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Cromwell's Legacy

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Out of what materials was 'Oliver Cromwell' shaped? (1) To what extent was he self-consciously shaping and reshaping himself? Did he record those self-constructing manoeuvres with some insight and effect? Certainly his spiritual odyssey is documented although not as thoroughly as we would wish. It is, on one level, about his struggle to make 'the chief of sinners' into a chosen instrument of the living God. At the same time, the outcome of that struggle, his final identity, was always at the disposal of that God. And his perception of what he had become and had contributed in the civil sphere could waver, from a sense of himself as the drudge of others upon all occasions, to one who had fought consistently, and not without success, for civil and religious liberty. There is a complex process being worked out here and it is (incompletely) documented in his letters and speeches. The problem for the historian is: how far should we trust that record. If we take it at face value, do we become complicit in the 'myth' of Oliver Cromwell? In which case our 'biography' is little more than an aide-mémoire to Cromwell's art, a recycling of his myth. Or, is it our task to deconstruct his myth – to write biography as a corrective to autobiography? But on what ground shall we stand to do such work? Since we reject his ground, the choice must be between ours or that of his critics. Our biography becomes about us or them, not him. One way out of the dilemma is to write the history of the myth, its construction, deconstruction and reconstruction over time, to study Cromwell's reputation.(2)

This dilemma has lurked behind Cromwell studies for the last decade or so. There has been a growing sense that the biographies based on his letters and speeches, of which there have been some outstanding examples in the last 20 years, have exhausted the possibilities and share too much common ground. In particular, there has appeared to be the establishment of a (not exactly cosy) consensus that Cromwell was a sincerely religious man, who, despite his failings and lapses (Drogheda and Wexford conspicuous amongst them), did his best in difficult circumstances. The gaps in the record – as provided by Cromwell's own words – have also led scholars to look in more detail at the contexts in which he operated and some brilliant archivally-based reconstructions have been made of, for example, Cromwell's early political associations and his finances.(3) But substantial gaps remain and the use of indirect evidence almost always carries with it a cautionary conditionality. We turn from the reconstructed context and, without confirmation in Cromwell's own words, resort to the formulae of 'it is likely that', 'probably', 'must have' and the rest.

John Morrill's introduction to this volume goes straight to the point. On the one hand, he argues,

Cromwell's self-image presents us with a man of principle, the advocate of religious liberty and equality, against tyranny in church and state, for the accountability of governors, leading a people freed from slavery toward a promised land. On the other, his critics then and since have observed a man bent on tyranny, a hypocrite, and an ambitious manipulator of his own image as well as of others (p. 2–3). It is, as we all know, a contested image. But, mostly unexplored, there is another side to Cromwell's public self identification and it is one in which he casts himself as lacking capacities (in oratorical skills, or numeracy or linguistic ability), as politically manipulated or frustrated, as sinful and weak. Of course, provided that we accept the notion of his hypocrisy, all this can be rejected as self-serving and little more than a smoke-screen. But the 'weak' Cromwell is conspicuously absent from the Cromwell legend and it would be interesting to ask why.

The notion of 'legacy' raises some issues to which this review will turn later. The substance of the book under review is divided into three section: 'The man himself', 'Institutional legacies' and 'Reception'. Opening the first section Patrick Little, who has done so much to rebuild interest in Cromwell studies and, in particular, the Protectorate, offers a dynastic interpretation of Cromwell's 'intended' legacy. The argument is that 1656 presented him with dynastic opportunities. Moves towards what was to become the Humble Petition and Advice reopened the question of succession via protectoral nomination (even by heredity) rather than by conciliar election. In the summer of 1656 both Richard and Henry, Oliver's sons, became fathers of sons, both named Oliver. Little suggests that the combination of these developments enabled Cromwell senior to begin thinking in dynastic terms. In the end, he concludes, 'Cromwell may have considered that it would be safer to relinquish the crown, and in the process preserve what he really prized, the succession of the House of Cromwell' (p. 28). Unfortunately, this remains pure speculation as there is no direct evidence that this was indeed in Cromwell's mind or that it was his motivating intention, and as John Morrill points out in his introduction to the collection, Cromwell, unlike James II or Napoleon, 'had no heirs with political ambitions' (p. 4).

