

THE ENGLISH REVOLUTION IN THE 18TH CENTURY:
CATHARINE MACAULAY*

Bridget Hill

There is nothing new in the idea that memories of the English revolution remained alive during the eighteenth-century - at least among the Real Whigs, or, as Caroline Robbins named them over thirty years ago, "the eighteenth-century Commonwealthmen". Real Whigs were mainly but certainly not exclusively dissenters - of a variety of beliefs and sects - who saw themselves as the descendants of Commonwealthmen of the seventeenth century. The difficulty of defining such a group is that no common religious opinions united them other than a toleration and openmindedness about the beliefs held by others - with, of course, the one exception of Roman Catholics. But their belief in freedom of conscience if motivated by religion, had social implications and led straight towards the idea of natural rights. The memory of the sufferings of their forebears remained vividly present. They were familiar not only with the history of the English Revolution but with its writings - more particularly the work of Milton, Marvell, Harrington, Ludlow, Sidney. If it is difficult to define the Real Whigs with any exactitude, this was not a difficulty shared by their enemies, who continued to identify them with events of the 1640s and "remembered and condemned [them] as sectaries and King -killers". In 1799 the *Anti-jacobin* wrote how the "descendants of the Puritans are still found among us in great numbers. They retain the same principles which in England and America have produced so much disturbance; they have come, by their offspring and their seminaries, to transmit those principles to their posterity, and they have with few exceptions admired, extolled, even encouraged and promoted to the utmost of their power, the French Revolution because it was founded on their principles".

Catharine Macaulay certainly identified with Real Whigs. But like some others of the group - Theophilus Lindsey and John Disney for example -she was born within the Established church, and, unlike them, remained within it all her life. Yet many of her closest friends and acquaintances were drawn from dissenting members of this group, among whom she moved in the 1760s and '70s. Among those most influencing her were James Burgh, Obadiah Hulme and more particularly Thomas Hollis -perhaps the most under-estimated of all the Real Whigs. If, in the last half of the eighteenth-century there is evidence among both Real Whigs and Wilkite Radicals of considerable familiarity with seventeenth century texts, it was in no small part due to the work of Hollis in rescuing many from obscurity and often reprinting them at his own expense. It was due to him that excerpts from such texts were frequently printed in the London press, more particularly the *London Chronicle* and the *St. James's Chronicle*. It was due in large part to him that Catharine Macaulay could write a republican history of the English Revolution, for she was indebted to Hollis for at

* Editor's note: This text is the paper as delivered during the Symposium; it is therefore without notes. The attribution of quoted passages is, in any case, clear from the context.

least 175 tracts chiefly written during the civil wars. What she certainly shared with Hollis and other Real Whigs was a passionate belief in the importance of keeping the memory of the English Revolution alive. This was the main objective of her *History*.

Her choice of the seventeenth century as the subject of the eight volume *History* covering the period 1603-1688, which she wrote between 1763 and 1783 was quite deliberate. She wished, she wrote "to do Justice to the memory of our illustrious ancestors". Many had forgotten she wrote, that the privileges they enjoyed as compared with their forefathers, had had to be fought for by men, that with the hazard and even the loss, of their lives, attacked the formidable pretensions of the Stuart family and set up the banners of liberty against a tyranny which had been established for more than one hundred and fifty years.

Underlying much that she wrote there was the assumption shared by so many eighteenth-century radicals, of the theory of the Norman Yoke. So, for instance, she saw the civil war as having "overturned the tyranny settled by the Norman invader".

