

**A DEFENCE OF WILLIAM
PENN: FROM THE
CHARGES CONTAINED IN
THE HISTORY OF ENGLAND**

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A Defence of William Penn: From the Charges Contained in the History of England by Henry Fairbairn

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HENRY FAIRBAIRN

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A
DEFENCE

OF

WILLIAM PENN,

FROM THE

CHARGES CONTAINED IN THE HISTORY OF ENGLAND

BY THE

RT. HON. THOMAS BABINGTON MACAULAY.

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BY HENRY FAIRBAIRN.  
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1849.

A DEFENCE OF  
WILLIAM PENN.

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In the news papers which have been received recently from England, there is an account of a deputation from the Society of Friends in London, to the Right Honorable THOMAS BABINGTON MACAULAY, the author of the new History of England, on the subject of the charges which appear in that publication, against the moral and political reputation of WILLIAM PENN.

The same news papers describe the argument between this deputation and Mr. Macaulay, as remaining still in favour of the author of the History of England—whose statements are therefore to be taken as incapable of being now overthrown by any evidence which remains in vindication of the fair fame of Penn.

All this may be only a news paper paragraph, with little foundation in the truth that any such a deputation may have waited upon the author of the new political novel, called a History of England; or that the result of the argument was confirmatory of the charges which Mr. Macaulay has brought against the founder of the Colony of Pennsylvania:—for these charges rest upon no other than a sandy foundation, and they can be shaken with great ease.

The principal charges now brought against William Penn, would appear to be resolvable into the general one—that his fanatical devotion to the advancement of the interests of Quakerism, rendered him indifferent to the means by which the end could be gained; that he was therefore Jesuitical in his principles, and a willing political instrument in the hands of those two tyrannical princes—Charles and James,—in whose reigns

he did act an undoubtedly distinguished part in the English political world.

But when the proper light may be thrown upon the scenes in which William Penn is here described as moving so honourably at the courts of Charles II., and of James the II., it will be found that every part of his character has been falsified by the author of the new History of England. And although two centuries have intervened to increase the difficulty of tracing out the bearings of charges so contrary to all that has been supposed to be established in favor of a great name for the founder of the Colony of Pennsylvania;—yet all these imputations can be shown to be without any foundation whatever in historical truth—to be the grossest of libels upon the great and good name of William Penn—for misrepresentation, exaggeration, distortion, suppression of circumstances, false statements, false inferences, and language beneath the dignity of the pages of history—form the compound of these charges, now brought against the Socrates of modern times. They are the charges of sophistry alone, and Macaulay is the modern Melitus of a William Penn.

The introduction of Penn upon the scene of this History of England, takes place at the execution of Alderman Cornish; and therefore, in the latter part of the reign of James II.; for the execution of Cornish was one of the judicial murders of the time of the infamous Judge Jeffreys, and arose out of the discovery, or the pretended discovery, of the *Rye House Plot*. “William Penn, who stood near the gallows,” says the historian, “and whose prejudices were all in favour of the government, said that he could see in the demeanor of Cornish, nothing but the natural indignation of a man, who was unjustly slain under forms of law.”

Here is the first, but the cardinal, and all-important misrepresentation of the political character and opinions of William Penn. He is represented as a sycophant to the government, which was then advancing with rapid strides to the establishment of arbitrary power in England;—as siding with the court in

these infamous executions of the best and the most enlightened patriots of the time—and as bearing an unwilling testimony to the heroic demeanour of Cornish, in the scene of his most infamously unjust death. These assertions are in direct violation of all historical truth.

The *Rye House Plot*, had furnished the pretence which the court had long been in search of, for the removal and destruction of the leaders of the liberal party in England, of whom Lord William Russell and Algernon Sidney, had been the most powerful in abilities, as in reputation and in rank in life.

After the executions of Russell and Sidney, another important life was required to be sworn away, for the purpose of terrifying the city, or the mercantile part of the metropolis of England, into the same submission to the establishment of arbitrary power, which the trunkless heads of Sidney and Russell would produce at the court end of the town; and Cornish, who had been an Alderman of London, and was a merchant of wealth and abilities, but a strong opponent of the arbitrary measures of the government of Charles II., for this purpose was selected to be murdered, on a similar pretended participation in the Rye-House Plot. His name is with those of Russell and Sidney, in the History of England, and when Mr. Macaulay gives the words "unjustly slain under forms of law," he quotes the undoubted opinion of William Penn respecting this very barbarous murder of one of the best, and most enlightened, and valuable citizens of London, at that time. But it is most false to assert that he beheld this murder with prejudices in favor of the royal murderer, by whose judges these scenes were then being brought about, with a frequency so great, that the reign of Charles II. now ranks in historical infamy, with the reign of that of Tiberius, of whose similar murderous proscriptions so appalling a picture has been drawn by Tacitus, in his *Annals of the Empire of Rome*. William Penn did not witness the execution of Cornish with prejudices in favour of the government, but with prejudices in the most violent opposition to the government, his sympathies were with the murdered man, and not with the murderers concerned in this most truly diabolical



scene. It can be shown, that the whole heart and soul of Penn were on the side of Cornish, and with the liberal party in politics, of whom Cornish was now one of the leaders in the act of destruction, and in direct co-operation with which leaders of the party in opposition to the government of Charles II., himself was this same William Penn.

