**Liberty and Religion: Catharine Macaulay and the History of Republicanism and the Enlightenment**

Max Skjönsberg, University of Liverpool.

**Karen Green, ed., *The Correspondence of Catharine Macaulay.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019, 328** **pp., $64 (Hardback) ISBN 9780190934453.**

**Karen Green, *Catharine Macaulay’s Republican Enlightenment*. New York and London: Routledge, 2020, 276** **pp., $120 (Hardback) ISBN 9780367358976.**

**Rachel Hammersley, *Republicanism: An Introduction.* Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020, 276 pp., £17.99 (Paperback) ISBN 9781509513420**

There was a Macaulay’s History of England long before Lord Macaulay’s was heard of; and in its day a famous history it was.

R. Chambers, *The Book of Days* (2 vols., 1863-4).[[1]](#endnote-1)

Catharine Macaulay (1731-91) was one of the most read and influential historians and political writers in the second half of the eighteenth century. Her fame rested mainly on her eight-volume *History of England* (1763-83), covering the period from the accession of James I in 1603 to the Glorious Revolution in 1688-89. In justifying the regicide of Charles I, Macaulay broke new ground in historiography and presented a sharp contrast not only to David Hume’s subversively sceptical *History of England* (1754-61)*,* but to mainstream Whig history as well. While her writings are now only studied by specialists, they were widely read and celebrated in her day. In addition to history and politics, Macaulay also wrote about philosophy, religion, and education. Although her fame diminished in the years after her death, as Mary Wollstonecraft complained, her achievements earned her the praise of the nineteenth-century historian W. E. H. Lecky, who called her ‘the ablest writer of the New Radical School’.[[2]](#endnote-2)

As Caroline Robbins remarked in 1959: ‘[t]here was a certain detachment and independence in her commentary that entitles Mrs. Macaulay to more serious study than she normally provokes.’[[3]](#endnote-3) What remained true for a long time has begun to change.[[4]](#endnote-4) In her pathbreaking biography of Macaulay in 1992 – *The Republican Virago* – Bridget Hill lamented the lack of extant correspondence apart from that printed in miscellaneous collections. Shortly after the book’s publication, a collection of Macaulay’s letters became available at auction. Karen Green has now made these letters available, along with the previously published ones, in *The Correspondence of Catharine Macaulay*. This edition accompanies Green’s new intellectual biography, *Catharine Macaulay’s Republican Enlightenment*. In the book, Green stresses that Macaulay has all too often been marginalised in both political and intellectual histories of the eighteenth century (p. 211). She remarks that ‘[t]he first five volumes of Macaulay’s eight volumes of history played a central role in disseminating a broadly republican political agenda and a positive assessment of the English Commonwealth tradition to readers on both sides of the Atlantic’ (p. 2). Green’s two publications are a giant leap forward in scholarship on Macaulay.

Hill had hoped that additional correspondence would throw more light on Macaulay’s personal life. As Green acknowledges, however, this desire remains unfulfilled as yet, because the letters are almost entirely of a public kind, ‘written, in general, to politically engaged individuals, with whom Macaulay was interested in sharing her political and historical insights.’ (p. 29). While the letters are not entirely bereft of personal anecdotes, their public nature is, for intellectual and political historians, a gain rather than a loss. As Green argues, the letters ‘provide an illuminating snapshot of the preoccupations, debates, and personal relationships of an important segment of reformist Great Britain, during the second half of the eighteenth century.’ (pp. 28-9). This landscape included well-known names such as Thomas Hollis, James Burgh, John Wilkes, Horace Walpole, and Mary Wollstonecraft, as well as the somewhat lesser known but fascinating historian William Harris, the early abolitionist James Ramsay, and the pamphleteer Thomas Northcote. Her correspondents also included several intellectual giants outside of her political camp, including David Hume, James Boswell and Hannah More. In addition, she was in contact with many luminaries of the American Revolution: George Washington, Mercy Otis Warren, Benjamin Rush, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Abigail Adams, and others. Regrettably, there are some notable absences, including her brother and close political ally John Sawbridge, Richard Price and Joseph Priestley.

