

**WILLIAM PENN AND THOMAS B.
MACAULAY: BEING BRIEF
OBSERVATIONS ON THE CHARGES
MADE IN MR. MACAULAY'S HISTORY
OF ENGLAND, AGAINST THE CHARACTER
OF WILLIAM PENN**

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William Penn and Thomas B. Macaulay: being brief observations on the charges made in Mr. Macaulay's History of England, against the character of William Penn by W. E. Forster

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REVISED FOR THE AMERICAN EDITION BY THE AUTHOR.

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1850.

WILLIAM PENN,
AND
T. B. MACAULAY.

THE following remarks on the strictures lately made by a popular writer on the character of WILLIAM PENN, were originally written as a preface to a new edition of CLARKSON'S LIFE OF PENN,* but the surprise those strictures have so generally caused seems to call for the separate publication of an attempt to reply to them.

Of the nature of these charges hardly any one will be ignorant. Mr. Macaulay's "History of England" has throughout England been read and admired. Whether its accuracy will stand the test of critical inquiry the future public will decide; but there can be no question that, as a story well told and pleasant to listen to, it has bewitched the ears of the public of to-day, and that eventually it will rank, if not as an actual history, at least as a most attractive and eloquent historical romance.

In turning over its pages, so full of descriptive and oratorical power, we feel as though we were wandering through a gallery of pictures, or rather in quick succession they flit before our eyes, for the reader has no work to do—is merely required to look, not think—portraits so vivid, features so striking, that, in our admiration of the artist's talent, we care not to inquire whether they are really likenesses, true copies from nature, or merely the creations of his own fancy.

Still, when a figure comes before us such as Penn's, which we

* *Memoirs of the Public and Private Life of William Penn*, by Thomas Clarkson, M. A. New edition, with a Preface, in reply to the charges made by Mr. Macaulay in his *History of England*, by W. E. Forster. London: Charles Gilpin, 5, Bishopsgate Street Without.

think we ought to know, we cannot but start up and ask, Can this mean and repulsive countenance, in real truth, belong to one whom we have so long been accustomed to regard with respect, we may almost say with reverence?

For the page of our history is not so rich in illustrations of nobility and worth, that we can afford to barter away any one of them, not even in exchange for all the fine pictures of Mr. Macaulay; and if his portrait of Penn be in truth a caricature, the talent of the painter makes it all the more necessary to attempt to prove that it is not a likeness.

That it is not the portrait by which Penn is generally known, Mr. Macaulay himself allows:—"To speak the whole truth concerning him," he says, in his brief sketch, at the first mention of his name, "is a task which requires some courage; for he is rather a mythical than a historical person. Rival nations and hostile sects have agreed in canonizing him. England is proud of his name. A great commonwealth beyond the Atlantic regards him with a reverence similar to that which the Athenians felt for Theseus, and the Romans for Quirinus. The respectable society of which he was a member honours him as an apostle. By pious men of other persuasions he is generally regarded as a bright pattern of Christian virtue. Meanwhile admirers of a very different sort have sounded his praises. The French philosophers of the eighteenth century pardoned what they regarded as his superstitious fancies in consideration of his contempt for priests, and of his cosmopolitan benevolence, impartially extended to all races and to all creeds. His name has thus become, throughout all civilised countries, a synonyme for probity and philanthropy."^{*}

But is not this verdict of posterity, so unanimous and so favourable, which the historian thus records, not because he agrees with it, but rather to enhance his own valour in daring to dispute it, in itself, by the very fact of its existence, strong argument in behalf of its own truthfulness? for man is not so prodigal of praise as to bestow it on his fellow without a reason. If a reputation outlives the power of its possessor, there is good ground to believe it is the reward of his deeds. Time tests us by what

^{*} Macaulay, vol. i. p. 507. The first edition of Macaulay is the edition referred to throughout this pamphlet.

