
Selections from *The History of England* (1763–83)

Introduction to the Text

Macaulay's *History of England* treats the period from the accession of James I in 1603 to the Glorious Revolution which removed his grandson James II from power in 1688–9. It was published in eight volumes between 1763 and 1783. The first volume is dated 1763, the second 1765, the third 1767, the fourth 1768, the fifth 1771, the sixth and seventh 1781 and the eighth 1783. The first five volumes appeared in three editions, and the last three in only one edition. The present selections are drawn from the first editions of all the volumes. During the long gap between volumes five and six, Macaulay wrote political pamphlets and one volume of contemporary history. The title of the first five volumes – *The History of England from the Accession of James I to That of the Brunswick Line* – indicates that the narrative was originally meant to continue until the Hanoverian succession in 1714. Instead, she treated this part of the history in her separate *History since the Revolution* (see below). For volumes six, seven and eight, the title was changed to *The History of England from the Accession of James I to the Revolution*. The present edition includes selections from Macaulay's introductions and prefaces emphasising her intentions, some of the analytic chapters that place her narrative in larger social and intellectual contexts, her engagement with political ideas such as those of the Levellers, key set pieces including Charles I's execution and Algernon Sidney's trial, and the conclusion to the entire work.

The political orientation of the *History* was evident from the start. The preface to the first volume was followed by 'Address to Liberty' by the Scottish poet and playwright James Thomson (1700–48), who had belonged to the literary opposition to Robert Walpole's 'Court Whigs'

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earlier in the eighteenth century. While she defended the regicide of Charles I, unlike her friend Hollis she was not an admirer of Oliver Cromwell, whom she believed ‘deprived his country of a full and equal system of Liberty, at the very instant of fruition’ (v, p. [213]). With her *History*, Macaulay wanted to show that even though the triumph of liberty in the seventeenth century was short-lived, its achievements were vast and worthy of emulation. The English revolution was principally a revolution in political theory, which had resulted in ‘[t]he works of Nevil, Sydney, and Harrington . . . which excel[led] even the antient classics on the science of policy’ (v, p. [383]). One of the conspicuous aspects of Macaulay’s *History* is indeed that it is a history of political arguments, with reference to specific works and pamphlets, to a far greater extent than any other history of England written in the same period.

Macaulay’s *History* quickly became a sensation on both sides of the Atlantic, and eventually also in France. Most reviews were serious and generous, even if some were bewildered by her sex and the boldness of her arguments. In any case, the work quickly earned Macaulay a reputation as a formidable historian, if a controversial one. John Adams described how his countrymen were smitten by her *History* along with the works of John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon, as well as those of Macaulay’s friend James Burgh, in the run up to the American Revolution. However, having originally been complimentary about the *History* in his correspondence with Macaulay, Adams later presented his own political writings as written against ‘the erroneous opinions of government’ propagated by Macaulay, Paine, Burgh and Turgot, probably with reference to their anti-aristocratic biases.¹

Horace Walpole was initially ecstatic about the work, calling it ‘the most sensible, unaffected and best history of England that we have had yet’.² Later, however, he remarked that its weakness was that Macaulay seemed to have thought that ‘men have acted from no views but those of establishing a despotism or republic’.³ In other words, she imputed everything to political motivations and left little room for the influence

¹ Adams to Price, 20 May 1789, in *The Works of John Adams* (10 vols., Boston, 1856), ix, p. 558.

² *The Letters of Horace Walpole*, ed. Peter Cunningham (9 vols., London, 1886), iv, p. 157.

³ Horace Walpole, *Memoirs and Portraits*, ed. Matthew Hodgart (rev. ed., London, 1963), p. 189.

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of passions, weaknesses, errors, prejudices and chance. Though this criticism was exaggerated, it is true that Macaulay intended to celebrate the heroic deeds of specific individuals. This is notable in her vindication of the character of Algernon Sidney, who was executed in 1683 for plotting against the king. She defended Sidney at a time when new evidence emerged from the French archives, presented by the Scottish historian Sir John Dalrymple in 1773 in the second volume of his *Memoirs of Great Britain and Ireland*. This evidence had shown that Sidney may have been offered and even taken money from the French court earlier in his career. Rather than disputing the evidence, Macaulay argued that if Sidney had taken the money it would not have been corruption since he would have done so in order to advance the cause of liberty. In this context, Macaulay attacked moral scepticism under the heading of modern ‘levelling’, that is to say, the notion that all human beings were equally corruptible and governed by their passions – ideas she associated with Hume.

The conclusion to the final volume of Macaulay’s *History* must be read in the context of the movement for parliamentary reform in the 1780s. This cause was for a few years championed by William Pitt the Younger in Parliament, and outside by Christopher Wyvill and the Yorkshire Association Movement, as well as by Macaulay’s brother and friends in the Society for Constitutional Information. Conspicuous here is Macaulay’s indictment of the legacy of the Glorious Revolution, which she believed, in a Bolingbrokean manner, had opened the floodgates to corruption. Though Macaulay is primarily known as an anti-monarchical republican, she may at one point have hoped, like her friends Hollis and Burgh, that the accession of George III would bring an end to corruption and partisanship. This is suggested by her reference to Bolingbroke’s *Idea of a Patriot King* (1738). Her positive citations from and allusions to Bolingbroke in the *History* show that she distinguished between his political writings, which were fundamental for her political circle, and his sceptical religious and philosophical writings, which she despised.