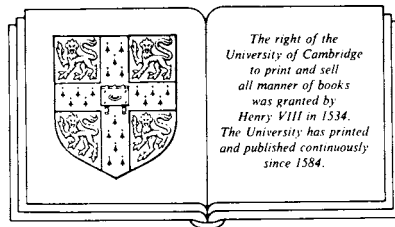


GEORGE LAWSON'S  
*POLITICA* AND  
THE ENGLISH  
REVOLUTION

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
*Cambridge*  
*New York Port Chester Melbourne Sydney*

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK  
40 West 20th Street, New York NY 10011-4211, USA  
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia  
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain  
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa  
<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 1989  
First paperback edition 2002

*A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data*

Condren, Conal  
George Lawson's *Politica* and the English Revolution / Conal  
Condren.  
p. cm. – (Cambridge studies in early modern British history)  
Includes index.  
ISBN 0 521 36642 9  
1. Great Britain – Politics and government – 1642–1660.  
2. Lawson, George, d. 1678. *Politica sacra & civilis*. 3. Political  
science – Great Britain – History – 17th  
century. I. Title. II. Series.  
DA405.C66 1989  
320.941'09'032–dc20 89-31715 CIP

ISBN 0 521 36642 9 hardback  
ISBN 0 521 52238 2 paperback

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## Historiography

Mr. George Lawson was a person of such universal learning and general esteem, that the works that already are extant of him and those that he hath perfected under his own hand for the press, shall stop my pen and supercede my intention of giving a larger character of him.

So wrote the auctioneer Millington, or his phrasemonger, to advertise the sale of George Lawson's books in 1681.<sup>1</sup> It is a pity the pen was stopped and intentions superceded, for within twenty years this man of such learning and esteem was to fall into an obscurity from which only the assiduous ink dippings of the twentieth century have begun, somewhat by accident, to rescue him.

If it was assumed familiarity with Lawson that really stopped the moving pen, it is symptomatic of Lawson's seventeenth-century fate. The apparent dissemination of his ideas and the affirmations of his importance are noticeably discrepant with the willingness of others to enlarge upon him or his work. As we shall see, Baxter, especially, claims he thought highly of Lawson and so did his more politically active friend John Humfrey. Locke certainly knew his work, may well have used it and, implicitly, criticised it; Defoe, as others certainly did, may have paraphrased and popularised it. An eighteenth-century satire, aimed at less than the most arcanelly learned, parodied and alluded to Lawson's *Politica* in a way that assumed a continuing public esteem; and one pen still moved in private marginalia when Napoleon was a threat to England. But a learned memorialist prefacing the collected works of Dr John Owen in 1826 could only remark on *a* Mr Lawson who had, like Owen, written an exposition of St Paul's Epistle to the Hebrews. He is quite absent from Benjamin Hanbury's compendious *Historical Memorials Relating to the Independents*.<sup>2</sup> The first history of political thought some thirty years later makes no mention of Lawson either; so I think, by the

<sup>1</sup> *Catalogus Librarum*, Printed Books of Sale, 1681–95, London.

<sup>2</sup> William Orme in Dr John Owen, *Works*, ed. W. Russell, 1826, vol. 1; B. Hanbury, *Memorials*, Fisher, London, 3 vols., 1839–44.

1850s, the pens had seized up entirely and the charting of Lawson's significance is made doubly difficult.

I shall suggest, however, that the significance was probably considerable at least until the end of the seventeenth century, and this study should be seen as a partial compensation for the stopped pens of the past. It is also an attempt to rectify the consequences of the more fluid ones of the present.