She was far from being the first historian in the eighteenth century to focus on an analysis of the years of the English Revolution. There had been others among both Tories and Whigs long before either she or Hume came on the scene. Acknowledged as by far the best among those seen as Whig historians was Rapin's *Histoire d'Angleterre* translated into English between 1723 and 1732. Catharine Macaulay frequently used the work along with that of James Ralph (1705?-1762) and the Scot, William Guthrie (1708-1770) - both committed Whig historians whose work she described as abounding "with very just remarks and pertinent reflections". When her first volume appeared, it was greeted enthusiastically by Whigs as a timely answer to what was seen as Hume's Tory interpretation. But it would be wrong to see Catharine Macaulay's work merely as Whig history. It was the first republican history of the seventeenth century and was based on scholarly research and an extensive knowledge of hitherto unused tracts of the 1640s and 50s. As her *History* proceeded, its republicanism became increasingly clear. It was her fourth volume that provoked the greatest criticism, for it dealt with the late 1640s and more particularly with the execution of Charles I.

The partisans of liberty - she wrote - applauded his fate... neither the laws of God nor nature were against the people laying aside Kings and Kingly government, and the adopting more convenient forms.

It was here for the first time she talked of the rise of the republicans, few though there were of them "who looked forward to the reformation of the principles, as well as to the executive part, of the government". The Commonwealth, under which "the nation had arrived at its meridian of glory" had been "the brightest age that ever adorned the page of history".

The Real Whigs in the 1760s and 70s were responsible for many political pamphlets and other writings; they actively promoted a propaganda campaign to familiarise their countrymen with the grievances of the American colonists; they were on the whole sympathetic to Wilkes - although many deplored his morals - but they were not actively involved in practical politics. Catharine Macaulay was almost unique in

moving between the two groups and being as active a Wilkite as it was possible for any woman to be. She was a friend of Wilkes who thought her a "noble English historian who does so great an honour to her own sex, and ought to cover ours with blushes". In the enthusiastic support and financial aid given by London radicals to the Corsican exile, General Pasquale Paoli, she played a leading role. In a *Short Sketch of a Democratical Form of Government* (1769) she outlined what she saw as the essential ingredients of a democratic republic. It owed much to James Harrington's *Commonwealth of Oceana*.

Catharine Macaulay's conviction that the history of the English revolution and its aftermath was of direct relevance to her own time was shared by many radicals. Indeed it is difficult to understand eighteenth-century radical politics without a knowledge of the seventeenth century. Analogies were constantly being drawn between the politics of the 1760s and 70s and those of the period before the civil war. As long ago as 1959, Elizabeth Wilson has reminded us; Dorothy George, in her survey of political caricature of the period, showed how often Wilkes was depicted in the company of Hampden and Sidney. When Wilkes was expelled from the House of Commons it was described by the City of London as an illegal act "more ruinous in consequences than the levying of ship money by Charles I or the dispensing power exercised by James II". Wilkes's imprisonment was, like Hampden's opposition to ship money in 1637, an "intrepid stand against the prerogative of the Court".

Much of the political debate of Catharine Macaulay's time was concerned with conflicting interpretations of the events of the preceding century. Indeed it could be said that what separates the radicalism of Wilkes from that of the country party was their very different attitudes to history and more particularly their interpretations of the revolution of 1688/9. In this conflict I believe Catharine Macaulay played a crucial role in shaping radical ideas. As early as 1770, in her answer to *Burke's Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents* she had made clear that in her view the origins of "the present discontents" lay in the "system of corruption" that "began at the very period of the Revolution". Parliament, after having had "a controlling power over the executive parts of government, became a mere instrument of regal administration". The fault lay with those "who called themselves Whigs, but who in reality were as much the destructive, though concealed, enemies of public liberty as the Tories". Burke thought there was nothing fundamentally wrong with the constitution. The Revolution of 1688 had guaranteed its perfections. There was therefore no need for parliamentary reform. Rejecting the whole idea of the "Glorious Revolution", Catharine Macaulay's answer was shorter parliaments, a system of rotation of offices, a place bill, and "a more extended and equal power of election" - a program not so far removed from that of the later Six Points of the Chartists. It signalled the emergence of a thorough-going program of parliamentary reform elaborated by, among many others, James Burgh, John Jebb and Major John Cartwright. She went on to echo the London radicals' insistence that unless parliamentary representatives were held to "some political promises of real public service" they would continue planning "schemes of private emolument and private ambition". Catharine Macaulay, Robert Zaller has written, with other Wilkite radicals of like mind, "had to debunk the received interpretation of the Glorious Revolution before they could challenge the system created on it; they had to overcome 1688 before they could recover 1640".

