Robert Sidney and His Books

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The earliest books we know of that can be associated with Robert Sidney are the Cicero, De officiis, the Sleidanus, De quattuor imperiis, and the logic texts of Valerius and Caesarius that his tutor Robert Dorsett purchased for him in 1575 when he was a student at Christ Church, Oxford.¹ A volume in the Pierpont Morgan Library, the French historian and prelate Claude de Seissel’s De republica Gallia (1562), also provides a window on the youthful Sidney’s interests, or perhaps his recognition that an apprentice courtier needed to have a network. It bears a note in Latin by Richard Edes, ten years his senior, “student” (that is, fellow) of Christ Church and later dean of Worcester, stating that Sidney gave the book to him in 1576; Sidney would have been twelve at the time.² Near the end of his life we see him inscribing his name in a volume by the virulently anti-Gallican Jesuit, François Garasse, Les recherches des recherches & autres œuvres de Me. E. Pasquier (Paris, 1622); the book was recently discovered in Bishop Hurd’s collection at Hartlebury Castle. Signed in a firm hand “Leycester, 1623” when Sidney was sixty, its binding bears the arms of the Order of the Garter, to which Sidney had been admitted in 1616. At least fifteen still-extant books from the years between his early studies of Cicero and his death in 1626 can be documented as having

¹ Maidstone, Centre for Kentish Studies: U1475 A59, and see Historical Manuscripts Commission, Report on the Manuscripts of Lord De L’Isle and Dudley Preserved at Penshurst Place, 6 vols. (London: His Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1925-66), I, 269. Centre for Kentish Studies, hereafter CKS; the Historical Manuscripts Commission’s volumes hereafter HMC.
² Bound with Froissart, Chroniques (1537), which may or may not have been part of the original gift. For Edes’ later career as dean of Worcester, see ODNB (Oxford Dictionary of National Biography). He does not appear in other family documents.
belonged to Robert Sidney, along with a few others associated with him. This is a substantial number for the period, and the intellectual record the volumes represent is supported by many more books, and a considerable body of documentation.

Yet knowing so much about the more glamourous Philip Sidney, scholars used to dismiss his younger brother as a dull fellow of no real interest to serious Sidnaeans, and Tudor and Stuart historians paid him little heed. In 1967 I was asked by the faculty member I was then assisting, Professor F. David Hoening, to investigate what evidence might still exist of the library of Sir Philip Sidney. The graduate student I then was would have greeted with puzzlement the idea that it might also be productive to ask about the books of Robert Sidney, whom I had barely heard of. But as I write, a book he once owned sits on a shelf near my desk, a solid representation of the thickening of texture that has come about in our understanding of Philip’s amiable, dutiful, amorous, musical, well-connected, extravagant and, it must be said, learned sibling. The transformation in our understanding of the career of Robert Sidney began with the emergence into the public gaze in 1973 of a manuscript of his poems with its fine songs, and has been continued by publications on inventories of his clothing and household furnishings, revelations about his musical gifts,


attention to his commonplace, and the preparation of editions published and forthcoming of his extensive private and public correspondence. No longer a dimensionless figure, Robert Sidney has emerged as one of our best sources for an understanding of the Stuart court personality and the world in which such figures had to survive.

After Philip’s dramatic death in 1586, Robert lived on for nearly four decades, serving as English military governor of Flushing, as a higher, though never quite high enough, functionary in the Jacobean court, fathering eleven children, including yet another Sidney poet Mary Wroth, serving as Ben Jonson’s employer and patron, maneuvering his way into the peerage, fretting endlessly to his cherished wife Barbara about the expense of contending for status at court, as a lonely widower marrying a second time, and finally expiring of a stroke in a river boat conveying him from Whitehall to Baynard’s Castle, where he was lodging. Twenty-seven men “came with the corps from London” to the funeral in Penshurst Church. Robert left Penshurst Place to his son Robert, the second earl of Leicester (1595-1677), who evidently revered his amiable father but was of a very different temperament—melancholy and more combative. But the second Robert was already a collector, deeply interested in the books he had inherited with Penshurst and eager to acquire more. Mortgage documents of 1623 indicate that the widower had earlier transferred his best furniture and books to his son and moved to a smaller establishment in London. Regrettably, the list of books that ought to have accompanied the inventory of furniture has

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7 See Domestic Politics and Family Absence: the Correspondence (1588-1621) of Robert Sidney, First Earl of Leicester, and Barbara Gamage Sidney, Countess of Leicester, ed. Margaret P. Hannay, Noel J. Kinmanon, Michael G. Brennan (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005). Editions of the letters of Rowland Whyte and of Dorothy Percy Sidney, the second earl’s countess, are also in preparation.
8 CKS U1475 A37/9, entries for 13 July-17 July 1623.
disappeared. But because the second Robert took care to preserve the records of his father’s reading, from them we can gain a partial picture of his library. We can also piece together the intellectual world in which the first earl lived almost as effectively as we can reconstruct that of Philip among the companions of his European journey of the 1570s.

