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Henry Sidney (1641–1704), Earl of Romney, and Robert Spencer (1641–1702), Second Earl of Sunderland

Michael G. Brennan

Henry Sidney and the House of Orange

The crucial role of Colonel Henry Sidney (Earl of Romney from 1694) during the 1680s in supporting the claims of the House of Orange and William III to the English throne is now often underestimated and merits reassessment. In May 1678 Colonel Sidney, the fourth surviving and youngest son of Robert Sidney, second Earl of Leicester, and Dorothy (Percy) Sidney, Countess of Leicester, led an infantry regiment in the British expeditionary force to Flanders. These circumstances provided him with an opportunity to begin cultivating a lasting friendship with the Protestant William III, Prince of Orange (1650–1702), the future King William III. The time was ripe for the active fostering of Anglo-Dutch relations because on 4 November 1677 William had married Princess Mary, daughter of James, Duke of York, and thereby became a likely candidate for the English throne if his father-in-law was excluded because of his Catholicism. Henry Sidney's personal contacts with the prince were judged so promising that in June 1679 he was appointed as Envoy-Extraordinary to the States General of the United Provinces with a brief to maintain a defensive alliance with the Dutch against France. Sidney family connections proved crucial to this political appointment since it had been engineered largely through the influence of two close associates: his own nephew and coeval, Robert Spencer (from 1643, second Earl of Sunderland), and the preceding English envoy at The Hague, Sir William Temple (1628–99), who was the grandson of Sir Philip Sidney's trusted secretary during the 1580s, William Temple, and the nephew of Henry Hammond, formerly Rector of Penshurst, 1633–42.

Henry Sidney's relationship with William III, Prince of Orange, flourished during the next two decades, and he became a valuable conduit for diplomatic negotiations between the English and Dutch. The two men often dined and hunted together, and Sidney was treated by the prince and his family as a trusted confidant. On 11 August 1680, for example, he accompanied William on a poignant trip to view "the fortifications of Zutphen" (Sidney, *Diary* 2:94), where his great-uncle, Sir Philip Sidney, had received his mortal wound in September 1586. Another typical reference in one of his letters, dated 17 December 1680, records how that evening: "the Prince and Princess of Orange and Prince of Hanover do me the honour to come to my house. They shall have music and dancing, and the best entertainment I can give them" (*Diary* 2:146).

This level of personal intimacy between Henry Sidney and Prince William III was also founded upon a century of mutual respect and friendship between the Sidneys and the

House of Orange. The prince's great-grandfather, William I ("the Silent"), Prince of Orange (1553–84), had hoped in 1577 to marry his daughter, Marie of Nassau, to Henry Sidney's great-uncle, Sir Philip Sidney, who during the early 1580s had been keen to join William I's military forces. Philip's younger brother, Robert Sidney, served as Governor of Flushing from 1589 until 1616, and when his eldest son and heir, William, was born in November 1590, Louise de Coligny, Princess of Orange—the fourth and last wife of William I—had stood as godmother for the christening. Fifty years later Henry Sidney's older brother, Algernon (see Scott ARC 1:11), sought in late 1640 a military appointment in the forces of William II, Prince of Orange, in advance of the prince's marriage on 2 May 1641 to Mary Henrietta Stuart, the Princess Royal and eldest daughter of King Charles I. When addressing the Dutch Assembly at The Hague in August 1679, Henry Sidney was justifiably proud to recall:

I am very glad to be employed in a service of so great importance to both nations, and I shall not fail to contribute all my endeavours towards it; and your Lordships having had so many of my family engaged formerly in employments here, will, I hope, take it as an earnest of my own good affection to the service of the State. (*Diary* 1:58)

On 28 January 1690 Henry Sidney also cryptically noted in his diary that "Monsieur Zulestein was married" (*Diary* 2:162)—an event that provided yet another Sidney family connection since William Frederick van Nassau van Zuylestein (later Earl of Rochford) married Jane Wroth (1659–1703), a Maid of Honour to Mary, Princess of Orange, and the daughter of Henry Wroth (a nephew of Henry Sidney's aunt, Lady Mary Wroth).