This is not Dr Little's most successful piece. He begins with the dubious statement that in the 1650s Cromwell 'certainly had the power to impose his will' (p. 17), yet the record is, in large part, one of his frustration. Legal reform, the reformation of manners, and collaborative parliaments all eluded him whether he willed them or not. Professor Blair Worden and myself are seen as contributing to an unbalanced perception of Cromwell by emphasizing the significance of providence in his thinking. Consequently, the 'sense that Cromwell was following a coherent religious and political programme has in recent years been compromised by a renewed emphasis on providence' (p. 17). These are, alas, straw men being beaten by Little, and he acknowledges as much in respect to his treatment of Worden's view of Cromwell's politics. This, according to Little, involves a 'two track approach, allowing God's will to be fulfilled through normal political means as well as blind faith'. But one suspects that Professor Worden might want to know what was blind about Oliver's faith and to question whether his providentialism kept that faith and its application in the world under constant scrutiny. As surely problematic is the question of what 'normal political means' meant in the 1650s – or at any time after 1641. My own position has been to depict Cromwell's political landscape as balanced between the good constable and 'the divinely chosen and providentially endorsed instrument'.(4) Or again, 'Cromwell could, and indeed had to weigh the secular arguments which humans had to rely on when God's guidance is not clear or was withheld'.(5) Paradoxically, Little concludes with the argument that Oliver's 'dynastic ambitions' could themselves be seen in providential terms (pp. 28–9), although nowhere does Cromwell provide evidence that this was his reading of God's will for his family.

Two essays follow which examine the relationship between Cromwell and the physical world. In the first of these, John Goldsmith, Curator of the Cromwell Museum in Huntingdon, examines the survival or not of material possessions allegedly associated with Cromwell. It is a meticulous, if

somewhat depressing, story of misidentification and wishful thinking, a tale full of the evidence of negligible evidence. For example, we are told that much of the Cromwell Bush Collection, central to that of the Huntingdon museum, cannot be directly linked back to Cromwell. Similar verdicts are pronounced on the collection at Chequers (the prime ministerial country retreat), on William Fawkes' collection and that of Sir Richard Tangye. When the Cambridge Antiquarian Society held an exhibition of Cromwell memorabilia in 1911, 'Credible provenance', we are told, 'was not a prerequisite for inclusion'. Goldsmith concludes, 'The likelihood of the survival of a physical legacy of personalia of Cromwell's over three hundred and fifty years is slight' (p. 53). 'The man himself' (let alone his 'legacy') appears to be heading for the exit.

The second of the two essays on Cromwell's physical 'legacy' is an examination by Peter Gaunt of his impact on the rural and urban environment of Britain. We could not ask for a surer guide than Professor Gaunt, whose The Cromwellian Gazetteer (1987) provides the basis for much of what we know about where Cromwell was when. Setting this against local and historiographical beliefs is a salutary, not to say bracing, exercise. From one perspective, Oliver seems to have been everywhere and blamable for everything. More soberly, and in a case study of his travels and doings in just one county, Norfolk, Gaunt finds that we are in a 'fog of truth, half truth and pure invention' generated by folklore and mythology (p. 68). Nationally, the systematic slighting of castles between 1648 and 1651 was the work of parliament not of Cromwell. Equally, the hard evidence linking him to acts of religious iconoclasm proves hard to find (pp. 84–5). Most tales of his destructive doings arose, Gaunt concludes, from 'confusion, conflation, malice or pure invention, with not a shred of truth about them' (p. 86). Faced with this bleak conclusion, he ends by asking whether the landscape, through which Cromwell had travelled so apparently tirelessly, had more impact on him than he did on it. But the reader is also left to wonder whether this is not a study of the man quite other than himself and what it might tell us about the pursuit of Cromwell's material legacy.