Macaulay’s correspondence treats topics such as the relationship between church and state, the chief events of the American Revolution and its aftermath, and the early history of the French Revolution. She used her letters to promote her books in both France and America. ‘It is my Lord, at present one of the warmest wishes of my heart to have my works translated into the French language’, she wrote in 1778 to George Simon, Earl Harcourt, who had many contacts in France (p. 84). A translation of the *History* appeared in French in 1791, although it was manipulated and given a monarchical slant as we learn from Green’s biography. The letters, moreover, confirm that Macaulay saw a connection between her politics, expressed in her historical works, and the American cause. Via Benjamin Rush, she sought to disseminate her *History* in pre-revolutionary America. The ‘general principles of the rights of mankind inculcated in my great work [her *History*]’ were more advantageous to ‘the cause of the Americans’ than more specific arguments, she claimed (p. 69). She further wrote to James Otis: ‘The principles on which I have written the History of the Stewart Monarchs are I flatter myself in some measure correspondent to those of the great Guardian of American Liberty.’ (p. 98).

In total, Green’s edition includes 217 letters, 82 of which are written by Macaulay. They are organised by correspondent rather than chronologically. In the case of some correspondents, the letters to Macaulay are greater in number, and sometimes longer, than those from her own pen. The most conspicuous example of this is that of her daughter Catharine Sophia Gregorie (1765-1821), whose letters to her mother take up forty pages. Macaulay’s side of the correspondence with her daughter has unfortunately not been found. Ezra Stiles’s four letters to Macaulay take up eleven pages, whereas all of her letters to him together amount to no more than one page. Most correspondents comment on her writings in detail. Indeed, an additional benefit is that Green’s edition not only sheds light on Macaulay but also on many members of her wider circle. Thus, we learn of Macaulay lending Burgh *A Collection of Scarce and Valuable Tracts,* collected by Lord Somers, ahead of the publication of his *Political Disquisitions* (3 vols., 1774) (p. 91).

A flavour of Macaulay’s political letter writing, and the spirit of her politics, can be gained in her description of a member of parliament in a letter to John Collett Ryland of August 1773, which resembles a draft pamphlet:

It is not a common character my friend to whom I would give my vote on the ensuing Election, no if there beget [*sic*] any means of salvation the sal­vation must be effected by men whose minds are exalted above the standard of common honest and vulgar sense. The man <sufficiently> Qualified for the im­portant business of Legislation must have a Heart Devoted to the public and a head equal to the understanding its true interests. He must not covet a seat in parliament (either for the purposes of selfishness or the Gratification of a vain idea of consequence) beyond the accomplishing that which in our present situa­tion is the only possible means of salvation. He must be ready to sacrifice the rise of his rent roll to <the> principles of justice and the Duties of Humanity. He must be capable of understanding the great Truth that every individual is interested <in the> prosperity of his fellow Citizens and that in a general sense the welfare of the Community at large and the interest of the individuals who compose it is intimately connected. He must condemn as a base imposition on the credulity and laziness of mankind every Distinction which does not arise from the com­parative degree of service an individual is enabled to perform to his Country. In short my friend to speak in the Style of those writings you are so particularly well acquainted <with>. He must be a man who has added to his wisdom Virtue, to his virtue knowledge, to his knowledge temperance, to his temperance charity, and to his Charity a Superlative love of God and his Country. (p. 189).

Green’s newly published edition of Macaulay’s correspondence allows us to understand the historian and political figure in her own terms as opposed to a representative of a supposedly coherent commonwealth or republican tradition as she has often been considered since the work of Caroline Robbins and J. G. A. Pocock.[[5]](#endnote-5) Her contextually rich intellectual biography is strengthened by her immersion in Macaulay’s correspondence and, for this reason alone, it offers a significant advancement on Hill’s pioneering study from 1992. *Catharine Macaulay’s Republican Enlightenment* presents a new interpretation of the historical and political significance of Macaulay’s political and moral thought. By emphasising Macaulay’s belief in human rightsand rational religion*,* Green argues that her writings ‘offer a partial corrective to the currently popular view, according to which eighteenth-century republicanism was a theory of non-domination, in the sense made popular by Philip Pettit.’ (p. 4).[[6]](#endnote-6) A similar concept is of course also associated with Quentin Skinner’s ‘neo-Roman liberty’: freedom from dependence on someone else’s will.[[7]](#endnote-7) Green notes that the theory of liberty as non-domination was espoused by eighteenth-century thinkers such as Sarah Chapone and Richard Price.[[8]](#endnote-8) However, the example of Macaulay illustrates, in Green’s view, that non-domination was neither the only nor the most important form of republicanism in the eighteenth century, and that positive liberty in the sense of moral self-determination was more salient.