Though Philip’s books and many of his papers have been lost to us, four substantial commonplace books remain in which Robert noted what he read, and they are being studied in detail by Robert Shephard. Clearly regarded by the second Robert as a repository of serious learning, they provided the model for his own extensive commonplacing; indeed somewhat unusually for the time, he sometimes returned to his father’s heavy volumes to make entries in them. A surprising number of the books Robert Sidney mentioned in these annotations can be securely identified today in various public and private collections; they were part of a library that may have amounted to perhaps 900 volumes, though that number is only a guess, based on commonplace book references and certain pre-1623 volumes in the catalogue (1652–65) of the much larger library his son would add to his father’s books. I have been editing the second Robert’s catalogue, in collaboration with William R. Bowen and Joseph L. Black, since a visit to what was then the Kent Archives Office in March, 1984 when I encountered the beginnings of an answer to Professor Hoeniger’s long-ago question.

The volume on my shelf is a heavy calf-bound folio: Rerum anglicarum scriptores post Bedam praecipui, ex vetustissimis codicibus manuscriptis nunc primum in lucem editi (1596), edited by Sir Henry Savile, the youthful but already distinguished mathematician who had sometimes been part of the group when Robert traveled on the continent between 1579 and

10 For the mortgage, see Warkentin, “Jonson’s Penshurst Revealed.” I speculate that the list of books that ought legally to have been part of the mortgage document was later detached to serve as the basis for the much larger catalogue that his son ordered compiled in the 1650s.
11 Ann Blair (personal communication) pointed out to me how unusual was this use of a father’s commonplace books by his son.
12 Spectators observing the glacial progress of the Penshurst Library Project will be interested to learn that a final manuscript of our edition of the catalogue is nearing completion.
1582. Many of Robert’s extant books bear the owner’s signature on a corner of the title page, as does this one from the title page of Robert Sidney’s copy of Savile, *Rerum anglicarum scriptores* (1596): “Sydney 1597.”

The volume was probably not among the books of the family library auctioned by Thomas Osborne in 1743 because it lacks the bookplate of Philip, the fifth earl of Leicester, which was added to the Penshurst books in 1704. In 1882 it belonged to the Cambridge classicist Evelyn Shuckburgh; among his many publications is an 1891 edition of Sidney’s *Apology* based on the 1595 text.\(^\text{13}\) Robert vigorously annotated several of the still-extant volumes he owned in his youth, such as the Tacitus that has been studied by Joel Davis.\(^\text{14}\) Unhappily he did not annotate his copy of Savile (a few pages bear Shuckburgh marginalia). However, there are at least twenty-three references to this book or to one or another of its authors in his commonplace books. The *Rerum anglicarum scriptores* is one of the best-documentated of all Sidney family

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\(^\text{13}\) *An Apologie for Poetry*, ed. E.S. Shuckburgh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1891). I am grateful to Julian Shuckburgh and Dr. Emily Shuckburgh for answering my inquiries about their ancestor.

books; besides the volume itself and the evidence of its use, we know roughly when it was purchased by Rowland Whyte, sent over to Flushing, and then apparently sent back to England.\textsuperscript{15}

There is some evidence in the catalogue that Robert in his youth shared Philip's interest in contemporary Italian poetry,\textsuperscript{16} but the \textit{Rerum anglicarum scriptores} is entirely representative of the kind of reading that engaged him during his maturity. As Shephard has argued, his aim was likely to educate the sons who would succeed him; first William (1590-1612) and then Robert. Shephard writes:

> These commonplace books tell us a good deal about what and how Sidney read, and they also provide insights about the assumptions and views that guided his reading. Unlike most earlier humanists, Sidney drew his examples overwhelmingly from the Middle Ages and more recent times, rather than from classical Greece or Rome, and his approach to politics was keenly pragmatic and instrumental, rather than moral. The political world they reveal is not governed by Providence, but is wholly determined by human action under specific circumstances. Rational calculations can therefore predict political outcomes and guide political choices.

And he argues that because they reveal Robert's pervasive skepticism about monarchy as a political system, they "comprise a missing link in the family's political tradition, between his older brother Philip and later generations of the Sidney family, including Robert's grandson Algernon."\textsuperscript{17} I would add that they also reveal an impressive linguistic range: English, Latin, French, German, Italian and Spanish.