Under the heading 'Institutional legacies' Bernard Capp provides a shrewd and balanced examination of religious policy under the Republic and the Protectorate, Alan Marshall tracks the military reputation and image of Cromwell down to the 20th century and Stephen Roberts looks at the use of Cromwell in both parliamentary speechmaking and in the physical representations of the Cromwellian period in the Palace of Westminster up to the present day. Capp's stress is on the moderation of Cromwell's religious policy (pp. 108, 110), although he also argues that it was Pride's Purge which 'saved religious freedom' by putting paid to any prospect of a compulsory, Presbyterian church (p. 96). Nevertheless, it was the Instrument of Government which gave constitutional guarantees of a degree of religious freedom and Cromwell showed 'none of the bitter spirit that many Anglicans were to visit on nonconformists after the Restoration' (p. 108). For Capp, Cromwell's religious legacy was in providing the opportunity for nonconformity to embed itself in British life (pp. 94, 110) – whether that was his intention or not. Alan Marshall focuses not so much on Cromwell's reputation as a soldier, as on the use of his name and historical persona in debates about the military presence in politics. Following William III's emulation of his campaigning achievements, Cromwell very largely became a warning figure in the standing army controversies of the long 18th century and the perceived threat of politically ambitious military men, such as Marlborough and the Duke of Wellington. By contrast, he eventually became a more positive point of reference for military reformers in the later 19th and early 20th centuries and for those who would reinvigorate society with military values, such as Baden Powell. Stephen Roberts argues that, for understandable reasons, Cromwell's reputation has tended to rise as that of Parliament falls (p. 150). Cutting against this is the lack of evidence for such a rise at the present time when Parliament's standing in public esteem is as low as it has been for very many decades. Equally, the 20th-century high point of his reputation, the Second World War, was also a period when Parliament, seen as a bastion of freedom against the totalitarian threat from the Axis powers, was riding high. Interestingly, Roberts suggests that in those years, Cromwell could, rather

extraordinarily, be invoked as a figure of national unity because he was viewed in the 1940s as ‘a uniquely English, and therefore acceptable despot’ (p. 152). Amongst the most interesting parts of Roberts’ essay is his discussion of the visual representation of the interregnum and of Cromwell in the Palace of Westminster – a more complex story than it has often been portrayed.

The final section of the collection contains essays on Cromwell’s impact on Scotland, Ireland, Europe, New England and revolutionary America, and early 19th-century Spanish America as it struggled for liberation from Spanish control. In a fine essay, Laura Stewart suggests that the Cromwellian occupation of Scotland, partly because it involved no wholesale destruction and, more questionably, no fundamental change to Scots society, could be regarded as relatively benign. That the ‘superiority’ of English administration brought benefits to the Scots was a consistent theme of Scots commentators down to historians such as Rosalind Mitchinson and William Ferguson as recently as the 1970s and 1980s. But, on balance, Stewart argues the impact of the occupation was slight. Cromwellian Britain remained marginal to Scots’ perceptions.

> ‘What happened in a handful of short-lived parliamentary sessions, in a faraway place, attended by about two dozen people with connections to Scotland, arguably had a negligible direct influence on how most Scots experienced the daily realities of English rule’ (p. 179) .

Despite various attempted reforms of Scottish life, it was the survival of Scottish legal and religious practice that helped to persuade a conquered people that they retained some of the attributes of sovereignty. Not only were English reforms rendered largely superfluous by those of the Covenanters earlier (p. 180) but, perhaps more critically, the wholesale restructuring of Scotland was incompatible with either political or fiscal stability (p. 177). And, one might add, the already stretched resources of the English state. Much the same could, in the end, be said about Ireland. Horrific as they were, in conception and implementation, English plans for post-conquest Ireland had to be accommodated to reality, including that of the limitations of even the Cromwellian regime. Toby Barnard’s is a masterly examination of that balance and the contrast between the ‘emollience with which he (Cromwell) addresses the generality of Irish catholics’ and his more notorious military actions (p. 194). The ‘unexpected absence in Ireland of Cromwell from much of the historical controversy of the next two centuries’ (p. 202) – a marginalisation comparable to that in Scotland – may be explained by the ‘mutability of the land question’ and perhaps by the overlay of the Williamite conquests.

Hugh Dunthorne opens the third section of the book, ‘Reception’, with an attempt at rehabilitating Cromwellian foreign policy, in his essay on Cromwell and Europe. Contrary to those critics who since Slingsby Bethel have argued that, in forging an alliance with France against Spain, Cromwell helped to tip the balance of power in Europe in a way which was to be disadvantageous to Britain until the 19th century, Dunthorne sees the policy as defensible because it ensured that the two powers, France and Spain, would not unite against him. The vigour, courage, shrewdness and cunning of Cromwellian foreign policy, admired in the 18th century by Cartaret, were the hallmarks of his legacy in terms of European policy. This essay is primarily concerned with foreign policy but there is another story to be told about Cromwell and Europe, from his image in contemporary Europe (6) to the use of his ‘example’ by Hitler and Stalin to justify themselves against English opinion. In New England, as Frank Bremer shows, Cromwell’s reputation fluctuated as a function of the colonies’ changing relationship with the metropolis. The positive reception Oliver’s doings enjoyed in the colonies in his own time evaporated with the establishment of royal control over their fortunes in 1685 and a negative image prevailed until the onset of the struggle for independence in the later 18th century. When it became necessary again to justify defiance of a king and even the