While remaining within the Church of England, Macaulay was a religious freethinker and a Unitarian (*Correspondence,* p. 285). As Caroline Robbins reminded us long ago, freethinking and atheism were antithetical in the English reformist political tradition to which Macaulay belonged.[[9]](#endnote-9) In the conclusion, Green argues that Macaulay’s republicanism was grounded in ‘Christian eudaimonism’, combining the ancient view on the importance of virtue to a good life with Christian doctrine. She further claims that Macaulay’s ‘political providentialism fits in well with the popular mainstream understanding of the tendencies that caused the eighteenth century to be designated, “The Enlightenment”.’ (p. 210). Although much research has been done on religious Enlightenments in recent years,[[10]](#endnote-10) one can question if Macaulay’s gestures towards ‘Biblical millennialism’ would commonly be associated with ‘the popular mainstream understanding’ of ‘the Enlightenment’. But Green’s bigger point is noteworthy. Her question is indeed whether ‘the faith in reason, which Macaulay shared with her optimistic enlightenment friends, [can] be sustained independently of their belief in a benevolent, omnipotent, deity, who has supplied us with a faculty of reason suited to comprehending the moral structure of the universe?’ (p. 211). Without a philosophical justification for universal human rights of the kind Macaulay’s ‘Christian eudaimonism’ provided, it is hard to defend against utilitarianism and Humean scepticism, Green argues (pp. 214-5).

Green’s conception of Macaulay’s enlightenment is a deeply religious one, as Macaulay actively sought to blur the lines between the religious and the secular. This case study aims to refute Jonathan Israel’s argument that ‘political radicalism during the eighteenth century was “anchored in radical metaphysics denying all teleology and divine providence”’ (p. 212).[[11]](#endnote-11) By contrast, the case of Macaulay shows that the correlation between religious criticism and criticism of monarchy was frequently very weak in the eighteenth century. As a religious and moral thinker, Macaulay castigated the atheism of Hobbes, the deism of Bolingbroke, and the scepticism of Hume, all of whom, without being arch-royalists, were stronger defenders of monarchy than she was (pp. 152-63). Macaulay was convinced that the rise of irreligion and scepticism threatened moral motivation, arguing that Hobbes and Hume’s undermining of the notion that human beings are morally motivated creatures who participate in God’s goodness weakened beliefs that are necessary for the promotion of peace and prosperity, as well as salvation. If stripped of its theological basis, the difference between Macaulay and Hume is reduced to an empirical one: how is human nature best represented? (p. 218). Macaulay did not wish to enter into any such discussion without the aid of Christianity. As Green further demonstrates, Macaulay’s ‘enlightenment faith’ and ‘rational religion’ were indebted to her reading of John Locke, for whom, in the words of John Dunn, ‘Rational action was tied logically to the strenuous discharge of a series of duties to God’ (p. 224).[[12]](#endnote-12)

This religious background was a decisive element of Macaulay’s views on women.[[13]](#endnote-13) Green’s book emphasises the closeness between Macaulay and Mary Wollstonecraft in this regard. It begins with the young Wollstonecraft paying her respects to Macaulay by sending her *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* in 1790. Importantly, they both believed that God had created men and women as sociable and moral creatures, who can and ought to perfect themselves as moral beings. Much of Macaulay’s critique of gender roles, education and societal norms generally in her *Letters on Education* (1790), reviewed favourably by Wollstonecraft in the *Analytical Review*, were echoed in Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), with some important modifications. Green argues that Macaulay, similarly to Wollstonecraft, can help us question the critique of ‘liberal feminism’, which was formed in the second half of the twentieth century, when secularised historiography of political thought was dominant. By assuming that ‘liberal feminism’ had its roots in ‘possessive individualism’ – theorised by the Marxist political theorist C. B. Macpherson,[[14]](#endnote-14) one of Green’s chief targets – ‘atomistic individualism’, and ‘Hobbesist [*sic*] *psychological egoism*’, such a critique has fundamentally missed its mark, according to Green (p. 225). Macaulay’s thought had its roots in Christian natural law and an idea of moral self-determination which included benevolence and concern for the welfare of others. In this way, Green concludes that Macaulay ‘offers a version of liberal, democratic theory which is immune to the criticisms of the left, while offering a more optimistic account of human nature, and a more coherent account of the just limits of civil liberty, than that proposed by the right.’ (p. 231).