\textsuperscript{15} U1475 A39, f. 15v: Nov. 1596, Rowland Whyte records that he purchased "Mr. Savile's storia of England for your Lordship." In U1475 C12/130, 126v, a letter of 11 February 1597/8 (crossed out, probably by RS) mentions sending the book to England. In U1475 A39, f. 27r, Feb. 10, 1597/8 Whyte reports a payment of 13s. 8d for this title, either confirming the original purchase or perhaps a second copy.


\textsuperscript{17} Shephard, "Political Commonplace Books," 2-3.
Among the books Robert cites in his reading there are very few classical authors—only Plutarch, Caesar, Polybius, and Livy—and he quotes scripture markedly less than his son, whose commonplace books are full of biblical and theological gleanings. Most frequently he draws upon historical works of his own era, both those chronicling contemporary history and those explaining it by reference to the past. Apparently reading with pen in hand, Robert Sidney notes passages in Pandolfo Collenuccio’s *Historia d’Italia*, the chronicles and histories of Matteo and Giovanni Villani, Girolamo Franchi di Conestaggio on the union of Portugal and Castile, the chronicles of Enguerrand de Monstrelet, Jean Froissart, Raphael Holinshed and David Chytraeus, the histories of Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini, Gerardus de Roo, Jean du Tillet, Jean de Serres, George Buchanan, William Camden, Albert Krantz, Juan de Mariana, Pontus Heuterus, Garibay y Zamalloa’s *Compendio historic de toda España y Navarra* (more than a hundred references), the *Memoires* of Martin du Bellay and Philippe de Comynnes, Seth Calvisius’ chronology, Johannes Carion’s universal history, and Luis del Marmol Caravajal’s *Descripción general de Africca*. Almost all of these books are listed in the catalogue of the Penshurst library as it stood in 1665, and nearly half of them still appear in a fragmentary 1723 list of books in the library at Penshurst prepared by some later Sidney for purposes unknown. The list of books still extant that once belonged to Robert Sidney may yet be expanded further; at present, it stands as follows:

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18 Some of Robert Sidney’s extant books are closely annotated in the margins. His son, however, almost never signed his books and there is little evidence of his annotating actual volumes; his papers suggest that it was his habit to make notes on slips of paper, which were then compiled in his commonplace books.

19 CKS: U 1500 E133 (68 pages) with 3 additional leaves in U 1500 Z18. This list is fragmentary and its entries are often unhelpful, but nine of the 22 titles listed are certainly present, and probably more.

20 A few “association” volumes have been noted: the Abraham Fraunce *Insignium armorum* (1588) currently at Penshurst is a volume dedicated to Robert Sidney but has no signature or 1704 bookplate. A copy of Aristotle, *Politiques or Discourses of Government*, tr. Le Roy and "I.D." was found by Gavin Alexander at Shrewsbury School; this book was dedicated to RS but has no other signs of his ownership, though it does bear the 1704 bookplate. A copy of Giambattista Cinzio Giraldi, *Gli Antivaloment* (1583) appeared as item 185 in Richard von Hünersdorff’s


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"Catalogue Eleven" ca. 1988; it was signed "Rob. Sidney 1584, 13 Junij," with the motto. The firm reports that the copy was in fact sold in 1986; the name of the purchaser has not been revealed.

21 I am obliged to Philip Oldfield for drawing this book to my attention.
presentation to RS from Estienne in memory of his brother. This edition not in 1665 catalogue.


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22 I am obliged to Rivkah Zim for drawing this book to my attention.
23 I am obliged to Giles Mandelbrothe for information about this book.
24 I am obliged to Henry Woudhuysen for drawing this title page to my attention.
heavily annotated in the hands of both RS and his son.\textsuperscript{25} Not in 1665 catalogue.


One of the most important aspects of Robert Sidney’s life was his music, as Gavin Alexander has shown. There are a few books on musical theory in the catalogue of the Penshurst library, though those could as easily have belonged to his son, who was deeply interested in mathematics. But just as the second earl’s mathematical notebooks are unhappily lost to us (along with his treasured “collections on Livy”), there remain no scores or part books belonging to his father, either extant or listed in the library catalogue. We have learned not to expect them, because it is likely that song collections and part books would have been kept with the musical instruments, wherever they were housed, perhaps in the solar or “Leicester’s Lodging.” At the time of his death those books Sidney had left to his son were probably housed in one of the studies described in the inventory of 1623, which would certainly have been possible if there were fewer than 1000 volumes.\textsuperscript{26} There is no evidence of the building of a specific library room until 1665, when “the library” is mentioned in the last of three wills of his son.\textsuperscript{27}

\textsuperscript{25} There is another copy of this book, with annotations in an unknown hand, at Penshurst Place today.

