

Oliver Cromwell: God's Warrior and the English Revolution

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Reviewer: Keith Livesey

Ian Gentles' book (a welcome addition to the *British History in Perspective Series* edited by Jeremy Black) is the first new biography of Oliver Cromwell in many years. The book contains significant new research, and Professor Gentles presents us with a far more in-depth picture of the private and public life of Cromwell than have previous biographers. It does not break much new ground from a historiographical perspective, but to his credit the author does try to infuse his new biography with the work of previous scholars. The book is ideal for students and the general public and should be used as a good introduction to the subject.

That we now know more about Cromwell than we did even ten years ago is down not only to a renewed interest in the man, but to the tremendous hard work of a growing number of historians. The work of Andrew Barclay has given us a far clearer picture of Cromwell's early political life, while John Morrill and his team of historians and researchers are working on new critical editions of Cromwell's collected works.

Recently I asked Professor Gentles what motivated him to do this biography. He replied: 'I am fascinated by Oliver Cromwell, and believe that I understand the 'inner man' better than most historians, especially his religion, which is of such key importance in understanding him. Finally, I believe I had some original information and insights to impart. Through my research in the Close Rolls (NA, C 54) I turned up material on his personal finances of which no one else was aware. I am also the first person to draw public attention to the 'Fleetwood Chest', his wedding gift to his daughter Bridget, now held in the Collins Barracks Museum in Dublin. I believe also that I have successfully interwoven his political and military careers and shown how they were interconnected, and influenced each other'.

Despite this, Gentles still feels the need to justify the need for a new biography in his foreword, arguing that the new evidence he alludes to above should throw up new interpretations and to a certain degree this book is a slightly new interpretation.

Gentles is a skilled and thoughtful historian. He is Professor of History at York University's Glendon College and at Tyndale University College. Most of his academic career has concentrated on the English Revolution, on which he has written numerous articles as well as four books including this one.⁽¹⁾

This Cromwell biography manages to strike a balance between Cromwell's public and private life, although

to my mind Gentles concentrates too heavily on Cromwell's military career to the detriment of spending more time on his political activities. He does present a 'warts and all' picture of Cromwell, but also attaches importance to recent research on Cromwell's practice of lay preaching and his significant patronage of the arts. To his credit he does attempt to counter the old picture of Cromwell as a dour and cultureless figure.

Gentles spends time on his new research into Cromwell's pay as a soldier, in chapter ten asking if Cromwell 'was a greedy puritan'. Gentles is accurate in his assertion that many modern day historians have paid little attention to Cromwell's economic position or for that matter even his personal finances. Gentles is correct when he implies that Cromwell was not guided solely by money in his social and political actions. In fact on many occasions he cancelled debts and on more than one occasion financed military operations himself – such as the occupation of Ireland. Cromwell was not alone in doing this as other major republican figures such as Henry Marten did the same.

It has become part of modern revisionist historiography to play down the link between a person's economic status and their political persuasions. I am not saying that there exists an umbilical cord between the two, or that historical figures like Cromwell were not motivated into action by their religious and ideological conceptions, but I do insist as Nick Beams eloquently put it 'that it is necessary to examine the motives behind the motives – the real, underlying, driving forces of the historical process and to make clear the social interests served by a given ideology – a relationship that may or may not be consciously grasped by the individual involved'.[\(2\)](#)

Gentles is perceptive enough to grasp the importance of the work of historians such as Robert Brenner, and while being critical of Brenner's 'social interpretation' he acknowledged that a study of mercantilism would enhance the theory that there was a transition from feudalism to capitalism.

He goes on to make the key point that:

'The new-merchant leaders and their radical allies among the City's shopkeepers, mariners and artisans were at the height of their power in the early years of the revolution, 1642 and 1643. Simultaneously they pursued their anti-Spanish offensive in the Caribbean and launched a policy of imperial conquest against Ireland. Indeed, in Brenner's candid portrait of these men, nothing comes across so clearly as the brutal, buccaneering character of early-modern mercantile capitalism'.[\(3\)](#)

Gentles does spend a large amount of time on military matters. He acknowledges that Cromwell had no formal military training. Gentles, it seems, does not rate him highly as a military figure which is a little strange because if you read Royalist supporting military historians like Peter Young you get a much more accurate picture of Cromwell's military prowess.

