

Cromwell's Major-Generals: Godly Government during the English Revolution

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Christopher Durston has produced here the sort of history which my generation of school students was brought up to regard as the norm, taking a celebrated episode of political and constitutional history and setting out to re-evaluate it by reading a broader and deeper collection of sources for it than ever before, in both local and national archives. This is the form of historiography which has been applied to past politics most commonly ever since the discipline of history became professionalised. It is one which acquired a new cutting edge in the 1970s when it became the mainstay of the revisionist movement in early modern historical studies. It is a straightforwardly empirical technique based on the twin assumptions that if you read more about something than anybody else has done, then you will know more about it than anybody else, and that if you read enough, then you are likely to solve the traditional puzzles which have hung over your subject of enquiry. Its application by a colleague as patient, reasonable and equable as Dr Durston provides a particularly good test of its worth at a time when methodologies of writing history are under close scrutiny. In the opinion of this reviewer, it vindicates the first assumption, for this is certainly the best book yet written on its subject, while throwing up a few doubts about the second.

It was a classically good subject to have chosen, being at once celebrated and neglected. Many historians have provided opinions upon it, from the seventeenth to the late twentieth century, and yet it has not hitherto been given any sustained treatment in its own right, based on extensive research. The opinions concerned fall into two contrasting, while possibly compatible, groups. One has emphasised the spectacular and unique nature of the experiment of Cromwell's government in dividing England and Wales into regional commands supervised by Major-Generals supported by county committees and militias. In keeping with the dual character of the Cromwellian Protectorate as a government resting upon the victories of an army of (potential) saints, they were expected both to ensure military security and to impose a deeper level of godly reformation upon the English and Welsh. This school of thought, which has included most leading historians of the period between the late seventeenth and the mid-twentieth century, has differed only over the merits of the experiment. Some (from Echart, Hallam and Ranke, down to David Underdown and Robert Ashton) have emphasised the arbitrary, despotic and unpopular nature of the Major-Generals' rule, while others (from Carlyle to Christopher Hill) have been more inclined to credit them with good intentions and personal virtues. The other school has been comprised mostly of late-twentieth-century scholars, and has placed more stress upon the brief and ineffectual nature of their administration.

What Christopher Durston does is to prove that both traditions are correct, for the Major-Generals were at

once important, unpopular and ineffectual. He carries out the vital work of establishing who they were and what they did, so well that the job will not need to be done again. They turn out to be in personal terms impressive enough to justify the praise granted to them by some previous writers: a set of relatively young, energetic and dedicated men, all with distinguished records as soldiers, almost all with personal connections to the territories which they administered, and almost all deeply committed to some form of radical Protestantism: classic godly governors. Only a sixth of them came from the traditional magisterial elite. The accepted picture is also reinforced in Dr Durston's analysis of the county committees on whose work they depended, the 'commissioners for securing the peace of the Commonwealth'. Some recent work has tended to emphasise the presence among them of members of pre-Civil War ruling families, and of individuals with relatively moderate religious views, but a closer look reveals that these were precisely the people who were most reluctant or unwilling to do the actual work. When those who undertook the job enthusiastically are identified, they turn out to be exactly what traditional historiography has made them: 'small cadres of godly zealots of generally lower social status'. There can no longer be any doubt that the rule of the Major-Generals represented the point at which the political and religious radicals who were most clearly identified with the English Revolution of 1648-49 were given their starkest and most complete measure of control of the localities. This is the more significant in that everything points to the fact that until its sudden downfall in the Parliament of 1656-7, the system was expected to remain a permanent feature of the Protectoral government.

The other side of the equation is therefore the more significant: that the same system actually accomplished so little. Dr Durston proves that the only work in which the Major-Generals showed any success consisted of closing alehouses and cowing royalists. Even in these their achievement was severely limited. The alehouses returned in their old numbers as soon as the campaign against them wound down. It was true that royalist conspiracy was effectively wiped out, as the supporters of the exiled king were submitted to punitive taxation and the submission of large bonds for good behaviour, while the collection and monitoring of political intelligence reached a peak of efficiency not otherwise known in early modern England. In this sense, the Major-Generals gave the regime complete physical security. It is also true, however, that the royalists were already exhausted after the complete failure of a rebellion which they had launched in early 1655, and which had itself done much to provoke the new system of surveillance. There is no way of demonstrating that they would have taken a shorter time to resume plotting had the latter never been imposed.

