and animated the story with the highest patriotic idealism. Macaulay's literary achievement is heightened by the fact that he had an active public life as well: he sat in Parliament for sixteen years, took a leading part in the Reform Bill contest, twice held cabinet office with the Whigs, and, for four years, sat on the Supreme Council of India in Calcutta. Like other great Victorians, he added to these claims on our interest a strongly marked personality. A lifelong bachelor, living at the center of London, he was a familiar figure in high Whig society, where he ranked as the most formidable talker of the day, knowing everything and able to produce everything he knew thanks to a photographic memory. His slashing reviews, his habit of violent rhetorical exaggeration in speech and writing, his fearless confidence in his opinions, made him seem strong, tough – perhaps a bit shallow and insensitive. Yet beneath this crust – as we know now from his letters – Macaulay concealed a sensibility so tender that he suffered almost debilitating agonies whenever his affections were touched.

Macaulay's letters would be interesting simply for their record of their writer's life and career. His life, which coincided with the first half of the nineteenth century, touched on a remarkable number of the significant events and movements of the age, and the letters have an added interest in their reflection of this larger historical scene. For the first fifteen years of his life England was engaged in the great drama of the Napoleonic wars; his undergraduate years and his young manhood were then spent in the period of reactionary politics that followed Waterloo. But he felt the strong counter-currents of reform sooner than most. He grew up in an Evangelical family, fully sharing in the Evangelical faith that reform in the morality of public life was both necessary and attainable. He had an almost hereditary interest in the great Evangelical cause of the abolition

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of slavery, a movement in which his father was one of the most active and important figures. His precocious literary tastes were, at least partly, determined by the works of the Romantic revolution, particularly those of Byron and Scott. At Cambridge, as an undergraduate, he lived in an atmosphere laden with the new ideas of Jeremy Bentham, ideas that to many idealistic young men seemed to open the way to a new society. If Macaulay did not go the whole way with them, he was nevertheless stirred by the Benthamite vision of reason and justice.

The post-Napoleonic system of reactionary politics was already breaking up at the moment when Macaulay, by a lucky chance, was brought into Parliament. He was privileged, then, while still a young man, to take an enthusiastic part in the exciting struggle to pass the English Reform Bill – a triumph of the orderly freedom of British constitutionalism, as Macaulay always saw it, and certainly the great symbolic event of his public life: he was always to remain, in outlook and loyalties, a Man of 1832. The Reform Bill was followed soon after by the success of the long campaign for the abolition of slavery in the British dominions. Macaulay then went out to India, as part of a newly reformed government, determined to bring to a subject country some, at least, of the benefits of reform; his part was to write a new penal code, according to Benthamite ideas, and to decree a new system of education, Western and English, to replace the old and traditional.

After these first victories of reform at home and in the British dominions, England had to endure a decade of difficulties and severe political anxieties – famine in Ireland, distress in the industrial cities, the agitations of Chartism, the fierce political struggles over the Corn Laws, made men doubtful and pessimistic. Macaulay's faith in the good work already done carried him through these troubled years. He did not think that progress was inevitable; but he did not doubt the value of what had been accomplished in his own life. The work of the Evangelicals in the reform of public morals, of politicians in the reform of laws, of men of science in providing new amenity and comfort and speed (it is fitting that Macaulay's sister married into the family that promoted the first railway in England) were matters of fact, achievements that had been made by active men working under the blessings of political freedom. Macaulay believed in the reality of heroism – not surprising, perhaps, in one whose first impressions had been formed at a time when the high romantic energies of such figures as Napoleon and Byron were astonishing the world. It was a belief that he shared with his age. As G. M. Young has observed in writing of Macaulay,

> The patriotism of early Victorian England was at heart a pride in human capacity, which time had led to fruition in England; and in the great humanist,

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who brought all history to glorify the age of which he was the most honoured child, it heard its own voice speaking.

This conviction is most fully and memorably expressed in Macaulay's masterwork, the *History of England*. The book appeared, with symbolic fitness, in the portentous year of 1848, when all the thrones of Europe trembled. England's alone stood secure and exalted, on the basis of what Macaulay fervently believed to be a just combination of freedom and order, achieved through a long tradition of such political action as he had himself had a part in.

