

# CATO'S LETTERS

# CATO'S LETTERS

OR

*Essays on Liberty, Civil and  
Religious, and Other Important  
Subjects*

FOUR VOLUMES IN TWO

---

BY JOHN TRENCHARD AND  
THOMAS GORDON

*Edited and Annotated  
by Ronald Hamowy*

VOLUME ONE



*Liberty Fund Indianapolis*

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The cuneiform inscription that serves as our logo and as the design motif for our endpapers is the earliest-known written appearance of the word “freedom” (*amagi*), or “liberty.” It is taken from a clay document written about 2300 B.C. in the Sumerian city-state of Lagash.

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AN APPENDIX CONTAINING ADDITIONAL LETTERS BY CATO

*No. 1 through No. 6*

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## *Publishing History of* Cato's Letters

1. *A Collection of Cato's Letters in the London Journal*. London: Printed for J. Peele, 1721. 36 pp. [Comprising Letters 1–7 (November 5–December 17, 1720). The first letter is mistakenly dated October 8, 1720.]
2. *A Collection of Cato's Political Letters in the London Journal, to December 17, inclusive, 1720*. 2d ed. With a new preface. London: Printed for J. Roberts, 1721. 36 pp. [See entry 1.]
3. *The Second Collection of Cato's Political Letters in the London Journal, continued to the End of January, 1720*. London: Printed for J. Roberts, 1720. 60 pp. [Comprising Letters 8–14 (December 24–January 28, 1720).]
4. *A Continuation of the Political Letters in the London Journal, to January 28, 1720*. London: Printed for J. Roberts, 1720. 60 pp. [See entry 3.]
5. *A Collection of Cato's Political Letters in the London Journal, to December 17, inclusive, 1720*. 3d ed. With a preface to the whole work. London: Printed for J. Peele, 1722. (Bound with *The Second Collection of Cato's Political Letters in the London Journal, continued to the End of January, 1720*.) 84 pp. [Entries 2 and 3, to which is added a new preface.]
6. *The Third Collection of Cato's Political Letters in the London Journal, continued to the End of March, 1721*. London: Printed for J. Roberts,

1721. 64 pp. [Comprising Letters 15–22 (February 4, 1720–March 25, 1721). In addition, this collection contains a four-page letter, signed “Coriolanus,” which does not appear in subsequent editions and which apparently was written by neither Trenchard nor Gordon.]

7. *The Fourth Collection of Cato's Political Letters in the London Journal*. London: Printed for J. Peele, 1721. 52 pp. [Comprising Letters 23–29 (April 1–May 13, 1721).]

8. *The Fifth Collection of Cato's Political Letters in the London Journal*. London: Printed for J. Peele, 1721. 64 pp. [Comprising Letters 30–38 (May 20–July 22, 1721).]

9. *The Sixth Collection of Cato's Political Letters in the London Journal*. London: Printed for J. Peele, 1722. 64 pp. [Comprising Letters 48, 55, 56, and 59–63 (October 14, December 2, December 9, and December 30–January 27, 1721).]

10. *The Seventh Collection of Cato's Political Letters in the London Journal*. London: Printed for J. Peele, 1722. 94 pp. [Comprising Letters 64–73 (February 3–April 21, 1722).]

11. *The Eighth Collection of Cato's Political Letters in the London Journal*. London: Printed for J. Peele, 1722. 58 pp. [Comprising Letters 75, 76, and 80–85 (May 5, May 12, and June 9–July 14, 1722).]

12. *The Ninth and Last Collection of Cato's Political Letters in the London Journal*. London: Printed for J. Peele, 1723. 64 pp. [Comprising Letters 86–93 (July 21–September 8, 1722).]

13. *A Collection of Cato's Political Letters in the London Journal*. London: Printed for J. Peele, 1721–23. 7 vols. in 1. [Entries 5–10, bound in one volume.]

14. *A Collection of Cato's Political Letters in the London Journal*. London: Printed for J. Peele, 1722–23. 9 vols. in 2. [Entries 5–12, bound in two volumes.]

15. *A Collection of Cato's Letters in the British Journal*. London: Printed for T. Woodward and J. Walthoe, 1723. 3 vols.

