

## **Black Tom: Sir Thomas Fairfax and the English Revolution**

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**Reviewer:**

Martyn Bennett

I have always enjoyed reading Andrew Hopper's work. It is an especial pleasure when compiling my reviews for the *Annual Bulletin of Historical Literature* as in most years it contains an article by Hopper (usually on the subject of the north during the civil wars). It was a surprise to see a biography of an aristocrat from an historian whose work is usually about those somewhat further down the social scale. A similar point was made when I began work on my biography of Oliver Cromwell a few years back. It was, nevertheless, an exciting prospect to read such a biography and Hopper is right to make comments about how few full biographies there are of Sir Thomas. Indeed there are sections in the book where there is evidence of some frustration with the prominence given to others, particularly Cromwell. Much of this is fair comment too and, as Hopper shows, Fairfax made the same point in the 1660s when he said 'my retirement makes me seem dead to the world' (p183). This perception is probably a very general one; I have been told with great confidence that a portrait of Sir Thomas was that of 'one of Cromwell's generals' while in Fairfax House in York. This is therefore a much needed book and, given the popularity of biography amongst the public it offers the opportunity to begin to change perceptions, not only about who was whose general but more importantly about Fairfax's role in the politics of the 1640s and particularly the creation of the republic.

Hopper has chosen to present the biography as a work of 'two halves', similar to Sarah Barber's *A Revolutionary Rogue: Henry Marten and the English Republic* (Stroud, 2000). The first 'half' is a chronological biographical study, which reminded me of the tone of Peter Gaunt's *Oliver Cromwell*, (Oxford, 1996); the second is a themed analysis, reminiscent of J. C. Davis's *Oliver Cromwell*, (London, 2001) as well as the latter two-thirds of Barber's work on Marten. Thus in the first half we progress from an examination of the Fairfaxes and the opening of the war (a subject which is Hopper's home turf grounded as it is in popular politics in Yorkshire during the civil wars). There is a swift progression through Sir Thomas's

career in the first and second civil wars, on to the regicide and establishment of the republic in 1649. The republic and restoration, aided by Fairfax's being 'dead to the world', is dealt with in a mere 15 pages.

The second half explores the salient themes of which, as you would expect, there are many: Fairfax and the causes of the civil wars; questions of honour and religion; Sir Thomas and his image; and a look at the way Sir Thomas his relatives sought to write themselves into history. There is one section which may surprise some - gender and literature - and another whose inclusion may be understandable given what Hopper writes about the lack of biographies of Fairfax and the discussion above: Fairfax and Cromwell.

The first part of the book is fast paced; although it slows down in places where, in order to develop the discussion, Hopper contextualises Fairfax in the local politics of Yorkshire. The quickened pace is with us right from the start and his depiction of the dramatic rally on Heworth Moor, (then two miles east of the walls of York, now embraced by its purple-grey bricked suburbia). As the then Sir Thomas, attempted to press a petition on the king but was fended off by Charles's minders, the folly of trying to stop a war with paper was played out. The pace slackens as there is an attempt to give a background analysis of what brought about this dramatic and symbolic but otherwise fruitless scene. This lull in pace is symptomatic of the work's problematic structure for while the full analysis of the background of these events is reserved for part two of the book, a tantalising and tangible vision of popular fear such as this needs an accompanying explanation.

The pace picks up again, however, and we are virtually hurled through the war. The rise of the Fairfaxes, Sir Thomas and his father Ferdinando, Lord Fairfax, as a military team to be reckoned with is explained with clarity and verve. Their strong political support in the West Riding and their seeming military strength is well rehearsed despite the brevity and speed. The pair's strategic and tactical defeat in the heart of their territory when the amateur soldier the earl of Newcastle outplayed them at Adwalton is well presented. The Fairfaxes' subsequent roles as the comeback kids and the concomitant revival of the parliamentary cause in Yorkshire, following the exposure of the treacherous Hothams, likewise sound and presented in a good and fast-paced manner.