The uncertain process of rehabilitating George Lawson began, as far as I can tell, with A. H. Maclean's doctoral thesis of 1947, 'The Origins of the Political Opinions of John Locke'. The only copy of this that either I or Cambridge University Library know of disappeared from the university library *circa* 1973. Scholarly paranoia might suggest a cosmic plot to ensure Lawson's obscurity, but Maclean had published an essay abstracted from his thesis in 1949, in which he emphasised strongly the similarities between Lawson and Locke.<sup>3</sup> A few years later, John Bowle gave some attention to Lawson's *Examination*, which he considered the finest of the early attacks on Hobbes. His criteria of assessment were, however, obscure, and the *Politica* remained very much on the periphery of Bowle's vision.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Maclean's invitation to take Lawson's major work seriously was not accepted for some years. In 1960 Peter Laslett produced the splendid edition of Locke's *Two Treatises* that made possible the gradual resurgence of interest in John Locke, and in this edition he makes passing comment on Lawson, but not of the sort that was to encourage further interest. The overall gist of his remarks is to suggest a Lawson of a less abstract turn of mind than Locke, who coincidentally shares some of Locke's arguments; most readers would have been reassured that Locke was the significant man, comforting not least because there was now a fine edition to work from whereas there was, and remains, no modern printing of the *Politica*.

The most substantial, and now best-known account of Lawson's *Politica* is to be found in Julian Franklin's *John Locke and the Theory of Sovereignty*. It is this work which really took up Maclean's neglected claim. Lawson was heralded as coherent, radical and original, and as *the* theorist who *really* solved – a generation before Locke – the problem of sovereignty in a mixed, or limited, constitution (if such are ever 'solved'). Locke, we are told, too radical for mainstream Whigs, had found the answer to constitutional sovereignty and resistance 'ready-made' in Lawson's *Politica*; and so Locke became 'the source through which Lawson's theory of sovereignty

<sup>3</sup> A. H. Maclean, 'George Lawson and John Locke', *Cambridge Historical Journal*, 9, 1 (1949), pp. 72ff.

<sup>4</sup> John Bowle, *Hobbes and His Critics*, London, 1952; but see M. Goldie, 'The Reception of Hobbes', in *The Cambridge History of Political Thought, 1450–1700*, ed. J. H. Burns, Cambridge University Press, forthcoming, for a more satisfactory discussion.

was transmitted'.<sup>5</sup> It is a depressing thought that these claims are central to any assessment of Franklin's book and precious few reviewers showed any familiarity with Lawson. It would also be fair to say that Franklin's lucid chapter on Lawson can, and has been, taken as a surrogate for the *Politica*. This too has been less than encouraging, as, for all its merits, Franklin's account is forced and full of errors. These issues will be discussed where appropriate; and, as the first part of my conclusion will make clear, Franklin's principal promotional contention, concerning Locke's lifting a theory ready-made from Lawson, is sheer fantasy.

What is of more immediate consequence is that, first, Franklin's work comes at the end of a somewhat hiccoughing move to rehabilitate Lawson marked largely by the attempt to insert the *Politica* into a prearranged historiographical tradition between Hobbes and Locke. His identity has been shaped in counter-point to theirs. Take away a faith in the historiographical usefulness of this tradition *per se* and these thinkers become less obvious standards by which to measure Lawson. Nevertheless, if it was originally the importance of Locke that helped draw some derivative attention to Lawson's *Politica*, it is now the remarkable fluidity of Locke studies that reinforces a need for that attention. The conventional patterns of textual relationships and authorial influence are breaking down nowhere as they are in Locke scholarship; a highly schematic tradition of great names is ceasing manifestly to be of much explanatory power or contextual enlightenment and this makes it both easier and more important to give serious attention to the *Politica*. In the first part of my conclusion, I shall pay some attention to Lawson's relationship to both Hobbes and Locke as a means of refocussing on the *Politica*. If anything, my arguments will further complicate the putative patterns of intellectual relationship surrounding Locke and now obscuring the nature of his significance.

Secondly, as Franklin's work most clearly shows, the criteria of judgement employed to elevate Lawson into the historiographical firmament of Great Political Thinkers revolves around the standard rhetoric of originality, coherence and influence, with a top dressing of the 'radical', uncertainly modified by reference to 'moderation'. All this seems to me to be as unsatisfactory as the tradition into which Lawson is being placed. My own account presupposes and illustrates a different approach to the historiography of political thought and the appraisal of its texts, which, in the last analysis, recognises both that there is a certain arbitrariness underlying the fate of texts in the

<sup>5</sup> Julian Franklin, *John Locke and the Theory of Sovereignty*, Cambridge University Press, 1978, preface, chaps. 3 and 4, quotations from p. 123. James Tully, 'Current Thinking on Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Political Theory', *Historical Journal*, 24, 2 (1981), is uncertain just what relationship is being posited by Franklin. He may have been phased by its simple extremity.