\textsuperscript{26} For information on the inventory of 1623 see Warkentin, “Jonson’s Penshurst Reveald”; for the layout of Penshurst Place in 1623, see West, “Studies and Status.”

\textsuperscript{27} Two early testaments (1632 and 1642) mention the books and papers in the second earl’s study, but the first to speak of the library itself as a place is his third will (1655) which refers to books “in my Library Evidence house and studdy in my dwelling house called Penshurst place ... and in my Studdy and evidence house in my Messenage called Leicester house ... and all my books in other places” (NA Prob. 11/355, fols. 215r-v, 337r-41v; probate 19 December 1677). Few books were kept at Leicester House; a letter of Hawkins to Leicester of April 9/19, 1640 relates that when the town mansion was cleared for letting to Strafford, all the books and papers in the study and elsewhere were packed into one trunk (CKS U1475 C132/106), and after 1660 Leicester seems to have resided almost exclusively at Penshurst.
There is, of course, the frustration of encountering volumes still in the Bodleian Library that appear to have belonged to Robert but which it turns out he never saw at all. These were the fruits of the splendid gift of £100 that Robert gave in 1600 to the library of the University of Oxford being re-founded by his friend Sir Thomas Bodley; the bindings are all stamped with his armorial. When the books comprising his donation were purchased and bound he was in the Netherlands, and as usual pleading to return home. Rowland Whyte, his London agent, wrote to him on 16 May, 1600: "Mr. Bodeley hath the bookes away, and in my opinion they are of all others the fayrest gifte, and soe intended to be put in the best place of the Library." It is possible of course that it was Whyte who selected the titles, but the books delivered to the Bodleian reflect the same serious reading that we see in the commonplace books. One volume (we don’t know which) left the Bodleian in the 1650s, and its binding, with Sidney’s arms, after some fascinating adventures ended up late in the nineteenth century supplying the covers for a Shakespeare First Folio now in the Morgan Library, a bibliographical detective story Peter Hoare and I recently related elsewhere.

What picture can we draw from our assembled knowledge of Robert Sidney as reader, book collector, and perhaps patron? Robert Shephard has portrayed Sidney firmly in the family tradition of anti-monarchist skepticism, a conclusion I support. At the same time, the documents supply us with a larger and more varied context in which to situate that portrait. Not only the range of his languages (perhaps to be expected of a well-prepared courtier) but the remarkable variety of titles listed in his son’s library catalogue—cookbooks, ephemera, gossipy court annals, statutes, works of practical use to the owner of an estate—must in part have been Robert’s responsibility, and certainly suggests a wide range of interests. I’ve mentioned the unusual quantity of minor sixteenth-century Italian literature, a taste Robert would have shared with Philip, though not with his son, who was more

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28 Rowland Whyte to Robert Sidney, 16 May 1600, HMC II, 462, see also 477, "If you had bene in England..."

29 Germaine Warkentin and Peter Hoare, “Sophisticated Shakespeare: James Toovey and the Morgan Library’s ‘Sidney’ First Folio,” Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America, 100.3 (September 2006), 313-56, where there is also some discussion of the books bought with Robert Sidney’s donation of 1600.
interested in mathematics, drama, theology and French history. There is also a substantial collection of works on military strategy, architecture, and administration, perhaps begun by Philip but certainly extended by the military governor of Flushing.

The list of books dedicated to Robert Sidney is a fairly short one, at least compared with the much greater patronage of his prosperous relations by marriage, the Herberets. But there is a reason why patronage of this sort may have played only a small role in Robert Sidney’s life. The record of his reading situates him less in the court environment where he conducted his administrative life, than in the intellectual setting of learned country gentlemen like—in his son’s generation—Sir Roger Twysden and Sir Edward Dering, and the Oxindens, Lovelaces, Tuftons, and Haleses.\footnote{On the intellectual vigour of the next generation of Kentish gentry and aristocracy, see Peter Laslett, “The Gentry of Kent in 1640,” Cambridge Historical Journal 9.2 (1947-49), 148-64.} Earnest readers, eager compilers and historians, they were men of large responsibilities in the county. Robert Sidney spent much more time in court service than any of these men, but there is a sense in which he stands as their predecessor, forerunner of a generation whose reading, in many of the same books mentioned here, would lay the groundwork for our understanding of early British history. As the growing evidence shows, Robert Sidney, at war and at peace, at court or in his study at Penshurst, was reading just as learnedly and assiduously. Had Philip Sidney survived into the 1620s to become the master of Penshurst and a member of James’ court, these are probably the books he would have been reading as well.