The last decade of Macaulay's life, the years of his unchallenged high standing as spokesman for the age, are the years that the historians have agreed to recognize as the Victorian climacteric – the struggles and agitations of reform are, for the moment, over; the terrors of the Hungry Forties have subsided, and England enjoys for a decade the blessings of political tranquillity and of prosperity (that such states are never perfect the Crimean War and the Indian Mutiny remind us). Macaulay's rather early death, in 1859, seems in retrospect to be rightly timed, for the names and ideas that begin to fill the air then are prophetic of different, newly problematic times: it was the year of Darwin's *Origin of Species*, of Marx's *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, of Fitzgerald's *Rubáiyát*, all portents of a world very different from the one that had delighted to recognize itself in Macaulay's image of English achievement.

Directly or indirectly, Macaulay's letters tell us a great deal about the historical events of the first half of the nineteenth century. Their immediate interest does not lie in that, however, but in what they reveal of an interesting and attractive personality whose observations and activities are set down in a prose of great vigor, rapidity, and point. Macaulay is to me, and I cannot doubt that he is and will be to many others, a delightful letter-writer. Writing informally and rapidly, thinking of no public beyond the person addressed, he always manages to maintain the virtues of his formal and meditated works, virtues which include precision, economy, and vividness of language, pellucid clarity of arrangement, and strong rhetorical emphasis. In reading Macaulay, one moves easily from point to point in what seems a natural and obvious sequence, and one always knows what it is that Macaulay has said. At the same time, the letters, as befits the intimacy of the private form, are freer, more loose and expansive in their movement, more relaxed in tone, often more racy in their language. Consider this passage from a letter of 1833 (it is not included in this selected edition), written to his sister Margaret to explain why she found the report of a speech made in the House of Commons hard to understand:

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As to Rice's speech which astonished you so much the explanation is quite simple. He had been dining with the Lord Mayor, and was as drunk as a fiddler. Lord Althorp called out to some of those who were sitting on the Treasury Bench to pull the poor Secretary down by his coat-tail. We are a very joyous assembly. The other day Colonel Torrens made a tipsy speech about rent and profits, and then staggered away, tumbled down a staircase, and was as sick as a dog in the Long Gallery.

The management of effect here is admirable; the passage, brief and seemingly unadorned, is yet filled with little expressive touches that tell. The comic contrast of dignified setting and office with clownish behavior permeates the language: Rice, we are reminded, is an official, a Secretary in the ministry, but in plain cliché he is simply 'drunk as a fiddler'. His formal 'coat-tail' becomes an appliance of farce, something to be pulled. The single instance of Rice's performance is quickly generalized by the laconic, ironic observation, 'We are a very joyous assembly'. There is no reaching after words – 'drunk', 'joyous', 'tipsy' convey no very heightened or melodramatic notion of the habits of the House, but establish a lightness of tone that is dramatized for us in the antics of Colonel Torrens, who undercuts the severe theme of 'rent and profits' by his staggerings and tumblings. But the final phrase leaves us in no doubt as to Macaulay's position – the unpleasant vulgarity of 'sick as a dog' side by side with the public decorum of 'Long Gallery' implies a clear enough judgment. The passage is a perfectly casual, even trivial, instance of Macaulay's habits as a writer of letters, but it is not the less representative for that, and much more analysis might be devoted to its praise.

Macaulay is at his very best and most characteristic when he is explaining, illustrating, making a point, or persuading. The clarity of his expression, the range and aptness of his illustrations, and the definiteness of his manner all combine to the best effect in this kind of writing; his own evident pleasure in it comes through strongly, and, reading it, we can form an idea of what it must have been like to hear his marvellous table-talk. See, to take only a few instances out of the many that clamor for notice, his explanation to his sister Fanny of the reasons why Bunyan has no memorial in Westminster Abbey (14 October 1854), or his presentation to Ellis of the case for choosing literature over politics (30 December 1835), or his illustration to Bulwer Lytton of the abuse of pronouns in English prose (30 December 1848), or, for an instance of rhetorical power on a controverted question, his letter to Tytler on Indian education (28 January 1835).

