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ALGERNON SIDNEY  
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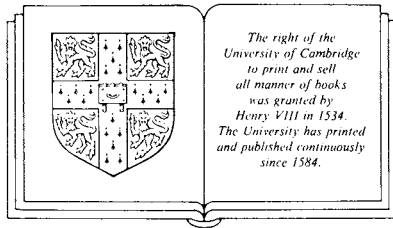
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# ALGERNON SIDNEY AND THE ENGLISH REPUBLIC, 1623–1677

JONATHAN SCOTT

*Lecturer in History, Victoria University of Wellington*



CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

*Cambridge*

*New York New Rochelle Melbourne Sydney*

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[More information](#)

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
 The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
 The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK  
 40 West 20th Street, New York NY 10011-4211, USA  
 477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia  
 Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain  
 Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa  
<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 1988  
 First paperback edition 2004

*A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data*

Scott, Jonathan, 1958–  
 Algernon Sidney and the English republic. 1623–1677 / Jonathan  
 Scott.

p. cm. – (Cambridge studies in early modern British history)  
 Includes index.

ISBN 0 521 35290 8 hardback

1. Sidney, Algernon, 1622–1683. 2. Politicians – Great Britain –  
 Biography. 3. Political scientists – Great Britain – Biography.  
 4. Great Britain – History – Puritan Revolution, 1642–1660. 5. Great  
 Britain – History – Charles II. 1660–1685. 6. Great Britain – Politics  
 and government – 1603–1714. I. Title. II. Series.

DA407.s6s43 1988  
 941.06 6'0924–dc19 87–33391 CIP  
 [B]

ISBN 0 521 35290 8 hardback  
 ISBN 0 521 61195 4 paperback

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Nothing is farther from my intention than to speak irreverently of kings . . .

*Discourses* p. 160

. . . and I presume no wise man will think I do so, if I profess . . . what history, and daily experience teach us concerning the virtues and religions, that . . . have been from the beginning of the world supported by monarchs . . . their moral as well as their theological graces, together with what the Scriptures tell us of those, who in the last days will principally support the throne of antichrist . . . [and] conclude . . . that monarchy can be said to be natural in no other sense, than that our depraved nature is most inclined to that which is worst.

*Discourses* p. 160

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*For Lindsey*

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## PREFACE

This is the first of two books on the life and political thought of the English republican Algernon Sidney (1623–83). In one sense – chronologically – the two works may be regarded as volumes of a single intellectual biography separated by the dates of their titles: *Algernon Sidney and the English Republic 1623–1677*; *Algernon Sidney and the Restoration Crisis 1677–1683*. Since Sidney himself proved a good deal more popular in two pieces than he had been in one this would not be inappropriate.

Biographical chronology, however, and the resulting narrative, provides only part of the content and purpose of each book. In another sense each is a separate work in its own right and neither is bounded by the date limits of its title. For each addresses a wider question about Sidney's thought and experience in its historical context and in each case it is the nature of this question rather than that narrative which gives the book its final shape.

Thus the question asked by the present work (following its preliminary: 'What did Sidney believe?') is 'How did Sidney come to hold the beliefs he expressed?' – beliefs which were to prove so influential in the eighteenth century and which remain influential today. The answer to this question, in so far as it can be provided, calls for a combination of analysis and narrative which takes us well beyond the date limits of the book's title. Chapters 1–4 and 11–13 in particular involve substantial examination of aspects of the period 1677–83 as well. Similarly, in its turn, *Algernon Sidney and the Restoration Crisis 1677–1683* will use its central focus on Sidney's activities within those years to argue a wider case about Restoration (and indeed seventeenth-century) political structures as a whole.

In addition to this central question and its subsidiary object of locating Sidney's thought in some sort of intellectual context, this present work has a secondary historiographical purpose as well. One of the ironies of the whig historiography of Sidney was that his biographers were writing the life of someone whose life in the public eye began with his death. Accordingly the spectacle of that death and its immediate political context traditionally occupied a greatly disproportionate share of their attention. The result was



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not only a relative neglect of the first fifty-four years of Sidney's life – the subject of this book – but a misrepresentation in the process of that life's political fulcrum. This was not the so-called 'Exclusion Crisis'<sup>1</sup> though this and its aftermath made his name. It was the age of the English Republic (1649–53, and 1659) and the period from 1635 to 1677 generally. It was through the disorder, hard choices, struggle, and eventually loss of this period that Sidney developed all the attitudes that were to motivate the rest of his life and writing.

In short it is one purpose of my work on Sidney in general to show that he was a republican – an historical product of the first of England's seventeenth-century 'revolutions' (1649), not an 'exclusionist Whig' who may be ahistorically appropriated for the second (1688). The construction of this revised picture will be the object of this book; we will see in the next what happened when such a creature was transplanted back to the political world of the later Restoration. It will be time at that stage, from the standpoint of the crisis of 1678–83, to make some more general remarks about the relationship between those two 'revolutions' themselves, and between the first and second halves of the seventeenth-century English political experience in general.

<sup>1</sup> The grounds for my objections to this term will be fully explained in the book to follow.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work, and much of that which follows, was completed in my time at Cambridge University, first as a research student at Trinity College, and then as a research fellow at Magdalene College. I would like to express my gratitude to the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission, to the Master and Fellows of Trinity College and, above all, to the Master and Fellows of Magdalene College, for making that time possible, and for making it so enjoyable.

It is impossible to adequately record all of the obligations incurred in the writing of this book. To the many archive, record office, and library staffs who have helped me over the years I can only express my thanks for assistance often well beyond the call of duty. I am grateful to Viscount De L'isle, by whose kind permission I was able to use the Sidney family papers at Maidstone; and to Lord Bath, and the Duke of Devonshire, who also allowed me to see manuscripts in their private possession.

Graduate research can be lonely; that mine was never so I owe above all to John Morrill. For his unflagging interest, support, and generosity over almost five years this book is a very inadequate return. To J. C. Davis, who first introduced me to Sidney, and who has continued to teach me about him since, I also owe more than even he knows. It was Blair Worden who rediscovered not only Sidney's *Court Maxims*, but the historical Sidney himself. For the stimulus and kindness he has seen fit to offer my subsequent arrival on the same shores I feel the deepest gratitude.

Others who have read my work in manuscript and tried to save me from error include Mark Goldie, Johann Sommerville, Richard Tuck, Eamon Duffy, and Glenn Burgess. For whatever scholarship exists in this account I am indebted to them also; the errors which remain are, of course, my own. I would also like to thank John Carswell, Alan Houston, Paul Hopkins, and John Adamson – the first two working on their own studies of Sidney – for information about manuscript material I would otherwise have missed. Finally I owe a great deal to all those Cambridge historians and friends upon whose knowledge, conversation, and criticism over the years I have relied.

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*Acknowledgements*

My greatest debt is to Lindsey, who in marrying me found herself married to the ghost of Algernon as well. A glance at the text will show the disruption to domestic harmony which could have resulted. Yet one strong character took the measure of another, and allowed the scholarly exorcism to take its due course. I dedicate this book to her.

All references to Sidney's works in the text are in italics; the *Court Maxims* has not, however, been published. References to the *Court Maxims* are to the manuscript at the Warwickshire Record Office. References to the *Discourses Concerning Government, Apology, Last Paper, and Works* are to *The Works of Algernon Sydney* (London 1772). *Of Love* was published in *Tracts . . . of the Late Lord Somers* (1809–15) volume 8; the manuscript is in the British Museum, add. MS 34,100. *The Character of Henry Vane jnr* was published in V. Rowe, *Sir Henry Vane the Younger* (London 1970) Appendix F.