John Locke, William Penn, and the Question of Locke's Pardon

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.5206/ls.2008.1011

Keywords: John Locke

Abstract

Shortly after Locke’s death, Jean Le Clerc began collecting materials for the short biography he was planning to publish in the periodical he edited, the Bibliothèque Choisie. He had known Locke in Holland but had very little knowledge of his earlier career in England, and he sought information from some of his English friends. One of these was Lady Masham, who sent a long letter detailing what she knew or had been able to find out from some of Locke’s other friends. One of the things she mentioned was that Locke had once received, but had turned down, the offer of a pardon:

After the Death of King Charles, Mr. Penn (with whom Mr. Locke had been long before acquainted in the Universitie, and than whom no man did ever more generously make use of Court Favour for the Service of others) undertook to procure a Pardon for Mr. Locke of King James and (as I am told) it was actually offer’d him, but he would not accept of it as not owning that he needed it.

Le Clerc was deeply appreciative for information of this kind, and in his biography, published a few months later, he repeated Lady Masham’s account almost word for word:

Après la mort du Roi Charles II, qui arriva le 16. de Fevrier 1685. Mr. Penn, que Mr. Locke avoit connu dans l’Université, & qui employa avec beaucoup de générosité le credit, qu’il avoit alors auprès du Roi Jaques, enterprit d’en obtenir un pardon pour lui, & l’auroit en effet obtenu; si Mr. Locke n’avoit répondu qu’il n’avoit que faire de pardon, puis qu’il n’avoit commis aucun crime.

Le Clerc’s account was quickly translated into English and was published the following year. During the remainder of the eighteenth century many further short biographies of Locke were published, but these contained nothing new, in most cases being simply paraphrases or abridgements of Le Clerc’s account. It was not until 1829, when Lord King published The Life and Letters of John Locke, that any new material came to light. King accepted Le Clerc’s account of Penn’s efforts on Locke’s behalf, but he added that Locke had also received similar help from the Earl of Pembroke. In support of this he published, from Locke’s papers, a letter from Pembroke, written in August 1685, which, though it did not specifically mention a pardon, certainly did show that Pembroke had spoken to James II on Locke’s behalf and had received assurances from him. King also printed a letter from another of Locke’s friends, David Thomas, which mentioned that James Tyrrell had told him that ‘Will. Penn hath moved the King for a pardon for you, which was as readily granted’. This letter was dated November 1687, but King did not explain how the pardon Locke had now been granted related to the one he had supposedly turned down two years previously.
William "Legis, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2009. An overview of Locke's philosophy by one of the most complete philosophy websites on the web. Additional Resources John Locke's Manuscripts: A website with letters to and from Locke, a chronology of his life, a bibliography of Locke sources and a link to additional resources.