Preface: Volume 1

The Sidneys of Penshurst Place, near Tonbridge in Kent, were justifiably proud of their distinguished historical and cultural heritage and sustained personal service to the English monarchy for over two hundred years between 1500 and 1700. Through their remarkable range of literary works and their impact on national and international affairs they remain today of paramount importance to literary scholars and historians. The imaginative creativity of Sir Philip Sidney, along with his acclaimed political identity as a hero of Continental Protestant militancy, tended to dominate literary discussions until the mid-twentieth century, but other members of the family are now widely recognized as having made a major contribution to the development of English literature. Sir Philip’s sister, Mary Sidney Herbert, Countess of Pembroke, became the first widely celebrated non-royal woman writer and patron in England; and her brother, Robert Sidney, first Earl of Leicester, was also a poet and patron of letters and music. His daughter, Lady Mary Wroth, is now acknowledged not only as the most important imitator of Sir Philip Sidney’s writings in prose, verse, and drama, but also as a major literary figure in her own right.

From a political perspective and from the latter half of the seventeenth century, the constitutional significance of Algernon Sidney’s republican writings has long been recognized, but other earlier family members also played a major role in English politics. Sir William Sidney, the founder of the family’s fortunes at the early Tudor court and a close associate of King Henry VIII, was appointed as governor to the household of the infant Prince Edward. His son, Sir Henry Sidney, served Queen Elizabeth in the taxing roles of Lord President of Wales and Lord Deputy in Ireland. Various other seventeenth-century Sidneys, most notably William and Philip Herbert, third and fourth Earls of Pembroke (the sons of Mary Sidney Herbert, Countess of Pembroke, and the “incomparable pair of brethren” of the Shakespeare First Folio), and Robert Sidney, second Earl of Leicester, held important court and diplomatic positions. The constitutional significance of the Sidneys culminated in the leading role played by Henry Sidney, Earl of Romney (the youngest brother of Algernon), in ensuring the succession of the Dutch House of Orange to the English throne in 1689.

The Sidneys’ sustained personal interaction with members of the royal court at this period can only be rivaled by a few other influential English families, such as the Dudleys (Earls of Warwick and Leicester and Duke of Northumberland), the Herberts (Earls of Pembroke and Montgomery), Percys (Earls of Northumberland), Cecils (Lord Burghley and Earls of Salisbury and Exeter), Talbots (Earls of Shrewsbury), and Howards (Earls of Arundel, Northampton, Nottingham, Suffolk, and Surrey, and Earls and Dukes of Norfolk). Significantly, many members of these distinguished families enjoyed close personal and official dealings with the Sidneys themselves.

In common with other dynastic families of the period, the Sidneys regularly commissioned family portraits from the leading artists of the day, many of which still remain in the major private art collection at Penshurst Place, with a selection from these paintings included by kind permission of their owner, Viscount De L’Isle, as illustrations to this first volume of The Ashgate Research Companion to the Sidneys (1500–1700). These portraits eloquently testify...
to the Sidneys’ determination to preserve a lasting historical sense of the importance of their family name and dynasty. Architectural historians have also long focused attention on Penshurst Place, granted to Sir William Sidney by the young King Edward VI and still today in the ownership of the Sidney family, as one of the most important late medieval and Tudor private homes in England. This striking and idyllic country residence provided not only a personal and intellectual focus for their literary, political, and cultural engagements, but also a psychologically reassuring and often idealized family home for successive generations of the Sidneys. More recently, architectural and cultural research has also focused on the Herbert family’s vast London mansion, Baynard’s Castle, where the Sidneys often stayed between 1550 and 1650, and their own now lost seventeenth-century London mansion, Leicester House, built by Robert Sidney, second Earl of Leicester, and (significantly, since he was often away from London on court and diplomatic duties) his wife Dorothy.

The Ashgate Research Companion to the Sidneys (1500–1700) offers forty-two specially commissioned and previously unpublished essays by both senior and more junior academics on this remarkable family’s central historical and cultural importance to the Tudor and Stuart periods. All of the contributors bring considerable expertise and fresh insights to their chosen fields of research. This first volume of the collection, comprising twenty-one chapters, seeks to establish the current state of scholarship in a diverse range of historical, biographical, geographical, and cultural areas of Sidneian studies, and no less importantly, to map out possible new areas and avenues of future research for the next generation of Sidney scholars. These chapters therefore place a distinct emphasis not only upon how these multifaceted and interdisciplinary fields of study are currently understood, but also how they might be explored in new and challenging ways.