we are, not seem to be: only the fruitful plant escapes its scythe; the weed, however rank, is relentlessly mown down. Many a world-wide renown follows its owner to the grave; the bubble bursts when the breath leaves him who has blown it; but it is hard to find an instance in which after ages have wasted honour on the worthless—lavished laurels where contempt would have been fitting. Posterity pays rather than gives—is just more than generous. A man who was persecuted during his lifetime, *then* slandered and hated by not a few, but who, now that almost two centuries have elapsed, is thus honoured and revered by all creeds and parties, may perchance be what Mr. Macaulay chooses to term a “mythical person,” but if so, there is at least a meaning in the myth, for in fact no myth can be formed out of a falsehood; the very condition of its existence is that there must be truth and worth in its subject: it is only the heroes of history whom she deigns to clothe with a mythical garment; the halo, however misty, proves that within must shine a light.

Mr. Macaulay, however, it is plain, does not believe in Penn, not even as the subject of a myth. He is a historical sceptic, or at best a rationalist. See how ingeniously he tries to undermine the fabric of this mythical renown:—“Nor is this reputation,” he adds, “altogether unmerited. Penn was without doubt a man “of eminent virtues. He had a strong sense of religious duty, “and a fervent desire to promote the happiness of mankind. On “one or two points of high importance he had notions more correct than were in his day common, even among men of enlarged “minds; and, as the proprietor and legislator of a province, “which, being almost uninhabited when it came into his possession, afforded a clear field for moral experiments, he had the “rare good fortune of being able to carry his theories into practice without any compromise, and yet without any shock to “existing institutions. He will always be mentioned with honour “as the founder of a colony, who did not, in his dealings with a “savage people, abuse the strength derived from civilisation, and “as a lawgiver, who, in an age of persecution, made religious “liberty the corner-stone of a polity. But his writings and his “life furnish abundant proofs that he was not a man of strong “sense. He had no skill in reading the characters of others. “His confidence in persons less virtuous than himself led him

"into great errors and misfortunes. His enthusiasm for one
 "great principle sometimes impelled him to violate other great
 "principles which he ought to have held sacred. Nor was his
 "integrity altogether proof against the temptations to which it
 "was exposed in that splendid and polite, but deeply corrupted
 "society, with which he now mingled. The whole court was in
 "a ferment with intrigues of gallantry and intrigues of ambition.
 "The traffic in honours, places, and pardons was incessant. It
 "was natural that a man who was daily seen at the palace, and
 "who was known to have free access to majesty, should be fre-
 "quently importuned to use his influence for purposes which a
 "rigid morality must condemn. The integrity of Penn had stood
 "firm against obloquy and persecution. But now, attacked by
 "royal smiles, by female blandishments, by the insinuating elo-
 "quence and delicate flattery of veteran diplomatists and cour-
 "tiers, his resolution began to give way. Titles and phrases
 "against which he had often borne his testimony dropped occa-
 "sionally from his lips and his pen. It would be well if he had
 "been guilty of nothing worse than such compliances with the
 "fashions of the world. Unhappily it cannot be concealed that
 "he bore a chief part in some transactions condemned, not merely
 "by the rigid code of the society to which he belonged, but by
 "the general sense of all honest men. He afterwards solemnly
 "protested that his hands were pure from illicit gain, and that
 "he never received any gratuity from those whom he had obliged,
 "though he might easily, while his influence at court lasted, have
 "made a hundred and twenty thousand pounds. To this asser-
 "tion full credit is due. But bribes may be offered to vanity as
 "well as to cupidity, and it is impossible to deny that Penn was
 "cajoled into bearing a part in some unjustifiable transactions,
 "of which others enjoyed the profits."*

It is difficult not to admire the skill with which, in this passage,
 the writer glides from praise to contempt, ingeniously giving the
 impression that the praise is but in complaisance to the probable
 prejudices of his reader, the blame his own courageous convic-
 tion; and yet, if the two opinions be contrasted together, they
 can hardly, all allowance being given for the inconsistency of
 human nature, be made to fit. "A sense of religious duty" can