Three aspects of Gentles' historiographical proclivities come to the fore in this biography. He does not subscribe to a 'Three Kingdoms' approach to the English civil war – as Jasmin L. Johnson wrote, contained within this approach 'is a tendency to bounce back and forth from country to country and from campaign to campaign, causing confusion and obscuring the effects that developments in one theatre of operations might have had on the others'.[\(4\)](#)

Secondly, while taking on board some aspects of revisionist and post-revisionist historiography, Gentles centres Cromwell's life as part of a 'people's revolution', indicating that the influence of Marxist historians such as Christopher Hill and Brian Manning is not entirely dead. Professor Gentles is one of the few modern day historians who does not downplay the influence that groups such as the Levellers had. Gentles does offer a fresh insight into the complex relationship between Cromwell and Leveller leaders such as John Lilburne. In fact contrary to modern historiography Gentles offers a description of Cromwell being a far more radical figure than has previously been thought.

Thirdly, and perhaps more controversially, where Gentles does subscribe to one aspect of modern historiography is when he describes Cromwell belonging to a 'Junto'. The definition of junto is 'a group of

men united together for some secret intrigue', with the champion of this new historiography being John Adamson. The main theoretical premise of his book, *The Noble Revolt*, is to put forward a view of the Civil War as basically a coup d'état by a group of nobles or aristocrats who no longer supported the King. According to Diane Purkiss these nobles were 'driven by their code of honour, they acted to protect themselves and the nation. Names such as Saye, Bedford, Essex and Warwick move from the side-lines to occupy centre stage, as do their counterparts among Scottish peers. It was they and not the rude masses who plucked a king from his throne. Oliver Cromwell, for Adamson, was merely one of their lesser lackeys'.

The more you get to know Gentles' work the clearer it becomes that he is attempting to take a middle ground between the modern-day revisionist historians and an older more left-wing historiography.

While not rejecting the idea that Cromwell was part of a 'Junto', I think far more work is needed to either prove or disprove this thesis. After all Cromwell had a series of alliances throughout his career. To paraphrase Lord Palmerston he had no permanent alliances but only permanent interests. Gentles' biography does not go into too much detail on this, but maybe in the future he will.

Like Martyn Bennett in his review I have a major disagreement with Gentles last sentence, in which he sums up Cromwell's life by concluding (to quote Bennett): 'after an incredibly perceptive journey through Cromwell's life, Gentles concludes that Cromwell's 'achievements were chiefly destructive'.⁽⁵⁾ Revolutions by their nature are destructive but out of that destruction hopefully something new and better arises. In the case of the English revolution we witnessed albeit slowly the transition from feudalism to capitalism. Cromwell whatever his faults played an extremely important role in that process.

I will leave it to others to decide whether Cromwell's adventures in Ireland are a blot on his record as Gentles suggests, but he does make some interesting points, arguing that Cromwell's overriding concern in Ireland was the neutralisation of Royalist threat, and that the attack on, and massacre of, Catholics was a by-product of that action. Cromwell's hatred for Catholicism was prevalent amongst the rising bourgeoisie of the 17th century. He further suggests that Cromwell played a key part in the development of Irish nationalism.

To conclude, I would recommend this book to general readers and more academically minded students, as it is an intelligent and well researched introduction to Oliver Cromwell. It has extensive footnotes and a lengthy bibliography, a good list of abbreviations, a detailed index, good maps and battlefield plans.

It is only inevitable that Gentles revisits similar areas to other historians such as Christopher Hill, John Morrill and Barry Coward, but whether or not this biography transcends those written previously, it is certainly a valuable addition to the literature.

Notes

1. *The New Model Army in England, Ireland and Scotland, 1645–1653* (London, 1992); *Soldiers, Writers and Statesmen of the English Revolution* (Cambridge, 1998); and *The English Revolution and the Wars in the Three Kingdoms, 1638–1652* (London, 2007).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Nick Beams, 'Imperialism and the political economy of the Holocaust', lecture delivered 12 May 2010. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Ian Gentles, 'A new social interpretation – review of Robert Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution*', *New Left Review*, 207 (1994), 103.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Jasmin L. Johnson, 'Review of Ian Gentles, *The English Revolution and the Wars of the Three Kingdoms, 1638-1652*', *H-War* (February 2008).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Martyn Bennett, 'Review of Ian Gentles, *Oliver Cromwell: God's Warrior and the English Revolution*', *History*, 97, 326 (April 2012).[Back to \(5\)](#)

Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/17259>