The sections depicting the war are, in my mind, problematic. Fairfax, in the context of the civil wars, was first and foremost a general. Had he failed in this sphere he would have completely faded from view and, like Lord Grey of Groby, would have been reduced to the role of an Osric providing support and sidelines to the main text. Despite this, there is little consideration of Fairfax's leadership in the field. It can be argued that one of the most important parts of this book is the analysis of Fairfax's role in the revolution of 1648-9 for, without a successful military career, Fairfax's motivation would only have been as important as Thomas Grey's for helping out with Colonel Pride's identification of MPs. The place where this lack of attention is perhaps most overt is in chapter two when Marston Moor, which Hopper recognises as 'the largest battle of the civil wars', merits less than a page. Fairfax's role in this battle is almost as controversial as Cromwell's and surely demands more attention.

The description of the battle of Naseby in the succeeding chapter is equally brief and Hooper directs his readers to the work of Glenn Foard. Again this is problematic for Hopper's own interest in Fairfax at this point in time clearly lies with the politics and this third chapter is largely given over to an excellent study of how Fairfax came to lead the New Model Army in 1645. Fairfax, Hopper asserts, is often portrayed as an apolitical choice; a candidate to whom the majority of rival protagonists in the arguments of 1644-5 had least objection, even if they did not have much confidence. Not so argues Hopper: the Fairfaxes were, by the end of 1644, clearly identifiable as part of the Saye and Sele group around which had coagulated the remnants of the more radical of John Pym's allies, including Oliver St John and his cousin Oliver Cromwell. The battleground on which the Fairfaxes had made their mark would not be Selby, Marston Moor or in the end even Naseby: according to Hopper's contention it would be Westminster.

At the centre of this battlefield was the fate of the Hothams. Briefly seen as a hero for keeping the king's hands off the residue of the Tower of London's magazine whilst it rested in Hull, John Hotham Senior had become involved in shady negotiations with the earl of Newcastle which had thwarted a series of campaigns

in the Midland and elsewhere. The arrest of John senior and his son 'Captain' John Hotham became a trial of strength between Saye and Sele's group and the earl of Essex's supporters. The Fairfaxes were too busy to be involved in the trial at the beginning of 1644 but, according to Hopper, this did not stop them sending 30 witnesses south. The eventual execution of the Hothams clearly placed the Fairfaxes in the camp of the 'political' Independents and this put Sir Thomas in the forefront of those who established the New Model Army.

With his extensive political network in the north, Sir Thomas was also now marked as an opponent of parliament's Scottish allies. Resentment towards the expense of Scottish forces was growing in the north and Fairfax, in his central role, now became a conduit for that resentment. This, of course, in turn placed Sir Thomas in the centre of the military/political crisis of 1646 when the relationship between parliament and army deteriorated sharply, leading to the stand-off in the middle of the year, which was eventually resolved by the army's seizure of the king in June and its march on London in August.

Sir Thomas is usually shown to be politically conservative during this period, allowing others, such as Cornet Joyce or Cromwell to make the running: his absence from much of the Putney debates seems to underline this political inertia. Hopper argues that this is not the case; Fairfax may have been pushed firmly into the army's political maw by the impugning of his honour by Presbyterian MPs, but he took up its position with gusto. Although he later pretended he had not: Fairfax approved of the army's radicalisation and of its accusations of treason levelled against the 11 Presbyterian MPs at the centre of the attack on the army. He supported the mutiny against Sydenham Pointz, commander of the Northern Association Army, and an ally of the parliamentary Presbyterians, and used it to gain control of all the armed forces in the country. Furthermore, during the second civil war Hopper reads Fairfax's anger at the renewed conflict as anti-royalist, rather than anti-disorder or anti-rebellion: placing the monarch to be the root of the problem. The execution of Sir Charles Lucas and Sir George Lisle must then be seen in this light.

The thorny issue of the trial and execution of the king is dealt with in chapter five. This is a very interesting chapter which seeks to portray Fairfax again as active rather than reactive and conservative. Instead of being out on a limb in opposing the progress and outcome of the trial, Hopper shows a Fairfax riddled with doubt along side others in a similar state. He is also in a difficult position: prevailed upon by foreign representatives to intervene, singled out by the king as being different to his fellow officers and, marked by his wife's angry interventions into the trial, Fairfax may have wished that the trial would not lead to the death sentence. He may also have hoped that the charges against Charles would be more limited, but in the end he was powerless to intervene in any way. Outweighed in argument and rightly unconvinced of his ability to use force majeure, Fairfax could do nothing. On the other hand, Hopper posits, Fairfax might actually have been convinced that the country was better off with the king out of the way, rather than deposed and sidelined. This is a convincing set of propositions, either of which challenge the picture of Fairfax as suddenly impotent and isolated. He may, however, have harboured a deep feeling of guilt, long before his apology after the restoration. Hopper suggests that this feeling of guilt lay behind his resignation on the eve of the war against Scotland in 1650.