history of ideas and that argumentative 'faults' perhaps more than virtues play a part in the establishment of fame.<sup>6</sup>

There is a sense in which my own early essays on Lawson operated perforce within the terms of the received historiographical context of a pantheon of great thinkers amongst whom Lawson might be given some place. Initially I took issue with Franklin's claims about the logical coherence and originality of the *Politica*, arguing that if it needs to be seen as an appendage to the more famous, Lawson was better seen as a Marsilian than a proto-Lockean;<sup>7</sup> but, as I moved from this sort of *ad hoc* criticism to a more general account of Lawson's *Politica*,<sup>8</sup> others were also moving towards accounts of Lawson's work which were not reliant upon the great tradition, or upon an inherited rhetoric of textual promotion. In discussing Richard Baxter's intermittent dabbling with political and millennial fireworks, William Lamont had a number of interesting things to say about Lawson, who began to assume an important place in Baxter's world.<sup>9</sup> Brian Tierney in a powerful and perceptive argument about the continuity of medieval thought used Lawson as a culminating illustration of his arguments.<sup>10</sup>

The works of Salmon, Schochet and Tuck have discussed Lawson in the context of elaborating historically specific arguments about intellectual movements, to one side of any process of promotion.<sup>11</sup> Schochet, though not touching on the *Politica*, has correctly pointed to Lawson's ambivalent place in the context of patriarchal thought; Salmon managed simply to define Lawson beyond the limits of a tradition of resistance thought in the seventeenth century; Tuck has placed Lawson, perhaps too firmly, within the context of a Presbyterian tradition of rights theory, and this has been further discussed by James Tully.<sup>12</sup> All of these authors have had worthwhile things to say on Lawson, but no overall picture of his major text, or his thought as a whole, has emerged. In all cases this has been due, understandably, to the fact that a certain theme which is partially revealed in Lawson

<sup>6</sup> C. Condren, *The Status and Appraisal of Classic Texts*, Princeton University Press, 1985, esp. pt 3.

<sup>7</sup> C. Condren, 'Resistance and Sovereignty in Lawson's *Politica*', *HJ*, 24, 3 (1981), pp. 673ff.; 'George Lawson and the *Defensor pacis*', *Medioevo*, 5-6 (1980), pp. 595ff.; to a lesser extent, 'The Image of Utopia', *Moreana*, 69 (1981), pp. 101ff.

<sup>8</sup> C. Condren, 'Sacra Before Civilis', *The Journal of Religious History*, 11, 2 (1981), pp. 524ff.

<sup>9</sup> William Lamont, *Richard Baxter and the Millennium*, Croom Helm, London, 1979.

<sup>10</sup> Brian Tierney, *Religion, Law and the Growth of Constitutional Thought, 1150-1650*, Cambridge University Press, 1982.

<sup>11</sup> J. W. H. Salmon, *The French Religious Wars in English Political Thought*, Oxford University Press, 1959; Gordon Schochet, *Patriarchalism in Political Thought*, Oxford University Press, 1975; Richard Tuck, *Natural Rights Theories: Their Origin and Development*, Cambridge University Press, 1979. See also J. W. Gough, *The Fundamental Law in English Constitutional Thought*, Oxford University Press, 1955, p. 121.

<sup>12</sup> Tully, 'Current Thinking', pp. 478ff.



has been the principal preoccupation. Lawson, in short, has never really been a focus of anybody's attention. Even Millington tumbled his books indiscriminately with those of three other defunct ministers, and may have stopped his pen in order to say something about them before the proceeds of the sale were to be handed to grieving beneficiaries. Where Lawson has come close to being a centre of attraction, the canvas has been distorted, as I have suggested, by the need to stitch him according to the prior threads of an historiographical tradition of relatively modern invention stretched upon an ill-working framework of appraisal.