The Sidneys, originally a Kentish gentry family, owed their rise to public prominence at the Tudor royal court to Sir William Sidney, who served Henry VIII with distinction both as a naval commander and at the Battle of Flodden against the Scots in 1513. Sir William was chosen to supervise the early guardianship and education of Henry VIII’s only son and heir, Prince Edward, who as King Edward VI, died in the arms of Sir William’s son, Sir Henry Sidney. Sir Henry, who served Queen Elizabeth for long periods as both President of her Council in Wales and her Lord Deputy in Ireland, bonded the Sidneys with the powerful and intensely ambitious Dudley family through his marriage to Mary Dudley, sister of Robert, Earl of Leicester. The careers and accomplishments of three of Sir Henry’s children, Sir Philip Sidney, Robert Sidney, first Earl of Leicester, and Mary Sidney Herbert, Countess of Pembroke, have dominated Sidneian literary studies for many decades. But, as the chapters in this volume demonstrate, they made major contributions to the historical and cultural developments of the late Elizabethan and early Stuart courts, enjoying a significant presence in English public life and on the Continent. Later generations of the Sidneys, including Robert, second Earl of Leicester, his son, the republican Algernon Sidney, Algernon’s youngest brother Henry Sidney, Earl of Romney, and their nephew Robert Spencer, second Earl of Sunderland, all played major roles in public and political life. Their experiences, as traced in this collection of historical and culturally focused essays, provide a richly informative insight into the lives of a closely knit and highly politicized English family from the Civil War, through the Interregnum and Commonwealth, to the Restoration and Exclusion Crisis and accession of William III in 1689.

In recent years it has been increasingly appreciated that a distinctive characteristic of the Sidneys at this period lies in their highly educated women often being as politically and culturally influential as male members of the family. The essays in this first volume therefore focus specifically and extensively upon the importance of Mary Dudley Sidney (Sir Henry’s wife) and her influential family network, and the prominence at court and in literary matters of Mary Sidney Herbert, Countess of Pembroke, whose marriage to Henry
Herbert, second Earl of Pembroke, provided the Sidneys with, arguably, their most important and long-lasting family connection with the Herbets of Wilton. Other chapters explore the family significance to the Sidneys of Lettice, Penelope, and Dorothy Devereux and Frances Walsingham Sidney (the wife of Sir Philip Sidney); Barbara Gamage Sidney, Countess of Leicester; Elizabeth Sidney Manners, Countess of Rutland (Sir Philip Sidney’s daughter), and Lady Mary Wroth, whose imaginatively diverse writings are now recognized as having played a key role in sustaining the Sidney family’s unparalleled literary productivity at this period. During the seventeenth century the family’s court and political fortunes rested heavily upon the intelligence, court connections, and diplomatic skills of Dorothy Percy Sidney, Countess of Leicester, and Dorothy Sidney Spencer, Countess of Sunderland. This collection of essays conclusively demonstrates that, without taking into account the achievements of the Sidney women, only a partial understanding of the importance and influence of this prominent family can be appreciated.

This first volume also focuses research upon the Sidneys’ dominant role in both Ireland and Wales during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, alongside their wide-ranging political and cultural interests, both as observers and interventionists, in Continental affairs during the Tudor and Stuart periods. Their interests in the visual arts and music are also explored in detail since both merit further investigation, as do their major architectural endeavors at Penshurst Place and their London residence, Leicester House. The Sidneys’ reputation for literary patronage has already proved a long-standing area of literary investigation, but there is still important work to be done on their patronage of not only literature, but also other arts during the Tudor period, and especially the entire seventeenth century.

As proposed in “Future Sidney Studies,” the concluding chapter to the second volume of this collection, there still remains much work to be done on the Sidneys by other scholars. These areas incorporate the already familiar topics of literary criticism, historical analysis, book history, material studies, and a continuing expansion of both academic and popular interest in diverse members of the Sidney family other than its still most renowned figure, Sir Philip Sidney. Fresh ideas and approaches will surely be brought to these areas by new generations of researchers, along with a broader and still developing awareness of the major significance of the Sidneys during this period to the manuscript and print circulation of their original works, their book collecting, their religious and theological perspectives, and their substantial and sometimes crucial contribution to English political debate and constitutional affairs.

In conclusion, this collection demonstrates that several key areas of Sidney studies definitely merit further and sustained examination by other scholars. The last twenty-five years have seen a timely and influential growth in interest in the activities and achievements of the female members of the Sidney family, but more work remains to be done in exploring and defining the contribution to both private and court life of the Sidney family’s remarkable mothers, daughters, wives, and other female relatives and friends. It is also apparent from essays included in this collection that further examination of the Sidneys’ involvements in Continental affairs and international exploration may prove a fruitful area of investigation. Likewise, the art collections (especially portraiture) and voluminous personal papers of the Sidneys have more recently become major new areas of historical and critical study, but much further work still remains to be done, as is also the case with their voluminous personal and public correspondence with an impressively wide network of relatives, friends, and political associates, both within the British Isles and abroad. In this respect, the Sidney family’s published works and private archive of personal and estate papers (now at the Kent History and Library Centre) remain among the most important surviving collections of manuscript and printed documents from the early modern period. They offer an unrivaled opportunity to understand the public and private affairs, as well as the psychological and cultural affairs, of this prominent family.
intellectual workings, of these prominent, creative, and memorable members of the Tudor and Stuart aristocracy and county gentry.

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