The second half of the book presents the analysis and begins with a return to the origins of the civil war. This is unsurprising given that Hopper, as previously noted, has made his most important contributions to civil war history in the area of popular politics in the West Riding. The relationship between Fairfax and the populist parliamentarian cause was essential to the success of the Fairfax family and the cause in general in the north. Whilst some contemporaries, notably moderates in the royalist camp, drifted towards their political stance out of fear of populist politics, others in parliament's forces rode it and manipulated it. Lord Brooke is one good example: the Fairfaxes were no less able. Nevertheless, despite this being a biography of the Fairfaxes, Hopper avoids seeing his central figure as the Svengali of the popular movement: it was demonstrably capable of working its own course when deprived of the Fairfax presence.

In chapter eight the book looks at the themes of religion and honour in order to explore more closely the personality of Thomas and his father. Part of the political motivation of parliamentarians, as John Morrill has long shown us, was religion. This was often in a far more specific sense than was the case with royalist

officers For parliamentarians, a quite vague defence of the church as established sufficed. The Fairfaxes had a firm Calvinist approach to life which, while it offered as much confidence in one's elect status as it was possible to have, meant a life of dutiful service to the community at the appropriate level. For Ferdinando, this meant being an active JP, and had Thomas's life not been interrupted by war, then no doubt his life would have followed a similar pattern.

As far as religion was concerned, both father and son had sympathies which transcended a range of perspectives, including a limited appreciation of Presbyterianism. When it came to war, Fairfax is placed by Hopper firmly into the mode Morrill would recognise; they were fighting a godly war: royalists were enemies of god, not just of parliament. For the Fairfaxes the presence of a strong Catholic element in the officer corps of Newcastle's army, made this distinction much clearer than was the case for, say, a parliamentarian in the south west, who had far fewer Catholic officers to oppose; despite sectarian differences universal Protestantism made being godly in the face of royalists more difficult to interpret.

Chapter nine explores Fairfax's image and this, Hopper shows, was clearly related to his close contacts in the London press. His relative John Rushworth, for example, was able to influence the context of several journals and to ensure a positive image for Fairfax in the *Perfect Diurnall* he even used the latter to advertise *Anglia Rediviva* which painted Fairfax in glowing terms. Given that rival presses fought an internecine struggle within the parliamentarian cause, such shrewd media management was important perhaps even essential.

The fascinating chapter on gender and literature looks closely at the relationship between Thomas and his wife, Anne. Whilst it does look at a range of issues, the best section deals with Anne's intervention at the king's trial, and the impact that this has had on perceptions of Fairfax. Anne's comments suggest two possibilities: either they should be interpreted as an attempt to voice Thomas's thoughts or instead she was demonstrating marital instability, as no wife should be allowed to voice publicly ideas contrary to her husbands. Chapter 11 explores the relationship between Fairfax and Cromwell and their relationship with history. It is interesting, but sometimes feels like an argument between rival reputations, such as those of Lennon and McCartney: it need not. It certainly moves us towards a more balanced view of the two men and their relationships, but I think there is more to go at still.

The end of the book looks at Fairfax's reputation and the way he reconstructed history at the Restoration, and how this work was completed and continued. It is this which has created the image against which Hopper has had to combat. In the presentation of Fairfax as a reluctant revolutionary, swept along by events, we are left with a shadow of the man Fairfax was. One great merit of this book is the three-dimensional Fairfax we get from the analysis. This is not a Fairfax who became disengaged from events he seemed unable to control, nor one who is pushed beyond his limits by an increasingly radical army. This is a man who is at the heart of all events until the war with Scotland forces him to decide on his future role, or gives him the opportunity to bow out. True, Fairfax might have been reluctant at certain points to carry on with the developing radicalisation of politics, but he strove to remain at the head of the army at all times.

In short this is a very useful and worthy book. It gives us a forceful portrait of Fairfax and goes a long way to asserting his importance and a new clearer perception of him. I hope it has the impact Fairfax's reputation deserves.

The author is pleased to accept this review without any further comment

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