For all this, the noticeable interest in the *Politica* has now reached the stage at which Lawson is making his textbook début. Given the riches of the seventeenth century this is an achievement enough to justify a special study. Had Allen's two-volume work on English political thought in the seventeenth century been completed, the début may have been made a generation ago, and the specialist studies may by now have been legion.<sup>13</sup> Only Franklin and Goldie have said anything of the fate of the *Politica*; both have looked, appropriately enough, at the Allegiance Controversy and, of course, at Locke. The crucial point has been whether Lawson was as radical as Locke, or whether it is the radical resistance theorists who use him. Goldie's work is invaluable here but, as I shall suggest, the questions around the use of Lawson have been less than helpfully formulated.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, there is a sense in which at each stage of this study we have to start again, which is not to suggest any completeness about my argument. This is an exploratory study. Although I am able to add considerably to the little that has been known of Lawson's life, the biographical background – like the historiographical – remains sketchy and I suspect that the 'larger character' that Mr Millington's pen forbore to draw must await evidence now lost forever. In any case, my concern is predominantly with one work,

<sup>13</sup> W. J. Allen, *English Political Thought, 1603–44*, London, 1938. A second volume was intended to run through to 1660; Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, Cambridge University Press, 1978, vol. 2, p. 338; Mark Goldie, *Absolutismus, Parlamentarismus und Revolution in England, Handbuch der Politischen Ideen*, vol. 3, *Neuzeit von den Konfessionskriegen bis zur Aufklärung*, ed. I. Fetscher, Munich, 1985. One may now be legitimately surprised, especially given the subject matter, that Lawson's *Politica* rates only a passing footnote in C. C. Weston and J. R. Greenberg, *Subjects and Sovereigns*, Cambridge University Press, 1981, pp. 324–5, and a nod, via Franklin, p. 376.

<sup>14</sup> Mark Goldie, 'The Revolution of 1689 and the Structure of Political Argument', *Bulletin of Research in the Humanities*, 83 (1980), pp. 473ff; and 'The Roots of True Whiggism, 1688–94', in *History of Political Thought*, 1, 2 (1980), pp. 195ff. Richard Ashcraft, *Revolutionary Politics and Locke's Two Treatises of Government*, Princeton University Press, 1986, is the most recent and extreme example, predicated as it is so heavily on the search for 'radicals'. Lawson it seems, is too moderate to provide a useful context for Locke. So, although seeming to build upon Franklin's account, Ashcraft's rather distorting couple of pages on Lawson treats the *Politica* in the marginalising manner of Laslett. This is a pity as there is value in Ashcraft's antidote to Franklin and Maclean.

the *Politica sacra et civilis* of 1660 and 1689. It is this which justifiably has attracted attention as Lawson's most considered and sustained excursus into political theorising. Although formally incomplete (a second volume on administration was to follow), it stands, overall, as a rigorously yet simply argued and acutely perceptive, view of the principles of politics in church and state – especially as they were taken to apply to England and its great upheavals. As such it is difficult to see why it has not attracted more attention, notwithstanding the riches of seventeenth-century political writing. Even here, my own text, like Lawson's, cannot pretend to completeness, that is always fugitive in the history of ideas.

This then is a critical introduction to Lawson's work, through which I aim at some renegotiation of the character and significance of seventeenth-century political thought in general. Immediately, I hope to make Lawson's political thought intelligible; to reveal the problems it seems most designed to confront, the strategies of argument it displays, and the presuppositions which help to make it coherent. Thereafter, I look at its fate in the hands of others in the final stages of the English Revolution. Again the argument is partial, this is because the account I offer is illustrative of what I take to be broader patterns of textual employment, and because those thinkers I discuss are themselves left very incomplete by my concentrating on the fate of the *Politica* through them.

Throughout I assume little knowledge of Lawson but much of the seventeenth century. At every stage of the argument I hope that not only will a more carefully stitched cloth emerge, but also that there will be some partial unstitching of the established ways of weaving images of past texts. Perhaps the whole fabric of the English Revolution and that elusive but richly worked thread of the rise of modern political thought might be re-assessed through Lawson's *Politica*. In this respect, a work laid down in time and relatively neglected has advantages of manageability over those monstrous yardages that have been trodden time and again into the scholarly mud.

The place to start is not with the cloth, but with the needle in the haystack, with the life of the man who wrote the book that books are yet to be written about.