The letters also have a pleasing variety of tones. He can be urbane and easy, as in much of the correspondence with his friend Ellis; dignified and

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generous to opponents, as in his remarks on James Mill (21 January 1834), or unsparing in abuse, as in his account of Croker (3 January 1843); excited over political conflicts, as in the Reform Bill letters or that on the Edinburgh election (9 July 1846); thoughtful and kind to the unlucky, as in his delicate explanations to Leigh Hunt (29 October 1841); playful without condescension to a child, as in his letters to his niece (*e.g.*, 21 August 1847); amusing and detached, as in his sketches of Holland House (*e.g.*, 29 July 1833). The control of most of his letters makes all the more striking those moments when, as in certain of the letters to Margaret and to Hannah, he breaks down and cannot constrain his feelings (*e.g.*, 26 November 1832). Taken together, the letters show Macaulay as a most attractive person: loving in his family relations, eager and high-minded yet without pretense or pomposity in his public life, affectionate and good-natured with his colleagues and friends, kind to those who needed help. And running through them, as the ground-note of his life, is his deep, inexhaustible love of literature.

This selection of Macaulay's letters is drawn from the full edition published in six volumes by the Cambridge University Press between 1974 and 1981. Each letter is printed without abbreviation or omission but without the annotation which accompanies it in the six-volume edition. Readers who, from this sample, are moved to learn more about Macaulay and his letters are referred to that edition, which contains a full index as well as annotation. For this selection, a general context of information is provided by the headnotes to each section of the letters. Further aids are provided by a chronology of Macaulay's life, a family tree, and an index in which many of the more important persons figuring in the letters are identified.

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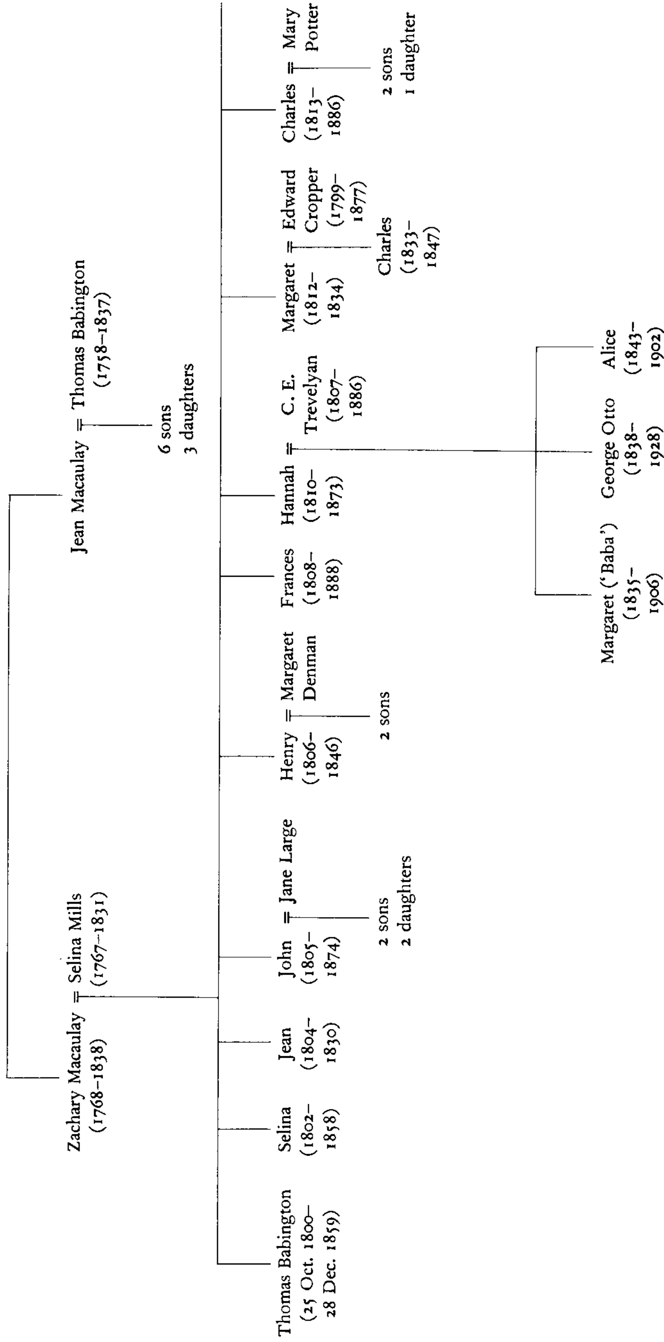