Following the death of King Charles II in February 1685, Henry Sidney crossed once again to the Low Countries in the following November and renewed his friendship with the Prince of Orange and his Protestant wife, Princess Mary. By 1688, the year of the "Glorious Revolution" when the prince was poised to invade England to support his claim to the throne, Henry Sidney was firmly established as his chief intermediary with supporters in England. He was prominent in the drafting of the formal letter (the final version was in his hand) that was delivered to William on 30 June 1688, inviting him to cross over to England. Gilbert Burnet, who was then serving as William's personal chaplain, recorded that Sidney was the "man in whose hands the conduct of the whole design was chiefly deposited, by the prince's own order" (*Bishop Burnet's History* 3:264). He landed with the prince at Torbay on 5 November (as his senior commanding officer in the field with the rank of major-general) for the House of Orange's largely peaceful claiming of the English throne.

Henry Sidney prospered during the reign of King William III, and on Coronation Day (9 April 1689) was created Baron Milton and Viscount Sidney of Sheppey. In 1689 he was appointed as a Privy Councillor, First Gentleman of the Bedchamber, and Lord Lieutenant and Vice-Admiral of Kent, followed by the Wardenship of the Cinque Ports and Constable of Dover Castle (1691), along with generous royal grants of extensive lands in Ireland. Most prominently, he occupied the public and symbolic role of one of the king's most experienced military commanders, echoing his family's proud tradition of royal military service stretching back to the distinction achieved by his great-great-grandfather, Sir William Sidney, at the Battle of Flodden (1513). During summer 1690 he served during the Irish campaign, culminating in his participation at the Battle of the Boyne and the Siege of Limerick. In May 1691 he was named, during William III's absence in Flanders, as overall commander of all foot regiments, and in March 1692 was appointed as Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, where his brother Philip, third Earl of Leicester, his father Robert, the second earl, and his great-grandfather, Sir Henry Sidney, had all held high office (see Warkentin ARC 1:9; McGowan-Doyle ARC 1:2). Recalled to England in 1693, he was chosen as Master-General

of the Ordnance—a key post in relation to both national security and William III's military plans on the Continent. In May 1694 he was promoted to the rank of lieutenant-general and created first Earl of Romney.

By now in his mid-fifties, Henry Sidney retired from active field service, but remained prominent in military procurement and pageantry. He took a leading role in the London celebrations following the English triumph at the Siege of Namur (1695) and the signing of the Treaty of Ryswick (1697), which concluded the Nine Years' War and which had been managed by his nephew, Robert Spencer. This period marked the apogee of the royal court careers of both Henry Sidney and Robert Spencer, and they were named together among the Lord Justices to govern the country during William III's absence in 1697. Henry Sidney remained on intimate personal terms with the king, accompanying him on three separate visits to The Hague between 1699 and 1701. King William III died on 8 March 1702; on 28 September of the same year Robert Spencer died of heart failure and was succeeded as third Earl of Sunderland by Charles (c. 1674–1722), his only surviving son. The accession of Queen Anne effectively ended Henry Sidney's public career, and he died of the smallpox on 8 April 1704.

Education, Continental Travel, and Court Careers of Henry Sidney and Robert Spencer

Henry Sidney's distinguished court career during the last quarter of the seventeenth century often interlinked with that of his nephew and coeval Robert Spencer, Earl of Sunderland, with whom he had grown up as a child. However, even though Sidney and Spencer, as noted, were named together among those appointed in 1697 to govern the country while William III was abroad, their earlier careers during the reigns of Charles II and James II had sometimes taken divergent paths. Let us now look back in time to examine their shared childhood, youth, and early court experiences, and in particular their sometimes starkly contrasting personal affiliations with James II and William III.

Henry Sidney was born during his father's Paris embassy in spring 1641, and his nephew, Robert Spencer, was also born at Paris on the following September. They were to become lifelong friends and court associates, demonstrating yet again the political potency of Sidney family networks (see Brennan *ARC* 1:1). Robert was the eldest surviving son of Henry's sister, Dorothy, who had been widowed when her royalist husband, Henry Spencer, first Earl of Sunderland, was killed in 1643, aged twenty-two, at the Battle of Newbury. The two boys were educated together at Penshurst under the charge of Thomas Pierce, an ejected fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford. As political conditions grew uncertain in 1658, they were sent with Pierce to broaden their education by traveling on the Continent, where they stayed until Charles II's restoration was certain. They were abroad again for much of the first half of the 1660s. Robert traveled extensively through France (with William Penn, later the founder of Pennsylvania), Spain, Switzerland, and Italy, only returning briefly to England in 1663. Henry was in Italy again for most of 1664 with a cultured group of young Englishmen, including Henry Savile, Sidney Godolphin, William Trumbull, and his nephew Sunderland. When both young men finally returned to England in 1665, their court careers began in earnest. They were to prove themselves two of the most adaptable, pragmatic, and shrewd courtiers of their generation, even if they tended occasionally to overstretch themselves, both on the personal and political levels, and expressed differing political and royal loyalties.

