

## CATHARINE MACAULAY: HISTORIAN AND POLITICAL REFORMER

FLORENCE BOOS  
and WILLIAM BOOS

### ABSTRACT

*Catharine Macaulay was an eighteenth-century radical Whig intellectual, the first woman to write an extended history of England, and a pioneering advocate of sexual egalitarianism and coeducation for women. Her defense of republicanism and constitutionalism in her History of England and other writings significantly influenced English and French pre-revolutionary thought in the 1760's and 70's, and her pioneering feminism in the Letters was a major source for Wollstonecraft, who wrote that "The very word respect brings Mrs. Macaulay to my remembrance. The woman of the greatest abilities, undoubtedly, that this country has ever produced."*

### BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Catharine Macaulay was a prominent eighteenth-century British defender of Enlightened republican views, the first woman to write an extended history of England, and perhaps the first British woman to spend her adult life in public political controversy. Unusually well-read in history, theology, and philosophy, she was a fervent polemicist on many subjects - taxation, copyright, education, divine benevolence, the French and American Revolutions, constitutional rights, and the subjection of women. Before 1760 few educated women hoped for change in the state of women's legal and domestic submission, or opportunity to influence public opinion on political issues. (1) Catharine Macaulay became one of the first exemplars of an important career for women in the next century: that of polemicist and social reformer.

Catharine Sawbridge was born in 1731 in a wealthy country family near Canterbury. Her father, John Sawbridge, was a recluse and anti-monarchist who had married the daughter of a wealthy London banker; her mother, Elizabeth Wanley Sawbridge, died soon after bearing her four children, when Catharine was still an infant. Virtually nothing is known of her upbringing; a friend who knew her in the 1770's reported that John Sawbridge seldom visited his children, and refused to provide tutors for his two daughters; (2) the *Dictionary of National Biography* reports only that at her father's wish she was "privately educated," an expression which could refer to almost any degree of training or neglect. It is possible that the elaborately schematized program of private co-education which Macaulay later advocated actually represented the form of education she would have liked to receive, but did not. She was however permitted the use of her father's library, and absorbed there the love of classical history and passion for reform which were to direct her life. Her writings reveal a good knowledge of Latin, eighteenth-century French and English literature, some interest in earlier literature (Shakespeare,

so  
ge  
of  
on  
as

hag (she was in fact rather handsome), given to excessive ostentation and use of cosmetics (conventional for both upper-class women and men), and a neglectful mother (no evidence). The double affront of intellectual woman and reforming Whig seems to have been peculiarly infuriating to Macaulay's opponents, among them David Hume and the writer, lexicographer, and conversationalist Samuel Johnson, whose opinion of Macaulay in 1776 Boswell recorded as follows:

by  
by

It having been mentioned, I know not with what truth, that a certain female political writer [Macaulay] whose doctrines he disliked had of late become very fond of dress, sat hours together at her toilet and even put on rouge: -

Johnson: She is better employed at her toilet than using her pen. It is better she should be reddening her own cheeks than blackening other people's character. (6)

s-  
er  
id  
e,  
y.  
in  
e

Earlier Boswell had patronized Macaulay with the remark that after a "very cordial, polite meeting" with her on legal matters, "She gave me a good breakfast, like any other woman." (7) The most frequently recounted anecdote about Macaulay, however, reverberates with the biases of all concerned: Johnson's proud narration of his 'refutation' of her views.

ir  
of  
st  
n  
d  
d  
y  
d  
ss  
is  
o  
h  
li  
d  
a  
d

He again insisted on the duty of maintaining subordination of rank. 'Sir, I would no more deprive a nobleman of his respect, than of his money. . . . Sir, there is one Mrs. Macaulay in this town, a great republican. One day when I was at her house, I put on a very grave countenance, and said to her, "Ma'am, I am now become a convert to your way of thinking. I am convinced that all mankind are upon an equal footing; and to give you an unquestionable proof, Madam, that I am in earnest, here is a very sensible, civil, well-behaved fellow-citizen, your footman. I desire that he may be allowed to sit down and dine with us." I thus, Sir, shewed her the absurdity of the levelling doctrine. She has never liked me since. (8)

