

Oliver Cromwell: New Perspectives

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In 1990 John Morrill edited a collection of essays entitled *Oliver Cromwell and the English Revolution*.⁽¹⁾ It was based on the premise that Cromwell was too complex and difficult a subject to be best summed up by a single biographer, and so should be tackled by a team which represented the best current experts in different aspects of his personality and activities. That assembled for the volume was indeed formidable, drawing upon the top academic scholars in subjects which corresponded to component parts of Cromwell's career. The result was still slightly disappointing. John Morrill's own essay was the one which genuinely broke new ground, by carrying out original research into the life of the future Protector before he became a national figure; the rest mostly presented the spectacle of first-rate historians working through the standard edition of Cromwell's letters and speeches and trying to find new things to say about him by providing insights into his words and contextualisation of them. None the less, some very valuable points were made by all, and the main import of the book was to define the man as scholars collectively viewed him at that point in time. The figure who emerged was very much the one depicted in the biographies which followed in the next 16 years, by Barry Coward, Peter Gaunt, John Morrill and Martyn Bennett: essentially Cromwell as he represented himself, in his recorded words, with historical background built around them.

Now, nearly two decades after the Morrill collection, another edition of essays has been published which attempts collectively to reappraise the man; and it makes a clear contrast with its predecessor. Most of its authors are drawn from outside the mainstream university system, and the cadre of long-established leading scholars of the period. Most, accordingly, are relatively young, and in the process of establishing reputations. The institution at the centre of them is the History of Parliament Trust, which has done more than any other, in the past decade, to rekindle dynamism in the study of the high politics of the 1640s and 1650s in England at a time at which it seemed that the brightest young historians might be seduced away into social and

cultural topics. Four of the nine contributors are employed by the Trust, including the editor, the indefatigable Patrick Little, who provides two of the essays himself as well as the introduction, and has also published an edition of new work on the Interregnum, and co-written a monograph on it, during the past two years. This book therefore promises new voices, and also two new approaches, which both depart markedly from those adopted by John Morrill's volume. The first is that each contributor takes an episode or short-term sequence of events in Cromwell's career, rather than an aspect of that career as a whole, so that his activities can be considered in more depth and richer context. The second is to avoid making his own words the basis for an assessment of him, and instead to judge him also by his actions and by the views of him taken by those with whom he interacted. It remains to be considered now how well these promising initiatives work in practice.

The first essay, by Simon Healy, goes over much of the ground covered by John Morrill in 1990, of Cromwell's murky earlier life, concentrating in particular in his dealings with property. In the process he reconstructs a story of how Oliver, reaching his 30s, sold up his patrimonial estate at Huntingdon in the expectation of receiving a more valuable one at Ely from his maternal uncle. Finding that he was not going to come into it as soon as he hoped, he attempted to speed up the process by having the old man declared insane. This failed, and Cromwell was punished (it seems with remarkable mildness) by being forced to wait two years after his uncle did die before gaining full possession. He then rapidly liquidated much of it to give him a cash reserve which helped launch his political and military career in the national crisis of 1640–2. This is a wonderful tale, which perfectly fits traits of the man's personality as many have observed it later: restlessness, impulsiveness and ruthlessness: it also reinterprets his famous letter of 1638, in which he speaks of his fervent Puritan faith, as an attempt to mend his fences with godly relatives after his bad behaviour. Unfortunately, as Healy himself scrupulously points out, every bit of it is based on circumstance and supposition, so it could be a brilliant piece of historical deduction or of historical fiction. Indeed, this chapter leaves us knowing less than many of us thought we did before. Healy throws out the celebrated testimony of the physician Theodore de Mayerne, that he has treated Cromwell for clinical depression, by showing that it need not refer to Oliver at all. Morrill had given us a coherent portrait of successive stages by which Cromwell was 'made', by a series of formative experiences. Healy largely deconstructs these to leave the question open of when the mature man was formed, if indeed he needed formation at all: he may have been born in 1599, but as far as historians are concerned he only really appears with that letter of 1638. His formative experiences are a matter for conjecture.