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CHRONOLOGY

1800 October 25
Macaulay born, Rothley Temple, Leicestershire
1802 Family moves from London to Clapham
1813 February
Goes to school, Little Shelford, Cambridgeshire
1814 August
School moves to Aspenden Hall, Hertfordshire
1818 October
Enters Trinity College, Cambridge
1819 June
Wins Chancellor's Prize for 'Pompeii'
1821 March
Wins Craven University scholarship
June
Wins Chancellor's Prize for 'Evening'
July–September
On reading party, Llanrwst, North Wales
1822 January
Takes B.A. without honors
Admitted student of Lincoln's Inn
1823 June
First contribution to *Knight's Quarterly Magazine*
Autumn
Family moves to 50 Great Ormond Street, Bloomsbury
1824 October
Elected to Trinity fellowship
1825 January
First contribution to *Westminster Review*
1826 February
Called to the bar
March
Joins Northern Circuit

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1827 August
  Receives first brief
1829 Leaves Great Ormond Street, takes chambers in Gray's Inn
1830 February
  Elected M.P. for Calne
April
  Makes maiden speech in House of Commons
June
  Elected to Athenæum
September
  First visit to Paris, following July Revolution
December
  Elected to Brooks's
1831 March
  Reform Bill introduced
  First speech on Reform Bill
May
  Death of mother
  First visit to Holland House
July
  Second speech on Reform Bill
1832 May
  Reform Bill passed
June
  Appointed to Board of Control
December
  Elected M.P. for Leeds
  Margaret Macaulay married
1833 July
  Offers resignation over slavery bill
December
  Appointed to Supreme Council of India
1834 February
  Sails for India
June
  Arrives at Madras, goes to Ootacamund
September
  Arrives in Calcutta
December
  Hannah Macaulay marries Charles Trevelyan
1835 January
  Learns of Margaret's death

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1835 February
  Minute on Indian education
 December
  Determines to undertake *History of England*
1836 February
  Inherits £10,000 from his Uncle Colin Macaulay
1837 May
  Completes Indian Penal Code
1838 January
  Sails for England
 May
  Death of father
 June
  Arrives in England
 October
  Leaves on Italian tour
1839 February
  Returns to London
  Elected to Reform Club
 March
  Begins *History*
  Elected to The Club
 June
  Elected M.P. for Edinburgh
 September
  Appointed Secretary at War in Melbourne's cabinet
1840 January
  C. E. Trevelyan appointed to Treasury office: Hannah enabled to remain in England
1841 August
  Melbourne ministry resigns
 September
  Moves to Albany, Piccadilly
 November
  Resumes *History*
1842 October
  Publishes *Lays of Ancient Rome*
1843 April
  Publishes collected *Essays*
1844 December
  Gives up writing for *Edinburgh Review*

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1846 July
Appointed Paymaster General in Russell's cabinet

1847 January
Appointed Trustee of British Museum
July
Defeated at Edinburgh

1848 December
Publishes *History of England*, vols. 1 and 2

1849 February
Begins second part of *History*
August–September
Trip to Ireland

1850 September
At Isle of Wight

1851 August–September
At Malvern

1852 July
Elected M.P. for Edinburgh
Suffers heart attack
August–September
Recuperates at Clifton
November
Speech at Edinburgh

1853 February
Elected to French Institute
June
Receives honorary D.C.L. from Oxford
July–August
At Tunbridge Wells
December
Publishes *Speeches*

1854 September
At Thames Ditton
December
Report on Indian Civil Service published

1855 June–September
At Richmond
December
Publishes *History*, vols. 3 and 4

1856 January
Retires from House of Commons

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1856 May
Leaves Albany for Holly Lodge
August–September
Italian tour with Ellis
October
Begins vol. 5 of *History*
1857 August
Given peerage by Palmerston's government
1858 November
Marriage of Margaret Trevelyan
1859 February
C. E. Trevelyan returns to India
October
Learns that Hannah will leave for India
December 28
Dies

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