Johnson's biographers do not record her response, so to what extent Johnson "shewed her the absurdity of the levelling doctrine" is left to the reader's imagination. It is of course true that she advocated abolition of aristocratic wealth and privilege but was no Digger. Her "equality" offered little hope to the nineteen out of twenty British subjects who were illiterate and impoverished. (9)

rr  
rr  
d

An oblique answer to Johnson may nevertheless have been provided by her second marriage in 1778 to William Graham, a twenty-one year old surgeon's mate without rank or wealth. Almost all who knew her were scandalized and affronted by this union, and it virtually ruined her public career. Only the American Mercy Otis Warren made the obvious defense in a letter to John Adams:

even whole volumes, are dramatic in themselves, but repetition numbs, and the reader is soon convinced that monarchy is often oppressive and ruinous.

Nevertheless the *History* is an impressive work. Macaulay blends overwhelming documentation with vigorous argument, and the fluent periods of her style adjust skillfully to shifts in topic and fortune. Her prose is precise and impassioned, and she enters past controversies with a carefully differentiated sense of administrative and legal reality. Macaulay's *History* is essentially a moral allegory, which often convinces by its persistent acuity and narrative skill. She is good at recording ironies: that the Presbyterian faction which repressed Independent opposition to the restoration of Charles II was ruthlessly destroyed by Charles in turn; or that the open and stolidly consistent behavior of James II, not the more extravagant and personally vindictive policies of his brother, brought ruin to the Stuarts. She finds it especially bitter that Parliament ceded to William of Orange at the peak of its power rights denied his predecessors in sixty years of struggle. She also condemns Cromwell's betrayal of the democratic impulses that had helped create him:

He deprived his country of a full and equal system of liberty, at the very instant of fruition. . . . and, by a fatal concurrence of circumstances, was enabled to obstruct more good and occasion more evil than has been the lot of any other individual. (V, 213-14)

She is adept at portrayal of courageous victims of repression - Algernon, Sidney, Henry Vane, John Hampden, Robert Greville, and members of the Long Parliament - and her sympathy for those who face pain and death crosses ideological and confessional lines. She is angered when Quakers are forced to submit to oaths, Millenarians and Covenanters shot by royal soldiers, and Levellers destroyed by Cromwell; in general she sees small evangelical groups as heroic, if unwise, victims of their more propertied and sophisticated opposition. She is respectful of Charles I's conduct on the scaffold, but no more distressed by royal than other execution, and her portrait of James II as a weak but suffering man evokes unexpected sympathy. She contemns the petty viciousness of the captors of the Duke of Monmouth:

. . . he trembled, fainted, and burst into tears; circumstances calculated to extract sympathy from beings liable to similar imperfections, and similar misfortunes, but which served as matters of insolent triumph to the bitterness of faction, who had the meanness to insult over the transient weakness of a man harassed with terror and vexation, and who had not slept for three nights, nor tasted food for three days. (VIII, 99)

She also condemns Charles II for raising the price of food for the poor by prohibiting importation of Irish cattle, and expresses disgust at praise for the Duke of Albermarle's willingness to blow up his ship rather than surrender, accurately noting that "an idea of military honour . . . can exist in an individual, without the association of any other principle of honour . . ." (VI, 200). She is an opponent of nascent British imperialism,

7

interest, and that all ranks would unite in the laudable and generous attempt of "fixing dominion's limits to its proper end" of realizing all those advantages in our mixed form of government, which experience has found to be only theoretical . . . This, without any unconstitutional design, or any wild enthusiastic hope of being able to influence the minds of a nation in favour of a democratic form of government, . . . is the grand aim of my writings . . ." (VI, vii)

Later, she suggests that England's political liberties in the 1760's are more abridged than under the Stuarts - a century of history wasted in impasse - and the final remarks of volume eight contemplate revolution:

. . . our large armies on the continent, our numerous subsidies to German princes, and the corruptions which prevailed through the whole system of administration, whilst they have filled the pockets of needy contractors, and swelled to an enormous height the lucrative appendages to office, oppressed the nation with such an additional burden of taxes and debt, as to forbid hopes of salvation, but from a circumstance so out of the ordinary course of sublunary affairs as to render it a perfect miracle in political history, viz. a patriot king and a patriot ministry co-operating with the body of the people to throw off the shackles of septennial parliaments, to reinstate the people in their constitutional right of election, and, by this means, to introduce such a rigid plan of economy, as may, in a process of time, in a great measure, restore the wasted finances of the country. (VIII, 335-36)

In summary, Macaulay's *History* was the first comprehensive anti-royalist history of its time, and by far the most detailed vindication of English opposition and dissent. With great skill, she succeeded in integrating millions of facts into an interesting and coherent narrative; much of her material was new to her audience, and the forthrightness with which she set forth her biases was exemplary. Documents are usually permitted to speak for themselves, and obvious interpretation acknowledged. The work's emphasis on individual character inevitably simplifies history, but she exhibits an unusual ability to grasp the human meaning of complex and painful facts. Often when she is homiletic, as with such figures as Charles II and Cromwell, her sense of justice and judgments have been largely confirmed by subsequent historians. Her revisionist *History* provided an alternative both to the narrowly sectarian religious accounts of the previous century and to more accepted royalist histories, and was an important achievement in eighteenth century historiography and political thought.

The most radical and original feature of this scheme is its demand for coeducation. The *Letters* contained the most comprehensive analysis thus far of the crushing legal, social, intellectual, and moral disability of women of all classes:

For with a total and absolute exclusion of every political right to the sex in general, married women, whose situation demand [sic] a particular indulgence, have hardly a civil right to save them from the grossest injuries. . . . (p. 210)

She was also very likely the first writer in western cultural history to draw up a sustained indictment of the assumption that there are innate sexual differences. Timidity and inanity, alleged as evidence of women's incapacity for education, simply reflect its denial:

. . . all those vices and imperfections which have been generally regarded as inseparable from the female character, do not in any manner proceed from sexual causes, but are entirely the effects of situation and education. (p. 202)

A 'separate-but-equal' education must be rejected. Mingling the sexes works against prudery, and helps make it clear to male children that their sisters are their equals:

Your sons will look for something more solid in women, than a mere outside; and be no longer the dupes to the meanest, the weakest, and the most profligate of the sex. They will become the constant benefactors of that part of their family who stand in need of their assistance; and in regard to all matters of domestic concern, the unjust distinction of primogeniture will be deprived of its sting. (p. 50)

Perhaps her lifelong friendship with her brother seemed to her a model of enlightened contrast to such "unjust distinction[s]."

Macaulay begins Part II of the *Letters on Education* with an interpretive summary of past cultures. Opposed to aristocratic indulgence and waste, she uncritically accepts other distinctions of rank and wealth: the "bulk of people" need an education to prevent injurious behavior, but "the great and opulent," the "higher class of citizens" (p. 237) must be educated so that they may set a good example and frame just laws. An oblique virtue of her class-bias is the refusal to patronize the "*sauvagerie*" then fashionable in reforming circles; she is immune to arguments such as Rousseau's that peasants digest food more rapidly than their masters, and 'savages' lead lives free of demanding labor or significant occupation.

In Whig-reformist juxtaposition to this unconscious elitism are the many sincere professions of belief in human equality. She derides philosophical attempts to rank varieties of human beauty or habitation, and castigates racist notions of merit and beauty:

Dr. King's treatise, *De Origine Mali*, (1702) was translated into English as *An Essay on the Origin of Evil* . . . (1731). In it King attempted to reconcile evil with the alleged omnipotence and benevolence of the deity; a fifth edition of the translation had appeared in 1781, so it was evidently an influential work. Bolingbroke's *Fragments or Minutes of Essays* had been published posthumously in 1754, and an edition followed in 1777. Macaulay saw King as a chief source for Bolingbroke, and the latter in turn as one of orthodoxy's most powerful and dangerous opponents (pp. 360-61). She asserted that Pope's "Essay on Man" derived from Bolingbroke's arguments, an assumption which stood for many years until recently refuted by Maynard Mack. (19)