16. *Cato's Letters*. London: Printed for W. Wilkins, T. Woodward, J. Walthoe, and J. Peele, 1724. 4 vols. [Comprising the 138 letters, all undated, that form the body of the work.]
17. *Cato's Letters; or, Essays on Liberty, Civil and Religious, and Other Important Subjects*. 3d ed., carefully corrected. London: Printed for W. Wilkins, T. Woodward, J. Walthoe, and J. Peele, 1733. 4 vols. [Comprising all 138 letters, dated and marked as to author, plus an appendix of six letters by Gordon.]
18. *Cato's Letters; or, Essays on Liberty, Civil and Religious, and Other Important Subjects*. 4th ed., corrected. London: Printed for W. Wilkins, T. Woodward, J. Walthoe, and J. Peele, 1737. 4 vols.
19. *Cato's Letters; or, Essays on Liberty, Civil and Religious, and Other Important Subjects*. 5th ed., corrected. London: Printed for T. Woodward, J. Walthoe, 1748. 4 vols.
20. *Cato's Letters; or, Essays on Liberty, Civil and Religious, and Other Important Subjects*. Berwick: Printed and Sold by R. Taylor, 1754. 4 vols. [Pirated?]
21. *Cato's Letters; or, Essays on Liberty, Civil and Religious, and Other Important Subjects*. 6th ed., corrected. London: Printed for J. Walthoe, T. and T. Longman [etc.], 1755. 4 vols.
22. *The English Libertarian Heritage: From the Writings of John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon in "The Independent Whig" and "Cato's Letters."* Edited by David L. Jacobson. American Heritage Series. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965. Reprinted with a foreword by Ronald Hamowy, San Francisco: Fox & Wilkes, 1994. [Contains excerpts from thirty-two of the letters and a lengthy introduction on Trenchard and Gordon by the editor.]

## FACSIMILE EDITIONS

1. *Cato's Letters; or, Essays on Liberty, Civil and Religious, and Other Important Subjects*. Photofacsimile edition of the 3d ed., corrected [1733]. New York: Russell & Russell, 1969. 4 vols. in 2.
2. *Cato's Letters; or, Essays on Liberty, Civil and Religious, and Other Important Subjects*. Photofacsimile edition of the 6th ed., corrected [1755]. New York: Da Capo Press, 1971. 4 vols. in 2.

## *Editor's Note*

The text of the letters has been taken from the 1755 edition, printed in London in four volumes. This was the sixth edition, and despite its being replete with typographical errors, it was marked as a “corrected” edition.

This new edition offers minimally modernized versions of the letters, which were quite readable as they originally appeared. Certain guidelines affecting spelling, capitalization, punctuation, and other aspects of style have been applied throughout, with consistency as one goal and fidelity to the meaning and spirit of the text as another.

Thus, spelling has been modernized, but only to the point where the flavor of the eighteenth-century text was not jeopardized. Such words as *haveing*, *belye*, and *jackells*, for example, have been rendered in their modern forms as *having*, *belie*, and *jackals*, while other words, such as *politick* and *oeconomy*, have been left to stand as examples of eighteenth-century orthography. British spellings have not been Americanized. Outright spelling errors, however, have been silently changed.

In modernizing the punctuation, extraneous marks such as dashes following commas or semicolons were deleted. To the modern reader these marks are duplicative and distracting. Punctuation has rarely been added except in two cases: missing apostrophes were silently affixed to possessives and missing quotation marks were added where the context called for them and when it appeared that the quotation was, in real-

ity, a quotation and not a paraphrase. Often the original text indicated quoted material by italicizing it; in these instances quotation marks were substituted. Where the original text *did* employ quotation marks, closing marks were sometimes missing; these have been silently added.

Longer quotations, in accordance with modern practice, have been set off in indented blocks except where the quotation was extremely long. Although the reader should have no problem in determining where Trenchard and Gordon are repeating the words of another author, quotation marks have been added to the beginning of each paragraph of all extended non-indented quotations.

Capitalization has been extensively modernized, especially because the original text capitalized almost all nouns. The original capitalization has been preserved for the italicized summaries preceding each letter. In all other cases capitals have been retained only for proper nouns and certain titles. Thus, where the word "King" did not appear to refer to a specific monarch or was not employed in a formulaic expression, it became "king."

Italics, as has been noted, have been eliminated when their purpose was to indicate quoted material. In addition, the italicization of proper nouns, standard in the original text, has also been dropped. Other elements that were italicized, such as short maxims, book titles, and foreign words, have been left as they appeared in the sixth edition.