Renowned for his good looks and social charms, Henry Sidney secured a position as Groom of the Bedchamber to James, Duke of York, and was soon appointed as Master of

the Horse to the duke's wife, Anne, the daughter of Charles II's chief minister, Edward Hyde, Earl of Clarendon. Unfortunately, his flirtatious relationship with the duchess led to his dismissal, and he is known to have had liaisons at this period with other women, including Anne Temple (1649–1718) and Grace Worthley, by whom he had an illegitimate son, Henry (Sidney, *Diary* 1:xxvii–xxxv). By 1667 he was reduced to accepting a commission in a regiment under the command of his older brother, Robert Sidney (1626–68), in the United Provinces. After a failed attempt to gain a parliamentary seat in 1668, he returned to France in the following year. He was there again in 1672, this time to deliver a message of condolence from Charles II over the death of Louis XIV's daughter, Marie-Thérèse. Still ambitious for a formal presence at the English court, Henry purchased in 1675 the position of Master of the Robes, thereby gaining his first major post at the royal court.

Robert Spencer's court career also began in 1665, when he returned to England and married Anne, daughter of George Digby, Earl of Bristol, whom he had previously courted in 1663, but then suddenly fled abroad when a marriage was arranged. Apparently now happily married, Robert and Anne took up residence at the family's seat at Althorp, Northamptonshire. This union brought Robert into useful contact with his brother-in-law, George Savile, Earl of Halifax, who in 1656 had married Robert's sister, Dorothy Spencer (1640–70; see Akkerman *ARC* 1:10), and also with the Dukes of York and Monmouth. Through his wife's family he was on friendly terms with Henry Bennet, Earl of Arlington, Charles II's former agent at Madrid and his Secretary of State (1662–74). Arlington sponsored his introduction to diplomatic affairs, arranging for him to be sent in 1670 to Louis XIV to offer Charles II's thanks after the signing of the Treaty of Dover. In the following year Spencer went to Madrid as an envoy-extraordinary with the difficult brief of attempting to prevent an Hispano-Dutch alliance against the French. Although this mission achieved little, with Arlington's patronage he secured the English ambassador's post at Paris in 1672. Taken conveniently ill in March 1673 when about to depart on yet another taxing and expensive embassy to Cologne, he was able to shed his diplomatic duties and move back to London, where he secured a position as a Gentleman of the Bedchamber. By this time Arlington had fallen from royal favor, but Spencer deftly secured the personal support of Charles II's then most influential mistress, Louise de Kéroualle, Duchess of Portsmouth. He regularly acted as a verbal intermediary between the king and the duchess, and assisted in gaining royal assent in 1675 for the ennobling of her son as Duke of Richmond. He undertook two other brief diplomatic missions to the court of Louis XIV in 1667/68 before achieving genuine political potency in February 1679, when Charles II appointed him as his Secretary of State of the Northern Department.

Henry Sidney's father, Robert, second Earl of Leicester, died on 2 November 1677, and his will provided generous provision for both Henry and Algernon (see Scott *ARC* 1:11), to the detriment of their eldest brother, Philip, now third Earl of Leicester, who had fallen out with his father in 1652. A protracted chancery case ensued, with Henry residing at Penshurst and Algernon at Leicester House in London. The aftermath of the Popish Plot in 1678 and the beginnings of the Exclusion Crisis in 1679, focusing on the problems of the probable succession of Charles II's Catholic brother James, placed Henry Sidney and Robert Spencer at the very heart of governmental intrigues. Sunderland was active in trying to placate those most hostile to a Catholic succession, notably the Earl of Shaftesbury, and led an attempt to gain support for a scheme of limitations, under which James as a Catholic king would vow to uphold the Church of England and respect the authority of Parliament. Henry Sidney was simultaneously continuing to court the trust of William III, Prince of Orange, and now considered it imperative that William should either personally come to England or declare publicly his claim to the English throne. Sunderland's public support for the second Exclusion Bill in late 1680 led to his own temporary exclusion from royal favor; however,

by September 1682 he had regained a seat on the Privy Council, and he was again named as Secretary of State on 31 January 1683.