Macaulay plays a rather marginal role in Rachel Hammersley’s *Republicanism: An Introduction,* having featured more prominently in her earlier *The English Republican Tradition and Eighteenth-Century France* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010). However, Hammersley’s new book complements Green’s study well, as it stresses that republicanism has been ‘a multifarious and contested concept’ from antiquity to the present day (p. 16). While republicanism is often associated with the idea of self-government or non-monarchical government, Cicero in *De republica* simplyrelated it to good government, whether monarchic, aristocratic, or democratic. Similarly, Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the eighteenth century called every state which was governed by the rule of law a republic, whatever its administration (p. 2).

Hammersley treats the English Revolution, the key event in Macaulay’s *History* and political imagination, in an important chapter. It was a watershed moment, she writes, because, in 1649, England self-consciously created a ‘Commonwealth and Free state’ in a large state which had previously been ruled by a monarch (p. 72). This declaration took place after and as a response to the execution of the monarch, and very few had written in favour of a republic before this event. Although the monarchy was restored in 1660*,* Macaulay wanted to show in her *History* that, even though the triumph of liberty in the seventeenth century had been short-lived, its achievements were vast, and worthy of emulation. Importantly, it gave the world ‘[t]he works of Nevil, Sydney, and Harrington…which excel[led] even the antient classics on the science of policy’, and ‘the keen satire and judicious reflections of Marchemont Nedham’.[[15]](#endnote-15) As Hammersley highlights, this ‘outpouring of republican writings’ was subsequently canonised as the English commonwealthman tradition.

Hammersley demonstrates that this canon of commonwealth writers was not a single coherent one, but one beset by disagreement and controversy. For example, whereas John Milton argued that power derived from the people, Nedham, at least at one point, held that it originated from the rule of fathers over their families (p. 83). In the *Commonwealth of Oceana* (1656)*,* James Harrington put forward the argument that political power was based on the ownership of land (p. 87).[[16]](#endnote-16) Much of this ‘commonwealth’ literature was written in response to changing political circumstances and shifting constitutional architecture between 1649 and 1660, during which time Oliver Cromwell replaced the Rump parliament in 1653 to establish the Protectorate (p. 78). Whereas some of the classics in the commonwealth canon justified the regicide, others criticised the Protectorate, and others still defended it. Towards the end of the 1650s, much of the ‘republican pamphleteering’ was directed against other republicans (p. 88).

As a writer of biographies and an editor of new, lavish editions of the commonwealth classics, John Toland gave this motley collection of political works coherence at the turn of the eighteenth century. In the process, former opponents such as Milton and Harrington became lumped together, and old arguments were not only adopted but also adapted to suit new purposes. After the restoration, republican ideas became ‘pluralist’, in the sense of accepting monarchy, rather than ‘exclusionist’ (pp. 93-5). Notably, Toland supported William III and later the House of Hanover. Toland’s publishing project was revived and continued by Macaulay’s friend Thomas Hollis in the 1750s and 1760s (p. 97). As Hammersley notes, Hollis was impressed with Macaulay’s *History* and presented her with tracts relating to the civil war (p. 98). It was Macaulay’s first marriage with the Scottish widower Dr. George Macaulay in 1760 which brought her into contact with Hollis. They stayed friends after George Macaulay’s death in 1766, and Hollis bound her works in the specially decorated bindings that he used for presentation copies of his favourite political writers.

Macaulay was an inheritor of this highly unstable body of work, and its importance for her political thought should not be diminished. As Green’s scholarship confirms, however, Macaulay’s political and moral thought was as reliant on Lockean natural law, the Bible, and ‘rational religion’, which stressed the importance of individual faith and use of reason. Religious liberty had been championed by representatives of the constructed ‘commonwealth canon’, from Milton and Algernon Sidney to Toland, John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon (p. 100). Whereas they had chiefly targeted priestcraft, however, Macaulay had additional concerns. Crucially, her political and moral thought was shaped by her opposition to what she perceived as the dangerous irreligion of Hobbes, Bolingbroke, and Hume. Toland was singled out as one of the dangerous deistical writers by John Leland in a work addressed to the Rev. Thomas Wilson, with whom Macaulay would lodge for several years in the 1770s.[[17]](#endnote-17) Macaulay’s own criticism of deism, directed against Bolingbroke in *On the Immutability of Moral Truth* (1783), was similar to Leland’s: accepting the existence of God while doubting his traditional attributes – omnipotence, goodness and wisdom – was no better than atheism, and would undercut morality.