None of the remaining objectives of the proposed godly reforms came anything near even this partial success. They were supposed to include a more efficient relief of the poor. In practice this meant that a lot of vagrants were arrested, and then released when the county authorities could no longer afford to hold them. About 2% of the national clergy were replaced with allegedly more efficient or politically reliable men, a tiny proportion of the total number of ejections during the period of the civil wars and republic. The impact on the prosecution of profanity, sexual offences, traditional sports and pastimes and prohibited activities on Sunday was at best marginal. Without the whole-hearted co-operation of both the public and local office-holders at all levels, things could hardly be otherwise, and such co-operation was evidently lacking. Dr Durston concludes that the expected reformation of society was 'a clear failure'. It is just as significant, as he points out, that both the generals themselves and the government to whom they reported believed that they had achieved great successes.

This capacity for self-delusion was very clearly one feature of the Cromwellian regime, exemplified in the conviction of the Major-Generals that they would be capable of controlling fresh parliamentary elections in such a way as to produce a national assembly which would support their work and that of the government behind them. Instead, even after a quarter of it had been purged, the Parliament concerned destroyed them and did its best to remodel the constitution to put the lid on godly reformation and republicanism together. Another ingrained aspect of the regime which is exposed by Christopher Durston's research is its curious combination of executive efficiency and strategic bungling. There can be no doubt that, for an early modern state, the Cromwellian Protectorate could construct and operate administrations with an almost breathtaking skill. In this case, the regional commands were staffed, the militias raised, and the royalists taxed and bound

over, with remarkable speed and effectiveness. It was the planning behind the whole enterprise which was fatally flawed: as in virtually all else that it did, the government could not get its sums right, could not supply the support that the new apparatus required, and could not reconcile its commitment to a radical Protestant godliness with its yearning for acceptance by, if not popularity with, the bulk of the nation.

As Dr Durston demonstrates, a large part of the reason for the establishment of the network of Major-Generals was that the regime could no longer pay for its own defence. The number of regular soldiers needed to maintain its security was too large for the existing level of taxation to support, even though that level was still too high for most taxpayers. Any chance of getting more money through unequivocally constitutional channels was blocked by the government's hitherto complete failure to work with a Parliament. In this situation, the idea of replacing some of the regular army with local militias of zealous supporters, paid from a tax on royalists which spared the rest of the population, seemed like a practicable and morally sound way out of the problem. The trouble was that the Protector and his Council got both parts of the equation wrong. They did not reduce the army as needed - indeed, at the end of the experiment it was bigger than before - and it turned out that the tax on royalists could never raise enough to pay for the new militia force. As a result, the government ended up with a bloated military establishment and even less adequate funding, and its financial crisis was considerably worsened. In the eyes of the present reviewer, this fits a pattern whereby Cromwell's regime lurched from one desperate expedient to another, like a failing gambler staking larger and larger sums upon a lucky throw; the installation of the Major-Generals makes a precise domestic parallel to the launching of an unprovoked attack on the Spanish colonial empire in the hare-brained belief that this war would pay for its own costs. In his own way, the Lord Protector was as reckless an adventurer as Charles I, Charles II or James II.

Even so, with all its inherent failures, the system would probably have lasted longer had not the Major-Generals themselves, unwittingly, done all that was necessary to ruin it. Dr Durston shows, better than ever before, how they provided a context for their own abolition by persuading the government to call a Parliament which turned out to be largely unsympathetic to them. Even so, the MPs ignored their existence until one of the most important politicians among them, closely connected in family and counsels to the Protector, called attention to it in the most crass possible manner. This was John Desborough, whose action in trying to bounce Parliament into recognising the tax on royalists precipitated the rejection of that tax, and thus the breaking of the whole system. The action concerned was hardly necessary and may have been taken on Desborough's own blundering initiative, but it would not have proved disastrous had it not been for two other features of this regime. One was the existence of a body of civilian advisors and courtiers, personally favoured by the Protector and often brought in by him, who were opposed to the army and to the godly in both instinct and experience. It was they, and not the backwoodsmen, who drove on the attack on the tax, and they were able to succeed because of the second feature of the Protectorate, its consistent failure to give the generals the support for which they asked. Dr Durston reveals how repeatedly their administrative measures faltered because the central authorities displayed no interest in providing the matching actions which were needed for completion; for example, to allocate shipping to transport imprisoned vagrants to the colonies. In the same fashion, the utter lack of any official attempt to defend the Major-Generals within Parliament gave free rein to their enemies and sealed their fate. Rarely, if ever before, have the peculiar strengths and weaknesses of this regime been so starkly exposed.