In the aftermath of the Rye House Plot, which was supposedly planned to murder both Charles II and his brother and heir James, Duke of York, Henry Sidney's elder brother Algernon was executed on Tower Hill on 7 December 1683. Although his nephew, Robert Spencer, had distanced himself from the trial, Henry Sidney was allowed to bury Algernon's body at Penshurst and to inherit his estate. Sunderland's influence at court was still very much in the ascendant during 1684, and he was poised to become chief minister when Charles II unexpectedly died on 6 February 1685. Although his personal contacts with James had diminished during the Exclusion Crisis, his skillful manipulation of the House of Commons to ensure its support for the new king rapidly gained him royal favor, and he retained his post as Secretary of State. Renowned for his "time-serving and double-dealing" (Kenyon 21) and regarded as the "most political animal in late Stuart England" (Speck), two key elements facilitated Sunderland's political survival and prosperity under James II. Unencumbered by any strong religious convictions, he readily went along with plans for the re-establishment of the Church of England. But he was also ready to cultivate the most ardent Catholic faction rather than more moderate elements, calculating that their intimacy would propel him more rapidly into the king's innermost circle. Secondly, through his undoubted personal charms, he was soon able to exert a strong influence over James II's queen, Mary of Modena.

In 1685 the king entrusted Sunderland with presiding over the brutal legal repression of the Monmouth Rebellion led by Judge Jeffreys (who had sent his uncle Algernon to execution), and Sunderland rewarded Jeffreys by persuading James to appoint him as Lord Chancellor. With the Earl of Halifax dismissed for not supporting the repeal of the Test and Habeas Corpus Act, Sunderland became the most powerful man at court when he succeeded him as Lord President. During mid-1686 Sunderland completed his political metamorphosis by secretly converting to Catholicism, followed by the public conversion of his eldest son, Robert, in April 1687. Ever the deft courtier, the latter conversion meant that he could now show more sympathy towards moderate Catholics and Nonconformists by lending his full support to the royal Declaration of Indulgence for toleration of worship of April 1687. Following the birth of a son, James (later the "Old Pretender"), to James II and Mary on 10 June 1688, Sunderland publicly declared his earlier conversion to Catholicism.

When rumors escalated in the following September that William was poised to invade, both King James and Sunderland hastily sought to forge bonds of support with the formerly despised Anglican Tories. But when storms turned back William's first invasion force in mid-October, James was furious at having been persuaded to grant concessions to the Anglicans, and promptly sacked Sunderland as the scapegoat to placate Catholic resentment towards the policy of appeasement. Following William's successful landing at Torbay on 5 November, Sunderland immediately sought refuge in Catholic France, but was spurned by Louis XIV and instead spent the rest of the month raising funds for his exile abroad. To the surprise of many at court, Sunderland and his Protestant wife finally fled to Rotterdam, although his wife soon returned to England on 19 December with the manuscript of a "Letter to a Friend in London" for an English printer (Henry Sidney's copy, in Sunderland's hand, is BL Add. MS 32681 fols. 326–9), which simultaneously defended Sunderland's dealings with James II and lavishly praised the new king, William III. The Countess of Sunderland returned to Rotterdam in January 1689, but her husband was arrested and briefly imprisoned before his resourceful wife engineered his freedom by appealing to William's consort, Mary. They were able to return to England in April 1690 to reside on their Althorp estates, and Sunderland quietly resumed his seat in the House of Lords in January 1692. When James, from his exile in France, pointedly excluded Sunderland from his Proclamation of Pardon in April 1692, he was able to offer his absolute allegiance to William, and his tacitly given

advice on the management of parliamentary and court affairs grew steadily more influential. He continued to exert considerable influence behind the scenes, and on 19 April 1697 was appointed Lord Chamberlain.

His opponents at court, however, sought his resignation in the following December, and although the king was unwilling to allow him to step down, he never again performed the duties of this office. He was also caught up during 1698 in an unpleasant scandal surrounding his Jacobite son-in-law, the Earl of Clancarty, who had deserted his first wife, Sunderland's daughter Elizabeth, and returned to Ireland to live as a Catholic and marry for a second time, only to then abandon this second marriage and to return to England to reclaim his first wife. Sunderland's eldest son, Charles, had him thrown into Newgate Prison, and this messy affair was finally solved by the departure abroad of Clancarty and Elizabeth to live in Germany on a royal pension. By now Sunderland preferred to spend most of his time on his Althorp estates, although he returned to London in December 1699 for the second marriage of his son Charles in the following January to Lady Anne Churchill, the daughter of the Earl of Marlborough, whom his uncle Henry Sidney had known well from visits to The Hague with William III. During the first two years of the eighteenth century Sunderland was influential in the negotiations for the Act of Settlement (1701) that led to the accession of the House of Hanover in 1714, but as his health rapidly failed, he died on 28 September 1702.