This impression, of a Cromwell who was much the same person before achieving fame as he was after, is reinforced by Stephen Roberts's essay on his parliamentary activities in the early Long Parliament, before his military career began. The consensual view of these, since the Morrill collection was published, has been of a reliable supporter of the party which favoured radical reform of the English Church and strict limitations upon the power of the King, well-connected but something of a maverick and outsider. In particular it has portrayed him as a rash, gauche and violent speaker, as much an embarrassment as an asset to his political leaders and allies. Roberts retains the loyalty to the party of radical reform and the maverick behaviour, but changes all else. He uses a close study of the parliamentary records to show convincingly that Cromwell pushed himself into the limelight from the start, and, while never becoming really prominent, got himself entrusted with ever more important and numerous duties by the Commons. He was certainly provocative but never inept, and never incurred the censure of the House; by the time that he departed to join the war, he was already a practised and effective politician. The stock image of him at the debut of his national career, as a rustic boor, turns out either to be a royalist caricature or else something of an act put on by Cromwell himself, to foster a public image as a plain, blunt and honest man of the (well-heeled) people. We cannot tell how much of each figured in its creation.

S. L. Sadler is the only contributor to examine the man's military career, focusing on its most obscure phase as a local leader in the Fenland. Here he matches it against the complaints made by an anonymous and well-informed opponent, that Cromwell had taken full credit for victories that were actually shared with other leaders, that his rule as governor of the Isle of Ely had been oppressive, and that he had pushed from power men (like the complainant) who would not support his aim of obtaining a right for radical Protestants to

worship outside the national Church. As Sadler shows, the charges fit the known facts of Oliver's activities at this time; and one might add that his letters throughout the war exhibit an unrelenting promotion of both himself and his political and religious cause, of Independency. As Sadler comments, however, the charges make it understandable why some people saw him as a self-seeking dissembler, without actually proving him one. Indeed, the evidence does not even allow us to tell how far he set out deliberately to steal glory from colleagues and how far that work was done for him by London journalists seeking a single hero. It shows that he learned to manage the press as adroitly as he had learned how to operate in Parliament; but not more; and neither does it determine how ruthless he was in disempowering opponents of his religious aims.

Philip Baker and Kirsten MacKenzie examine his relations with two key political groups, respectively the Levellers and the Scottish Covenanters. Both extended over several years, both fluctuated between enmity and alliance, and both ended in hostility, as Cromwell played a leading part in crushing the people concerned. He was, however, a much more natural ally of the Levellers than the Covenanters, because the former were always in favour of the liberty of conscience that he sought, and the latter immovably opposed to it. His only periods of co-operation with them, indeed, came when they each had common enemies who represented, at that moment, a greater threat, and were never free from tension. It is noteworthy in this context that MacKenzie accuses Cromwell of playing up his own part in an early military operation at the expense of that of a Scottish commander, and of wantonly encouraging a religious radical to disobey his more orthodox senior officer: precisely the sort of charge levied against him by his Fenland critic. With the Levellers, by contrast, the periods of co-operation were longer than the ruptures: although Cromwell was always less keen on political reforms than they, both proved capable of moving towards the other's position at key moments. Baker makes a good case that what he found completely unacceptable about their behaviour, causing a major rift in late 1647 and a permanent one in early 1649, was when they or their allies tried to incite Cromwell's army to mutiny against its leaders. This threatened both his personal power-base and the effectiveness of the armed force that made his ideological commitments viable. Naturally, it is impossible to disentangle the two, but many of the details of his dealings with Leveller leaders – the commitments that he made and the impressions that he tried to convey – also seem lost beyond certain recovery.

Lloyd Bowen takes the book into Wales, with the reminder that Cromwell's family name had been changed from Williams in the early 16th century, and that the older one remained as an alias in legal documents during his youth. His paternal lineage came from Glamorgan, and although it was apparently chance that a victorious Parliament turned him into a major landowner there and in Monmouthshire, it was not that he used his new property to sponsor local religious radicals to whom he was already acting as patron. The most remarkable aspect of his ancestry was that it gave him an almost certainly bogus claim to descent from various early medieval Welsh kings and lords. This was flaunted in the heraldry at his funeral, but also, more significantly, displayed both on the Protectorate's official coat of arms and on his personal seal. While it suited Cromwell to pose as a man of the people, or at least of the mere gentry, for much of the time, he could not resist also flaunting the only eminence that his lineage could bestow. This links to Andrew Barclay's essay on the Protector's court, which makes a splendid job of relatively little evidence to come down on the side of those historians who have emphasised the regal style of the regime. Indeed, the only exception to the latter now seems to be Cromwell's disinclination to be visually portrayed as a king. The key moment of transition here is established by Barclay as the decision of the Protector's Council to allot him two former royal palaces as residences, which itself demanded the establishment of something like a monarch's household to occupy them. The two most important contributions of this chapter are its proof of the success that resulted – by the time of his death those around Oliver were acting like genuine courtiers – and details of the staff whom he installed. Overwhelmingly, he chose his own relatives and civilian political leaders, ignoring both old friends from his East Anglian past and army officers; which suggests that he had lost interest in his roots and was trying to distance himself from the soldiers on whom he actually depended, in order to make himself appear more acceptable to the bulk of the population.