All this adds up to a considerable achievement on the part of this book, and if doubts linger over some of its suggestions, as stated above, then they are inherent in the nature of the material. Like most political and administrative historians, Christopher Durston has a much more straightforward job in determining the what and the how than the why. One of the biggest factors in the failure of the Major-Generals consists of their lack of popularity, manifested in their own reports concerning their reception and their decisive rejection by the electorate, despite all their efforts to pack a Parliament. Dr Durston considers two traditional explanations, that they were hated either as soldiers or as agents of a legally dubious governmental centralisation, and while admitting some force to them rejects them in favour of a third. This is to emphasise their status as the allies and patrons of local cadres of godly Protestant fundamentalists; in common parlance radical puritans. In this reading, it was the inherent anti-puritanism of the English and Welsh, as powerful at

times if less celebrated than their anti-Catholicism, which made the generals most obnoxious to them. There is nothing that can be faulted in such a suggestion; but nor is it actually demonstrated, and it probably cannot be. The great problem in evaluating public responses to the Major-Generals is that the latter possessed so many qualities likely to give widespread offence, consisting of all those mentioned above, that together they made up a package of irredeemable unacceptability. The recorded expressions of local opinion are too few and too general to make possible any convincing analysis of the component parts of that assemblage. The historian in this situation is not a chemist capable of making a forensic study, but a cook attempting to unscramble eggs.

The same sort of difficulty is encountered in attempting to uncover the role played in all these events by Oliver Cromwell himself. The portrayal of the Protector made in this book is possibly the most negative published by any academic historian during the last fifty years, and the more striking in that Christopher Durston himself goes out of his way to extenuate rather than criticise Cromwell. The latter's admirers, who have included most historians of the period during the twentieth century, have always been rather embarrassed by his apparent role in the fall of the Major-Generals. A good case has been made that, having realised how little support they had achieved in even a purged Parliament, the Protector decided to collude with the attack on their system in order to ingratiate himself with the MPs and obtain the financial and constitutional support which he needed. Dr Durston argues instead that he remained aloof and perplexed throughout the whole debate, exhibiting throughout what is called here his 'characteristic dithering and evasiveness' in political affairs.

Was the great Protector really so completely bemused? At the opening of the attack on Desborough's bill, a speech was made against it by an obscure cousin of Cromwell. The latter immediately received him warmly and presented him with a rich cloak and gloves, which he showed off in Parliament as a sign of his powerful relative's favour. Dr Durston suggests that Cromwell simply did not realise the likely effect of his action, a reading which credits him with breathtaking naiveté. Had so ruthless and decisive a soldier turned into such a helpless politician? It is possible, but it may also be noted that one of Cromwell's main traits as a commander had been his preference for oblique attacks, striking an enemy in the rear or flank. It may well be that his approach to politics was equally slippery, and that he was deliberately playing off the Major-Generals against their critics in Parliament and standing back to see who proved the stronger. After all, those critics were led by people to whom Oliver himself had given favour as advisers and servants, as part of his consistent policy of balancing groups in his court and council in such a way that they had nothing in common save loyalty to himself. As things stand, Dr Durston defends him from the charge of being a fox by making him out to be a goose. The bottom line of this affair is certainly that Cromwell made no effort to support men who had been his loyal servants and had laboured hard for ends which he was supposed ardently to endorse. Ultimately, we cannot know why he did not, because we cannot make windows into his mind, any more than we can into those of the general public whom he ruled.

These issues can be raised so clearly because Christopher Durston does his work so well. By writing a masterpiece of old-fashioned political history, he shows what it can achieve, and what it cannot. As in the case of predecessors in this tradition such as Austin Woolrych, writing on neighbouring parts of the same period, one has an impression that in places it is at last being worked down to the bedrock.

The author is grateful to Ronald Hutton for his generous review and will not be responding further.

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