

## God's Instruments: Political Conduct in the England of Oliver Cromwell

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Martyn Bennett

This is a judiciously edited and structured collection of arguably the most important of Blair Worden's essays. It is always possible to question the reasons for republishing essays that have appeared elsewhere, especially in this case, as none of these essays have been resting in obscurity and they are all available in print and electronic forms via institutional libraries the world over. A number, however, are very new and this manifestation may well be the first appearance that some readers are aware of. In any case the question here can be answered positively and firmly, as while the essays are each in themselves important, the value of the book is far greater than the sum of its already estimable parts.

Professor Worden argues his case for creating the volume somewhat modestly and states clearly that it was OUP that approached him with the project; nevertheless the opportunity provided allowed him to address what he perceived as problems with the earlier versions of some of the essays, and in half of the cases to make substantial changes to them to expand on his understanding, or incorporate within them other approaches which have made themselves apparent during the intervening years. However, he has actually made fewer changes to the earliest essays, and this is a bold move, as one would expect essays now approaching 30 years of published life to require more alteration. His justification, which bears supportive relation, is that those essays were an attempt to challenge existing orthodoxies in the historical process regarding the ideology of Puritanism. Puritanism as a manifestation of ideologies had been subsumed by sociological approaches which in many ways reduced religious expression to the status of a code – significant only in what it revealed about the development of capitalism. It was not enough that those very

ideologies were themselves already well-removed from the sympathies and understandings of the 20th century, it was as if the 20<sup>th</sup>-century observers were lecturing the Puritans on what they really meant in their naive statements. The three essays, 'Cromwell and the sins of Achan', 'Providence and politics' and 'Toleration and the Protectorate', are as refreshing now as they were to read originally for those of us who were unconvinced by approaches to religion which suggested that somehow we modern and more knowing people knew instinctively what Cromwell and his fellow godly people really meant when they gave voice to their beliefs. Thus in those essays we can begin to appreciate the need to try and comprehend what people meant when they spoke of God and their relationship to him and, moreover, how they were struggling to understand and justify their actions and reactions to events, which as Professor Worden points out, were 'unexpected in their extent'. Cromwell and others were truly wrestling with God, or at least the sort of runes God was casting in the shape of the events and outcomes of the Civil Wars, in an effort to discover what he wanted them to do by looking at his rewards and punishments. When Cromwell and his colleagues strove to express in words what they understood from their divinations, they were not making codified references to a determinist history which had yet to be defined as such – their statements were grounded in personal religious experience and understanding. When Charles I (and later the regicides or the act of regicide) were identified with Achan it was a real attempt to understand the cause of the country's woes, not a plaster of an excuse to cover social and economic revolution or evolution. Achan was identified by God as the root cause of the Israelites' catastrophic defeat following their successful capture of Jericho. Such a defeat was seen as analogous to the catastrophe of Civil War and the Irish Rebellion and thus another Achan was found in the person of Charles I. The lesson was clear, only the destruction of Achan and his family could expiate the reprobate state of the nation. This searching for historical and religious precedent was a genuine attempt to understand the run up to the regicide and later, the dark, depressing days following the debacle at Hispaniola. The three essays remain (unaltered) at the heart of our understanding of the thought processes of some of the 'Puritans', and (through association with the attempt to understand the meaning of Achan's story) of those Royalists who sought also to use providential readings as a means of understanding the fall of the British monarchies, when they attempted to find a cause for what they saw as the evil of the republic.

The five more heavily-altered essays, of which Professor Worden makes a spirited (and unnecessary) defence, are longer expositions, and are more recent, dating chiefly, at least in terms of publication, to this present century, even if there were earlier versions of the ideas behind them. The book as a whole provides an incisive analysis of the history of the period and the Protectorate in particular, in terms of how it operated and functioned and who was responsible for what happening. The essay on the Protectorate Council is valuable in its own right: the detailed and perceptive analysis of the day-to-day functioning of the Council membership enables us to see the nascent state at work and the seriousness with which that work was undertaken. Its coupling here with the essay on the single rule is exceedingly useful and instructive, as it places the day-to-day activities in the context of the relative importance of the Council itself. In many ways the essays hint at the failure of the Council to demonstrate clearly its role in government, thus opening it to accusations of being an ineffective lap dog dominated by its (single) master. The essay sandwiched between these two, that covering 'Cromwell and the Protectorate', broadens the discussion and explores the failure of the wider world to understand Cromwell – a point made in the chapter on the Council – or the real nature of the Republic. The Council was clearly understood to be subordinate to Cromwell and the centrality of Cromwell was enhanced by the (often wilful) failure to understand the nature of the relationships at the heart of government. It is not too fanciful to suggest that in a nascent regime such as the Protectorate, there was little understanding within the state either as regards its nature, for in its short life it remained unformed and incomplete. What was not appreciated was that Cromwell and his co-instruments did not represent a despotic regime feathering a small number of nests. Perhaps in time this collective failing would have been overcome: the irony was there was no time for the regime, its governmental machinery and even the internal opposition to it to mature and stabilise. Together the triumvirate of essays provide one of the most authoritative studies of the Protectorate's failings and foibles.