Harrington put forward his famous constitutional mechanisms such as rotation in office and agrarian laws because he largely agreed with Hobbes’s pessimistic interpretation of human nature. Somewhat puzzlingly, Macaulay accepted Harrington’s constitutional mechanisms and agrarian laws in the same pamphlet in which she rejected Hobbes’s anti-social view of humanity. Whereas Harrington’s political thought was calculated to ‘maketh evil men good’,[[18]](#endnote-18) Macaulay was confident that a rightly constituted government could nurture ‘the innate generous principles of the soul’.[[19]](#endnote-19) According to her, human beings were not naturally egotistical but became corrupted by power and wealth, or servility in absolute monarchies. The constitutional mechanisms were calculated to keep human beings good rather than make them good, which is a subtle but important difference. Moreover, Harrington relied on civil religion in the shape of an Erastian church settlement (p. 91). For Macaulay, religion was necessary for political stability because it was the source of morality, but this stability was threatened by the lukewarm, Erastian approach to religion associated with Hobbes, as it paved the way for scepticism and moral laxity in the eighteenth century. While Hammersley rightly highlights that the tradition of civil religion has been crucial for the history of republicanism, as can be seen in Machiavelli and Rousseau, among others, the contribution of rational religion was a distinct one, and for Macaulay and her circle, it was more important.[[20]](#endnote-20)

Green’s edition of Macaulay’s *Correspondence* and her intellectual biography are landmark achievements in intellectual history. They will be required reading for historians of historiography, political ideas, reformist politics, religious thought, human rights, revolution, Enlightenment, feminism and women in the eighteenth century. In addition, they will also be of interest to many political theorists, philosophers, and literary scholars. They can be usefully read alongside Hammersley’s erudite, accessible and highly readable introduction to the *longue durée* history of republicanism.

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1. Cited in Hill, *The Republican Virago,* 25. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Cited in Hill, *The Republican Virago*, 237. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Robbins, *The Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthman*, 353. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Besides the work reviewed and cited here, see especially Green, *A History of Women’s Political Thought in Europe, 1700-1800*, ch. 8; Green, ‘Catharine Macaulay: Philosopher of the Enlightenment’; Hutton, ‘The Persona of the Woman Philosopher in Eighteenth‐Century England: Catharine Macaulay, Mary Hays, and Elizabeth Hamilton’; Davies, *Catharine Macaulay and Mercy Otis Warren*; Nünning, *A Revolution in Sentiments, Manners, and Moral* Opinions; O’Brien, ‘Catharine Macaulay’s Histories of England’; Hicks, ‘Catharine Macaulay’s Civil War: Gender, History, and Republicanism in Georgian Britain’; Wiseman, ‘Catharine Macaulay: History, Republicanism and the Public Sphere’; Looser, *British Women Writers and the Writing of History, 1670-1820*, ch. 5. See also note 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Pocock, ‘Catharine Macaulay: Patriot Historian’; Coffee ‘Catharine Macaulay’s Republican Conception of Social and Political Liberty’. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Pettit, *Republicanism.* [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism*. See, however, Pettit, ‘Keeping Republican Freedom Simple: On a Difference with Quentin Skinner’. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. There was much more to Price’s conception of liberty, however. On his political theology, see Clark, ‘How Did the American Revolution Relate to the French? Richard Price, the Age of Revolutions, and the Enlightenment’. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Robbins, ‘The Strenuous Whig: Thomas Hollis of Lincoln’s Inn’, 444. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. See, e.g., O’Flaherty, *Utilitarianism in the Age of Enlightenment*; Bulman and Robert Ingram, ed., *God in the Enlightenment*; Bulman, *Anglican Enlightenment*; Ahnert, *The Moral Culture of the Scottish Enlightenment*;Young, *Religion and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century England.* [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Citing Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment,* 20. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Dunn, *The Political Thought of John Locke*, 266. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. On this, see also Sarah Hutton, ‘Liberty, Equality and God: The Religious Roots of Catharine Macaulay’s Feminism’. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism.* [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Macaulay, *History* *of England* (8 vols., London, 1763-83), vol. 5, 383. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. See especially Hammersley, *James Harrington,* ch. 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Leland, *View of the Principle Deistical Writers*, vol. 1, 62-8. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Harrington, *Aphorisms Political,* 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Catharine Macaulay, *Loose Remarks*, 30. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. On civil religion, see recently Walsh, *Civil Religion and the Enlightenment in England.* [↑](#endnote-ref-20)