## *A Note on the Dates of* Cato's Letters

The legal calendar in England until December 31, 1751, was the Julian, or Old Style, calendar, which was eleven days behind the Gregorian, or New Style, calendar in use throughout the rest of Europe, except Russia. Additionally, until the end of 1751 the beginning of the new year did not begin until Lady Day, March 25. Thus, Letter 9, dated December 31, 1720, is followed by Letter 10, dated January 3, 1720, since there was no change of year on January 1. If these two dates were translated into the Gregorian calendar—currently in use—Letter 9 would carry the date January 11, 1721, and Letter 10 would be dated January 14, 1721 (eleven days after January 3, to which would be added a change of year). To avoid confusion, the original dating of these letters has been retained, although the reader should keep in mind that the dates attached to Cato's letters are Old Style. On the other hand, all dates that appear in the editor's notes, unless otherwise indicated, are in New Style.

## *A Note on the Notes*

All notes to the text preceded by a number are the editor's. Because *Cato's Letters* is likely to be of interest to readers in a variety of disciplines, identification is supplied for all but the most prominent people and historical events to which the authors allude. In addition, translations (and sources) are given for all Latin quotations in the text, despite the fact that the authors—here one refers particularly to Thomas Gordon—occasionally employed rather florid translations. Definitions are offered for those English words that are either archaic or border on being archaic. Because of the exigencies of space, identifications and definitions have been provided only at the first mention of the person or event or at first use of the word. When classical figures are first identified, the name under which they are generally indexed has been italicized, in part because of the confusion that often attaches to Roman names when attempting to distinguish the nomen from the cognomen and when determining under which of these the person is most often cited.

## *Acknowledgments*

The research for this project was undertaken at several libraries, and I should like to take this opportunity to express my appreciation to their staffs for the help shown me. They are the British Library, London; the Library of Congress; the University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill; the University of Alberta Library; the Stanford University Library; and the Huntington Library in San Marino, California.

Because of the nature of this project, spanning a vast array of historical specifics from widely differing areas, I have, at one point or another, called upon the help of a large number of people. To all of them I owe a debt of gratitude for their time and patience. Most particularly, I should like to thank Professor Daniel Gargola of the Department of History of the University of Kentucky, who provided the Latin translations that appear in the footnotes. Among the many others who were kind enough to help me with points of historical or technical detail are Professor William M. Bartley of the University of Saskatchewan, Professor Doris Bergen of the University of Vermont, Dr. David Hayton of the Institute of Historical Research, University of London, Professor Dwyrdd Jones of the University of York, Professor Robert Knecht of the University of Birmingham, Dr. Ron McCail of the University of Edinburgh, Professor John Miller of the University of London, Professor Roy Pinkerton of the University of Edinburgh, Dr. Christopher Storrs, and Professors Ehud Ben-Zvi, George



Rothrock, Alistair Small, and Nicholas Wickenden, all of the University of Alberta.

I am especially indebted to Professor Harry Dickinson of the University of Edinburgh, who was unfailingly generous with his time and energy in helping me to track down some of the more arcane references appearing in the letters. His help was a reminder of one of the more rewarding aspects of scholarship: a sincere sense of collegiality.

I should also like to express my gratitude to those students who assisted me in the preparation of this edition: Michael Francis, Dusten Stewart, Oleg Roslak, and, especially, Leonard Szabo, whose master's thesis centered on *Cato's Letters*. Allen James and Robert Cole, who acted as my research assistants, worked with diligence and energy on my behalf.

Finally, my greatest debt is to Clement Ho, for his patience and unfailing help throughout the whole of this project.

## *Introduction*

On November 5, 1720, the *London Journal*, one of the numerous opposition newspapers then in circulation, launched a series of letters under the pseudonym “Cato.”<sup>1</sup> They attacked the government on a wide range of issues, which, over the course of the three years the letters were to appear, dealt with almost every aspect of political theory and practice then regarded as pertinent to contemporary British life. The letters were written with such vigor and eloquence that they soon made the *London Journal* the nation’s most influential paper and a particularly vexatious irritant to the administration. The immediate occasion of the letters was the bursting of the South Sea Bubble, which had precipitated a financial crisis of huge proportions earlier that year. The authors of the letters, John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon, had taken the position, shared by the more radical Whigs and soon borne out by the evidence, that the crisis was due in large part to the machinations of the officers of the South Sea Company, who had connived with members of the government and of the royal court to bilk the public, even at the cost of triggering a financial debacle.