In *The Great Chain of Being*, Arthur Lovejoy trenchantly comments on the bizarre interpretations given to principles of plenitude and continuity by King and other necessitarian optimists of the period, and ironically compares King's optimism with early Buddhist pessimism. (20) No one who has read Parts I and II of *Letters on Education* will doubt that Macaulay was deeply stirred by a perception of the suffering and cruelty of sentient life. Her arguments against King's smug acceptance of evil are the more impassionate and bitter for their own disquiet. Part I opens with an aggressive attack on human cruelty, conceit, and the refined selfishness of philosophers who admire the brutality of nature from the detachment of their writing desks:

. . . it raises in me a mixed sentiment of contempt and anger, to hear the vain and contradictory creature, man . . . dealing out a severe and short mortality to the various tribes of his fellow animals, and assigning to himself an eternity of happiness, beyond even the reach of his imagination. (p. 2)

In Part I she also urges restricted consumption of meat and the invention of less brutal methods of slaughter.

If brutes were to draw a character of man, . . . do you think they would call him a benevolent being? No, their representations would be somewhat of the same kind as the fabled furies and other infernals in ancient mythology. Fortunately, for the reputation of the species, the brutes can neither talk nor write . . . (p. 121)

If humans are destined for immortal life, she argues, why not animals? Does 'reason' count for all that?

She argues further in Part I that children should have the opportunity to practice kindness on animals, for remembrance of benevolent actions provides "a kind of store, on which the mind feeds, when in want of consolation from the pressure of present pain" (p. 124). Later she asserts that young people should be warned of human deception, greed, and savagery, in language whose pessimism does not fall far short of Hobbes':

Macaulay deserves sympathy for the enormity of her task, and her discussion of the problem of evil embodies most of the ambiguities and difficulties of Enlightened theism; some defenses are anguished, others evasive, and still others vigorous and ingenious. She coolly observes and describes many aspects of a vicious social order and yearns for a hypostatistically rational and benevolent Being to right them, but refuses to accept that this can be the capricious demiurge of King and Bolingbroke. Her rhetorical phrases about the goodness of creation are dutiful and sincere, but her pleas for the necessity of benevolence against the horrors of existence more intensely felt. Such controlled distress makes this obscure pedagogical-theological treatise by a troubled and discerning woman at times a strongly moving document. Catharine Macaulay failed to find answers to the familiar question:

How came the beneficent giver of so many rich and valuable gifts, to suffer mental and bodily disease? how came he to suffer guilt, remorse, and all the numerous train of evils which accompany sin and death, thus to deform his works? (p. 338)

Her quest was obviously foredoomed to fail, but not for want of restless energy and discursive intelligence in the search. Macaulay was a cogent moralist, and her indignation at human perversity was compassionate, immediate, and precise. Her theism is an intense but idiosyncratic effort to reconcile Christian thought with Enlightened principles, and her remarkable fusion of pioneering feminism, 'Roman' virtue, cautious egalitarianism, and Russellian "kindly feelings" make *Letters on Education* a striking document of British intellectual history.

#### AN EVALUATION

Catharine Macaulay's position in the history of eighteenth century political and cultural life has never been adequately recognized. She remained a somewhat isolated figure in Enlightenment and radical thought, possibly in part because of her sex and feminist views, possibly because she died before she could confront the more dramatic events of the 1790's. Only one brief biographical sketch of her has appeared in the twentieth century, and this is vitiated by obvious distaste for both her principles and her writing. (22) Her *History of England* is a convincing and eloquent attempt to interpret a moral pattern within history, a work of striking sophistication by a virtually self-instructed woman, and her political, social, and theological views reveal both erudition and an ability to apply it to contemporary issues. Her political interests and reforming spirit distinguish her from most scholars and 'Bluestockings' of the period such as Elizabeth Carter, Elizabeth Montague, and Hannah More, (23) and from all but a few of the many women writers of gothic and sentimental fiction. All political activity was closed to her, but her scholarly defense of republicanism and constitutional liberties did significantly affect English radical and pre-French revolutionary thought in the 1760's and 70's.