Here Patrick Little's contributions are significant, especially the second. The first considers Cromwell's relations with Ireland, up to the time that he launched his invasion of it in 1649. It emphasises how much a

financial stake he had in that venture, having donated a large part of his capital to funding the suppression of the Catholic rebellion that broke out there in 1642. This outlay was supposed to be secured against land confiscated from the rebels, but, as Little emphasises, was a huge gamble because those rebels might either win the struggle or obtain a negotiated peace. Indeed, it almost ruined him because the Civil War prevented any effective action in Ireland and consumed Cromwell's wealth further; only the grant of the Welsh estates, pushed through by friends, saved him from financial collapse. Little proves that he never lost interest in the recovery of Ireland, up to the moment when he undertook the job himself, and that he kept himself well informed on it. The essay also stresses, however, that his material interest in it was itself propelled by ideological fervour, in that his bitter hatred of Roman Catholicism, the other face of his evangelical Protestantism, caused him to plunge into the venture to crush the Irish rebels in the first place.

Little's other contribution focuses on the offer of the crown to Cromwell in 1657, demonstrating beyond doubt that before it was made the government orchestrated a campaign of disinformation to persuade the army that a Spanish invasion linked to a royalist uprising was imminent. This seems to have been intended to distract the soldiers and prevent them from going into mutiny against the initiative. Little argues persuasively that Cromwell was fully involved in the ploy, as part of an initial readiness to assume the crown, and only turned against that plan when he discovered how many godly people opposed it and came to see it as a sin. The first contention seems sound: there were other policy initiatives at the time, such as the readmission of Jews to England, in which the Protector's wishes were embodied in an adroit publicity campaign accompanied by careful political manoeuvres. However, the extent to which his decision to reject kingship more reflected his religious conscience or his fear of losing his traditional constituency of support must remain anybody's guess. Jason Peacey rounds off the book with a successful defence against Cromwell's successor as Protector, his son Richard, against traditional charges of laziness and political inexperience. He shows well how the younger Cromwell spent the first half of the Protectorate learning the ropes of local government and service as an MP, and the second half taking his place in national affairs. His twin problems were that he was given too little time to establish himself in the latter role, and that he completely lacked his father's religious radicalism, and so spiritual kinship with the army on which he depended for survival.

It is time to sum up, and here I declare a personal interest. I am predisposed to praise much of this book because many of its themes have already been aired in my own work: the need to avoid taking Cromwell at his own evaluation (2); the innate ruthlessness and slipperiness with which he functioned as a politician (3) and the intelligence and ability of his son Richard.(4) I am not concerned that none of the contributors have noticed this, for apart from the essential immodesty of such a reaction, those authors have tended to distance themselves from previous writers on Cromwell as a whole, as part of their claim to novelty. It does, however, make me the more ready to accept and applaud Patrick Little's overview, that the book goes further than its predecessors in convincingly portraying the great Protector's radicalism, his restlessness, his habit of taking up and dropping allies, his commitment to religious Independency, his self-promotion and his slightly excessive enjoyment of the trappings of power. I also accept Little's balancing comment, that none of this vitiates Cromwell's genuine piety, consistent commitment to liberty of conscience, and essential incorruptibility.

I would only add two comments to the picture. The first is that the book also provides the most effective portrait to date of the man's devious, manipulative, opportunistic and ruthless qualities, which explain so much of his success and also the deep distrust and hostility which he aroused in many contemporaries. It also, however, highlights very starkly, the limitations of traditional political history and biography. Repeatedly I have suggested that its authors run up against an absence of decisive evidence when attempting to reconstruct Cromwell's motivations and intentions, and sometimes even his behaviour. If this is true of a figure so well recorded, both in his own words and those of others, what hope is there for most of the rest?

Notes

1. John Morrill, *Oliver Cromwell and the English Revolution* (London, 1990).[Back to \(1\)](#)

2. Ronald Hutton, *Debates in Stuart History* (Basingstoke, 2004).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Hutton, *Debates* and *The British Republic* (Basingstoke, 1990).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Hutton, *The Restoration : a Political and Religious History of England and Wales, 1658–1667* (Oxford, 1985).[Back to \(4\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further

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