His connexion with the liberal party, and his very intimate connexion with its principal leader, Algernon Sidney, has been rendered clear by the correspondence in the hand-writing of William Penn, which remains in the library of the castle of Penshurst, in the County of Kent; this being the seat of the family of Sidney at the present time. These letters of William Penn, are of a very energetic political tendency, they are all written in the most direct opposition to the measures of the government of Charles II., and are addressed to one, to whom Penn could speak freely in those dangerous political times. Some of these letters come down to a time almost immediately before the fall of this great opponent of the government of Charles II., and therefore, to the time of the execution of Cornish, when William Penn is described in this History of England, as thinking and as acting in favour of the government and in opposition to his own political friends and party in the state.

The most remarkable of these letters, as published by the Rev. Mr. Blencow, in one of his works on the House of Sidney, is that written by William Penn immediately before the time of the election for the borough of Guilford, at which place Algernon Sidney was about to stand for its representative in Parliament; but against the opposition of the whole influence of the government of Charles II., for the eloquence, the learning, and the known incorruptibility of Algernon Sidney, were not more the causes of his defeat on every occasion of his attempting to find his way into the House of Commons, than of his judicial murder, which followed very soon after the time of the latest of these letters from William Penn. The letter on the subject of the Guilford election, leaves no doubt whatever, of the truly patriotic sentiments of William Penn; for we see his despondency at the sight of the fast approaching slavery of his country,

by means of the Parliamentary corruption which the court had extended over the greater part of the kingdom at that time. He urges Sidney to exertion at the borough of Guilford, although almost despairing of success, and observes, "if it can be done, thou hast the eloquence to persuade, and the energy to undertake," with other expressions, which prove the entire soul of William Penn to have been with Algernon Sidney, and with the party in direct opposition to the government, which now was murdering its leaders on the pretended participation in the scheme of assassination of the King, which has been called the Rye House Plot.

When we reflect that Algernon Sidney had just fallen murdered by the court, whose aims and policy they both so vehemently opposed, that murder was then following upon murder, and that Cornish was another of the same republican party with whom Penn was in direct alliance and co-operation, the which are shown in the Penshurst correspondence—how can it be possible that he witnessed the execution of Cornish with prejudices in favour of the destroyers of his own political party in the state? And when we find, from the Memoirs of Sir John Dalrymple, that William Penn was seen openly and anxiously canvassing the electors of the borough of Guilford, in favour of Algernon Sidney, speaking from the hustings in his favour on the same memorable occasion, and acting with all zeal with this most formidable enemy of the King, the monarchy, and the arbitrary power which was in the course of establishment in the reign of this infamous prince; who will believe the inference of Macaulay, that William Penn possessed no political independence of character,—but was a sycophant, who would side with any crime which royalty might commit upon the lives and the liberties of all beyond the pale of his own particular sect of the Society of Friends. Yet in this slavish and disgraceful manner is he first introduced upon the scene of this History of England; as witnessing the noblest exhibition of firmness in the hour of the martyrdom of the virtuous Cornish, and as viewing these infamous outrages upon the liberties of his country with

prejudices in favour of a Jeffreys, a Charles, and a James, the most infamous of mankind.

And it is clear that Mr. Macaulay well knew of the existence of the correspondence between Algernon Sidney and William Penn; for the publication of the Rev. Mr. Blencow, is mentioned by him in a note, at page 261 of the History of England, as the "interesting Memoirs of Col. Henry Sidney."—This was the older brother of Algernon Sidney, and the Col. Sidney mentioned by William Penn, in the letter to the Earl of Sunderland, which is dated at Philadelphia, in 1683, and published in the second volume of the Transactions of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania;—a letter which is replete with interesting descriptions of the country from which it is written, and in which, observes William Penn, "I had hoped to have seen your Lordship on some evening, at the house of Col. Henry Sidney, &c." Moreover, the publication of the letters from William Penn to Algernon Sidney, have been amongst the most prominent of the recently discovered MSS. relating to the times of the Commonwealth and the reign of Charles II., the Panshurst correspondence being usually considered as a most solid testimony to the enlightened and independent political opinions of William Penn.

He is seen from this correspondence to have been struggling for the preservation of the liberties of his country, and not with those who were religionists exclusively in their political movements against the measures of the government of Charles II.; but who were the defenders of liberty in the broadest republican meaning of the word.

A martyr in this same republican cause was Cornish, of the city of London; the entire metropolis was horrified at the infamous trial and the barbarous execution of this virtuous, enlightened and honourable opponent of the attempts of the government to establish a system of civil and religious slavery in England; and William Penn adds only the expression of his own indignation at the scene of this execution, when he proclaims Cornish to have died "with the natural indignation of a man unjustly slain under forms of law."