* Macaulay, vol. I. p. 508.

scarcely be called "strong" which does not save its possessor from "transactions condemned by the sense of all honest men," even though "bribes be offered to his vanity;" and it is strange that one "whose life furnishes abundant proof that he was not a "man of strong sense" should not only have "notions on points "of high importance more correct than were in his day common "even among men of enlarged minds," but should be "able to "carry his theories into practice," and practice so successful that "he will always," excepting of course by Mr. Macaulay, "be mentioned with honour."

But leaving for the present this preliminary sketch, which, consisting merely of assertion without attempt at proof, does not indeed of itself need notice, except as evidence of the animus of its author, we must pass on to the special charges upon which this general character appears to be grounded.

The first charge is in connexion with the infamous profit to which the maids of honour of James's court succeeded in turning Monmouth's rebellion, by the bargain which they drove with the friends of the young girls of Taunton, who, in the Duke's march through that town, had presented him with a standard. Mr. Macaulay's statement is as follows. After mentioning the thousand guineas which the Queen Mary of Modena had cleared on a cargo of rebels sentenced to be transported, he adds:—"We "cannot wonder that her attendants should have imitated her "unprincely greediness and her unwomanly cruelty. They ex- "acted a thousand pounds from Roger Hoare, a merchant of "Bridgewater, who had contributed to the military chest of the "rebel army. But the prey on which they pounced most eagerly "was one which it might have been thought that even the most "ungentle natures would have spared. Already some of the girls "who had presented the standard to Monmouth at Taunton had "cruelly expiated their offence. * * * Most of the "young ladies, however, who had walked in the procession were "still alive. Some of them were under ten years of age. All "had acted under the orders of their schoolmistress, without "knowing that they were committing a crime. The Queen's "maids of honour asked the royal permission to wring money "out of the parents of the poor children; and the permission was "granted. An order was sent down to Taunton that all these

“little girls should be seized and imprisoned. Sir Francis Warre, of Hestercombe, the Tory member for Bridgewater, was requested to undertake the office of exacting the ransom. He was charged to declare in strong language that the maids of honour would not endure delay, that they were determined to prosecute to outlawry, unless a reasonable sum were forthcoming, and that by a reasonable sum was meant seven thousand pounds. Warre excused himself from taking any part in a transaction so scandalous. The maids of honour then requested William Penn to act for them; and Penn accepted the commission. Yet it should seem that a little of the pertinacious scrupulosity which he had often shown about taking off his hat would not have been altogether out of place on this occasion. He probably silenced the remonstrances of his conscience by repeating to himself that none of the money which he extorted would go into his own pocket; that if he refused to be the agent of the ladies they would find agents less humane; that by complying he should increase his influence at the court; and that his influence at the court had already enabled him, and might still enable him, to render great services to his oppressed brethren. The maids of honour were at last forced to content themselves with less than a third part of what they had demanded.”*

This is the story, and one disclosing more contemptible cruelty it is scarcely possible to imagine. Innocent girls, whose sole offence was obedience to the orders of their mistress, thrown into a dungeon in order that maids of honour may exact a ransom for their liberty—the scrupulous Quaker acting as broker in this vile speculation, accepting the commission which the Tory cavalier had refused: if this story be as he tells it, Mr. Macaulay may well say that Penn’s integrity was no proof against “female blandishment.” A transaction so mean, so hypocritical, would indeed deserve the opprobrium “of all honest men.” No defence could be attempted of a deed which no possible motive could justify, and the reader could only wonder what can be Mr. Macaulay’s definition of the “religious duty,” with “a strong sense” of which he declares its perpetrator to have been endued.

Doubtless the charge is bad enough, but now what are the proofs?

* Macaulay, vol. i. p. 656.