The essay which covers the relationship between the University of Oxford and Cromwell at first glance appears almost to stand alone – although the book's final chapter reduces this impression. Nevertheless, such an exploration of Cromwell's relationship with a single institution may be seen as incongruous when viewed

beside essays dealing with the State Council, Parliament and government as a whole. Yet the essay adds certain 'roundness' or 'fulsomeness' to the collection, and the joke (rightly) retained about the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) adds welcome context. Seeing how the ideas and beliefs of the protectorate and its operatives permeated the higher education sector shows a practical application of their spiritual understanding and the need for reform and control within the education system which would provide their successors and many of their operatives, and also the means to fill the empty pulpits of the dark corners of the nation.

Chapter eight focusses on mid 17th-century meaning of religious and civil liberty, beginning with the 19th-century understanding that Cromwell had not only instituted that dynamic pair, but had set it in motion to be the greatest glory of the 19th century. This supplanted the adulation hitherto afforded to the Glorious Revolution on the same grounds. Professor Worden looks at how these two facets became intertwined. It certainly was natural in 1642 to refer to the two together but using different terms. Political liberty and the liberties of parliament were loudly called for and proclaimed by turn, but religion was described generally as being under threat from popery or innovations; liberty in religion was a weakness, not a strength. It took several years for religious liberty to be twinned with political liberty, rather than the pairing being political liberty and a defence of religion, and Professor Worden precisely defines the changes which enabled that relationship to alter, identifying four chief stages to the point at which all contending groups at the fall of the Protectorate were able to assert that they stood for both civil and religious liberties. Whilst the fragmentation of religious hegemony in the mid 1640s was an important spur to the call for religious liberty, the phrase came into use in Leveller texts in the late 1640s when the fruits of victory won by the 'sectarian' New Model Army appeared under threat; one of those fruits being religious liberty: ironically perhaps, it was Cromwell who brought the dualism to the political forefront: another example perhaps of the way that the consequences of the Civil War period were unlooked for.

The final two essays move away from the central focus of the rest of the collection. Professor Worden identifies a series of themes which permeate Milton's writings, one of these being liberty which mutated or rather developed as the revolution itself developed. It is seen here as at its best as a state of the mind or soul and the unfettered exercise of choice. Here Milton was really discussing the way an individual chose the nature of his or her relationship to God rather than the broader definitions which later liberals attached to the term and thus identified with Milton, which brings us back to the theme of the misinterpretation by later generations of texts produced in the revolution. The exploration of the work of John Milton is an important one, tracing Milton's shift to political writing from the sort of intercessionary prose that had marked the war years, which coincided with the regicide. It was this, as well as some of his secular arguments such as that in favour of divorce, which drew upon Milton opprobrium, but also in 1660 led him into the dangerous world of Royalist revenge and anger. This explains in part his decade-long withdrawal from prose, and into the completion of his great poetical work, *Paradise Lost*, which (whilst political and concerned with spiritual choice) probably mistakenly seemed less threatening than his political prose. That Milton remained a didactic writer even in the years when he was under the shadow of the Restoration acts as an interesting counterpoint to the book's earlier explorations of the almost runic interpretations of providence.

The final essay takes a surprising turn, given the book's title, by looking at Edward Hyde, Earl of Clarendon, the widely-acknowledged great historian of the period. Clarendon was of course a Royalist. He is often portrayed as a moderating figure in the king's circle in the early 1640s, in the company of Edward Culpepper and Viscount Falkland. However, as Professor Worden points out, Clarendon should not be mistaken for an empathetic political moderate. Nor was he one who held the institution of parliament in great awe. Clarendon did not hold with the extreme end of the divinity of monarchs (the belief in divine right) but he was a believer in a powerful monarch limited by a constitution (not to be mistaken for a believer in mixed monarchy), but limited more importantly by his or her own understanding and guided by wise counsel (by people, in fact, like Clarendon himself). We need to remember that Clarendon believed the king was not tough enough in some areas of governance and it was this weakness that cost him the throne. Nevertheless, Clarendon's often judicious and principled history of the period provides a valued counterpoint to the perceptions of the parliamentarian godly, without the excess of bile brought on by memories of 15 years of

defeat and exile perceptible in other Royalist histories.

This then is a valuable collection of work which presents a rounded view – a circumnavigation if you like – of the republican experience. It has been a pleasure to read the earlier essays again at a more leisurely pace when the schedule of a publication process has not demanded immediacy. It is a collection which deserves to be treasured (and will be, by this author at least – and surely he will be in good company); it will be revisited for its salutary and important wisdom.

The author does not wish to respond, merely stating that: 'I would risk damaging my character by lingering on Martyn Bennett's very generous remarks'.

**Other reviews:**

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<http://www.historytoday.com/blair-warden/historys-heroic-age> [3]

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