Diary and Correspondence of Henry Sidney

In 1843 a two-volume edition was published of the *Diary of the Times of Charles the Second by the Honourable Henry Sidney, (Afterwards Earl of Romney)*, edited by Robert Willis Blencowe, which also contained selections from his correspondence with his sister, the Countess of Sunderland, and other prominent court figures. Henry Sidney's diary covers the period 1 June 1679–18 January 1682, and Blencowe transcribed and interspersed with letters within its text at appropriate dates. Samples of Sidney's outgoing correspondence from this period include letters addressed to William III, Prince of Orange; James, Duke of York (the future King James II); Arthur Capel, Earl of Essex; William Savile, Viscount Halifax; and Sidney's nephew Robert Spencer, Earl of Sunderland. Copies of other letters from Sidney include those sent to Edward Conway, Earl of Conway; Laurence Hyde (later Earl of Rochester); Sidney Godolphin (later Earl of Godolphin); and the Welsh lawyer and diplomat Sir Leoline Jenkins.

Blencowe included samples of incoming correspondence from Henry Sidney's sister, the widowed Dorothy (Sidney) Spencer, Dowager Countess of Sunderland (see Akkerman ARC 1:10); the Earl of Sunderland and his countess, Anne Digby Spencer; the Duke of York; George Savile, Earl of Halifax; James Butler, Earl of Ormonde (also known as the Earl of Ossory); Ralph Montagu (later Duke of Montagu); Laurence Hyde; the politician and diplomat William Harbord (Herbert); Sidney Godolphin; John Mounsteven (Secretary to the Earl of Sunderland); William Savile; Sir William Temple; Gilbert Spencer (steward to Henry Sidney's father, the second Earl of Leicester); the diplomat Sir Richard Bulstrode; Sir Henry Capel (later Baron Capel of Tewkesbury); Sir Gabriel Sylvius (Chamberlain to the Prince of Orange); Sir Leoline Jenkins; and William Penn. A shorter concluding selection of letters covers the period February 1684–June 1689, with correspondence to Henry Sidney from Hans Willem Bentinck (later Earl of Portland); the diplomat Sir Robert Southwell; the Prince of Orange; the Countess of Sunderland; Princess Anne (later Queen Anne, the daughter of James II); Charles de Schomberg (later Duke of Schomberg); Bishop Gilbert Burnet; and the Earl and Countess of Sunderland.

Although these two early Victorian volumes still remain an invaluable primary source for the life and political career of Henry Sidney, many other relevant manuscript documents are now known, and there is a pressing need for a new edition of his correspondence. There is also a good case to be made for the undertaking of what would be the first book-length biography of this shrewd and ambitious individual. Henry Sidney's reputation is still a matter of historical controversy, as is demonstrated by the concluding paragraph of David Hosford's excellent *ODNB* article, explaining how he:

has been the subject of widely divergent views about both his capacity and character. Macaulay dismissively described him as "incapable, ignorant, and dissipated" In turn, Macaulay seems to have been influenced by Jonathan Swift's disparaging references, one differing only slightly from the other, to the effect that Romney was "an idel, drunken, ignorant rake, without sense or honour" Thomas Bruce, second earl of Ailesbury, hardly a friendly witness, took a much more charitable view of his character, while John Macky called him the linchpin of the planning effort for the revolution, a man of honour and honesty who served William to the best of his ability. Both Burnet's *History* and the supplement to that work provide an even fuller portrait. It is certainly one of an individual with flaws, but also remarkable for his even temper, straight dealing, good judgement, and a knack for gaining the trust of others.

A wide range of other significant items from Henry Sidney's life and correspondence are now preserved at The National Archives, Kew, and at the Centre for Kentish Studies in the Sidney family's private archive, but generally these documents have not been utilized in previous assessments of his political importance. Apart from Blencowe's 1843 introduction to his *Diary* and David Hosford's informative entry in the *ODNB*, there is still no substantial study of the life and public career of Henry Sidney, Earl of Romney. His posthumous reputation remains controversial, but through his personal friendship with the Prince of Orange and his undoubted diplomatic skills, it may be argued that he did more than any other member of the Sidney family to define the future of the British monarchy for his own and succeeding generations.

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