It was not only English radicals and Real Whigs who drew analogies between present politics and the events of the seventeenth century. Increasingly from mid-century similar analogies were being made by Americans - many of whom were later to play a leading role in the American revolution. Nor is this surprising given the common dissenting background many New England settlers shared with English Real Whigs and the strong links maintained with the country their forebears had fled. They shared what Pauline Maier has called "a characteristic Commonwealthman view of English history as expounded... by Catharine Macaulay". Catharine Macaulay's *History* was familiar to many Americans, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, George Washington, Josiah Quincy, Benjamin Rush, Richard Henry Lee, Mercy Warren and Ezra Stiles were among its many admirers. In terms of some of the leading figures in the American Revolution it is not an unimpressive list. They were equally familiar with seventeenth-century writers. Many in the early stages of confrontation, when few Americans would have even considered a break with England, would have fully endorsed the view of the revolution of 1688-9 of English Whiggery. But, as grievances accumulated, not only did they come to see in America in term of English seventeenth-century experience - closely identifying with the Wilkes campaign in the belief that in parliamentary reform lay the solution not only to England's problems but to their own - but slowly their view of the English constitution changed. Catharine Macaulay's *History* served as a timely reminder to them of the forms tyranny and oppression had taken earlier and led them to see parallels in their own experience. Much of the language used in the pre-Revolution period is that of the seventeenth century; John Adams in 1765, for example, could rejoice that increasing oppression might provide the opportunity for Americans to become "Hampdens, Vanes, Seldens, Miltons, Nedhams, Harringtons, Sidneys, Lockes". In 1768 Andrew Eliot wrote to Thomas Hollis how Americans had "everything to fear and scarce any room to hope", adding, "I am sure this will put you in mind of 1641". The Quebec Act, it was said "went beyond anything either Charles I or James II had attempted". During the Stamp Act crisis Andrew Eliot wrote how he lamented there were "no similar examples from former Times". It is not difficult to see why Catharine Macaulay's *History* seemed so relevant to their situation.

If the American colonists learnt something from Catharine Macaulay's *History*, they may also have been influenced by her political polemic particularly her answer to Burke's *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents* of 1770. In England it took time for her view of the 'Glorious Revolution' to be accepted and the implications acted upon. In the same way only slowly did Americans move to reject that Revolution and the constitution it had created. When finally they did so, a break was inevitable.

So Catharine Macaulay's version of the events of the seventeenth century not only had a shaping influence on English radicalism in the last three decades of the century but might also be seen as making a not unimportant contribution to the ideology of the American Revolution. Although far less well documented, there is also a case to be made for seeing Catharine Macaulay's *History* playing a similar role in France to that it played in England in the 1760s. It was a timely response to Hume's counter-revolutionary message and as such was to play a part in the revolutionary debate. Men like Mirabeau and Brissot de Warville were not only familiar with the *History* but fascinated by the parallels they saw in France to the events of the English

Revolution. Both expressed fear of the possible emergence of a French Cromwell. It is not insignificant perhaps that central to Catharine Macaulay's answer to Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* is her very different interpretation of the events of 1688/9.

The changing nature of English radicalism from the first impact of Wilkes to the end of the century, and the American and French revolutions were not isolated processes. They interacted, both influencing and being influenced by the others. But each - perhaps to a far greater extent than has so far been acknowledged - was influenced by the events of the English revolution. Throughout the eighteenth century memories of that revolution remained ever present. Catharine Macaulay can be seen as contributing something to keeping that memory so vividly alive.