1. The name was chosen to honor Cato the Younger (95–46 B.C.), the implacable opponent of Julius Caesar whose unswerving dedication to republican principles and liberty won him immense admiration in the eighteenth century. When it became clear that Caesar’s forces would triumph over those of the Senate, Cato fortified himself in the city of Utica and, rather than flee or be captured alive, stabbed himself after reading Plato’s treatise on the immortality of the soul.

The arguments with which Trenchard and Gordon attacked the alliance between the South Sea directors and members of the government who sought to manipulate the price of South Sea stock to their own advantage reflected the authors' broader views on the nature of politics and the proper limits of government. But the South Sea crisis was by no means the sole concern of *Cato's Letters*. Of the 138 letters comprising the original collection,<sup>2</sup> only about a dozen are devoted to the subject and to the dangers inherent in such financial enterprises, while the remainder range over a wide variety of topics of public concern, including questions of public morality and, most importantly, theoretical discussions of the idea of liberty and the nature of tyranny. The political convictions expressed in the letters are at almost every turn consistent with the natural law and natural rights theories earlier embraced by the radical Whig writers and particularly by John Locke in his *Second Treatise of Government*. The authors of *Cato's Letters* closely echo Locke in defining political authority in terms of inalienable rights and in claiming that we derive our liberty directly from our nature as human beings. "All men are born free," they state. "Liberty is a gift which they receive from God himself; nor can they alienate the same by consent, though possibly they may forfeit it by crimes."<sup>3</sup> The theoretical principle upon which Cato based the authority and compass of government is our inherent right to defend ourselves against those who would trespass against our lives, liberty, or property. The notion that the laws of nature and the contract by which civil society is established constrain the sovereign to safeguarding the lives and estates of his subjects, possibly the most important legacy of Lockean theory, informs the whole of *Cato's Letters*. This proposition defines the limits of legitimate state action for both Locke and Cato. When government seeks to impose constraints upon our natural and absolute liberty beyond those necessary to enforce "the laws of

2. Beginning with the third edition of the *Letters*, published in 1733, Gordon appended six letters to the collection, bringing the total number of letters in the series to 144. These six supplementary letters were originally published in the *British Journal* between August 24 and December 7, 1723, and were written by Gordon under the pseudonym "Criton."

3. Letter 59 (p. 406).

agreement and society," it becomes despotic and must eventually fall to revolution.

Trenchard and Gordon's radicalism is evidenced by their particular fondness for the Whig revolutionary martyr, Algernon Sidney, whose *Discourses Concerning Government* was one of the leading treatises on the rights of resistance to tyrannical government. Two notions—that the rights of Englishmen rested on the ancient constitution, and that these self-same rights had their origin in the laws of nature, from which our rights are derived directly prior to the establishment of civil society—appear throughout Sidney's work and were embraced by all radical Whigs. And Sidney's views pervade the whole of *Cato's Letters*, two of which are nothing more than extended quotations from the *Discourses*.<sup>4</sup>

Trenchard and Gordon's apprehensions regarding tyranny in part account for their particular concern with the danger posed to England by Jacobites and papists. Religious questions, especially those having political implications, were of crucial interest to the authors, who were writing in a period beset by Jacobite plots and conspiracies. This in great measure accounts for their rabid anti-Catholicism. Popery was widely associated with the worst excesses of Stuart rule and with the most barbarous and depraved forms of superstition and oppression, and opposition to it was an intrinsic part of the radical orthodoxy to which Trenchard and Gordon subscribed; they saw in the Church of Rome an instrument dedicated to undermining the Revolutionary Settlement of 1688 and to restoring Stuart despotism. Their abhorrence extended to all those who embraced High Church views, which they judged equally pernicious. Indeed, Trenchard and Gordon's Low Church credentials were beyond dispute. They had earlier that year cooperated in writing and publishing an anonymous weekly entitled *The Independent Whig*,<sup>5</sup> which, in passionate lan-

4. Letter 26 (pp. 188–94), on the effects of general corruption, and Letter 37 (pp. 262–66), on good and evil magistrates.

5. *The Independent Whig* began publication on January 20, 1720 and went through fifty-three numbers; its last issue appeared on January 4, 1721. Of these, twenty-two were written by Gordon, eighteen by Trenchard, and ten by a third writer, later identified by Gordon only by the letter C. Evidence sug-