As a major influence on Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and exemplar for Wollstonecraft's career as a radical woman polemicist, Macaulay was

has edited a short anthology, *The Political Writings of Dr. Johnson, A Selection* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1968).

(10) Quoted in Lucy Martin Donnelly, "The Celebrated Mrs. Macaulay," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 6 (1949), 189.

(11) The only discussions of Macaulay's *History* since the eighteenth century are in Donnelly, and Lynne E. Withey, "Catharine Macaulay and the Uses of History: Ancient Rights, Perfectionism, and Propaganda," *Journal of British Studies* (Fall, 1976), 59-83. For comments on Donnelly see note 22. Withey's article attempts to characterize attitudes toward history which recur in several of Macaulay's works.

(12) *The History of Great Britain*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Hamilton, Balfour, and Neill, 1754, 57).

(13) Edward Hyde, 1st Earl of Clarendon, *The History of the Rebellion and Civil Wars in England, begun in 1641, with the precedent passages and actions that contributed thereto and the happy end and conclusion thereof by the King's blessed restoration . . .*, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1704).

(14) *An Account of the Growth of Popery and Arbitrary Government in England*. More particularly from the long prorogation, of November, 1675, ending the 15th. of February 1676, till the last meeting of Parliament, the 16th. of July 1677. Amsterdam, 1677.

(15) For a further discussion of Macaulay's influence on Wollstonecraft, see Florence S. Boos, "Catharine Macaulay's *Letters on Education* (1790): An Early Feminist Polemic," *University of Michigan Papers in Women's Studies* 2, 2 (1976), 64-78.

(16) Page numbers in parentheses are to *Letters on Education* (London: C. Dilly, 1790). Unavailable since 1790, the *Letters* were finally reprinted in 1974 (intro. by Gina Luria, New York and London: Garland Press).

(17) The incident is recorded in Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, ed. George B. Hill (Oxford, 1934), vol. iii, p. 200. For a summary of Johnson's views on slavery, see also vol. ii, "Appendix A," pp. 476-77.

(18) William King (1650-1729), Archbishop of Dublin, was also the author of *State of the Protestants in Ireland under the late King James's Government* (1691).

(19) Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man*, ed. Maynard Mack (London: Methuen, 1950), xxvi-xxxi.

(20) *The Great Chain of Being: A Study in the History of an Idea* (1933; rpt. New York: Harper and Row, 1960), pp. 216-19.

(21) *The Great Chain of Being*, p. 220. Samuel Johnson's critique of another theodicy, Soames Jenyns' *A Free Inquiry Into the Nature and Origin of Evil* (1757), is reprinted in Mona Wilson, *Johnson: Prose and Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1967), 349-74.

(22) Donnelly's "The Celebrated Mrs. Macaulay," collects an interesting array of references to Macaulay in contemporary memoirs and letters, but her tone is intrusively belittling throughout, and she accepts prejudices of Macaulay's critics with no discount for male condescension or political bias. For example, she quotes John Adams:

Adams none the less knew her learning to be superficial and her views "extremely mistaken of the true construction of government." In a letter of 1789 to Dr. Price, Adams named her history among "the ill informed favorites" which set their country "running wild and into danger from a too ardent and inconsiderate pursuit of erroneous opinion of government." (p. 194)

A more conservative thinker, Adams might well have disagreed with a radical Whig, "superficial" or not. Donnelly's apparent distaste for didactic, political, and religious literature also causes her to condemn Macaulay's moral argumentation out of hand:

Mrs. Macaulay's *Immutability of Moral Truth* as a whole is, frankly, without merit - the ideas "borrowed," the arguments "confused," the style "embarrassed." She, however, set great store by it . . . (p. 192).