removal of monarchy it also became possible for patriots to address, the saviour of his nation, George Washington, as 'Great Cromwell' or 'Lord Protector' (p. 251). A similar pattern, though with variations, is observed by Karen Racine in her examination of the ways in which Cromwell could be used by both the Spanish authorities and by independence-seeking Spanish-American colonists in the struggles between them in the early 19th century. On the one hand, he could be portrayed as a harbinger of civil conflict, military tyranny and anarchy; on the other, as the champion of free speech, religious liberty and, more uneasily, of the virtues of republicanism over monarchy. Both Simón Bolivar in Venezuela and Jose de San Martín in Argentina found a Cromwellian mantle congenial for their campaigning. Racine also traces the fascinating appearance of Cromwell in Spanish-American novels, plays and dialogues of the period. A Chilean dialogue of the 1820s, for example, engaged Cromwell with Cardinal Richelieu in a debate on democracy and its capacity to unchain commercial enterprise (pp. 268–9). Racine effectively demonstrates how the invocation of the Lord Protector could expose the issues and fault-lines between conservatives and liberals in a world of which he, of course, knew nothing.

As a whole and despite its undoubted merits, the volume remains an uncomfortable mixture. In part, it engages with Cromwell in his own time (Little, Gaunt, Capp, Dunthorne). For the rest, it looks at Cromwell's varying reputation and the uses to which it has been put at different times and in a variety of contexts. But one might ask, 'What of the issue of Cromwell's legacy?' Only one attempt, by Karen Racine, is made to establish what the 'legacy' of an historic individual might entail. 'When', she says, 'their memory seeps into other cultures' political discourse historical figures become property for which future generations contend' (p. 257). This may have the virtue of some sense of transmission of 'property' but it still seems close to indistinguishable from 'reputation' or 'image' both of which may be in the control of others while 'legacy' suggest something/s he allegedly but intentionally left to future generations. Patrick Little comes closest to this in his attempt to identify Cromwell's intended legacy although his evidence for this attribution appears slight. When, with John Goldsmith, we explore the legacy of his material possessions his 'ownership' of them looks in the main like something later generations have fabricated. Similarly, as Gaunt shows, his association with specific places has often been misattributed. All too soon, we are left with the levers of approval and disapproval, with reputation rather than legacy. Is there a pattern, a story or a history to the exploitation of the property which successive generations make of Cromwell or is it an endless recycling of old materials of doubtful provenance? And, if it is the latter, why does he offer such a tempting subject for such exploitation to so many generations in so many different locations? Alas, these are not questions pursued systematically here.

If we ask what Cromwell might have wished his legacy to be, I suspect that the first thing to spring to mind would not be the establishment of a new and secure dynasty. Rather, I suggest, it would have been a godly nation, secure in its pursuit of God's providential will and, under God's guidance and without compelling tender consciences, moving ever closer to Christian unity. It might have also embraced the notion of government, whatever its form, accountable to a saintly citizenry, the preservation, in this sense, of civil liberty. Where is that legacy now?

Notes

1. In these introductory remarks I follow the insights of Edward Acton, writing brilliantly about the biographical construction of Alexander Herzen (both by himself and by his biographers) and about the problems of the biographical subject/object more generally. Edward Acton, 'La Biografía y el estudio de la identidad', in *El Otro, El Mismo: Biografía y Autobiografía en Europa (siglos XVII-XX)*, ed. J. C. Davis and Isabel Burdiel (Valencia, 2005) pp. 177–98. Back to (1)
2. See, for examples, Images of Oliver Cromwell: Essays for and by Roger Howell, Jr, ed. R. C.

Richardson (Manchester, 1993); Timothy Lang, The Victorians and the Stuart Heritage: Interpretations of a Discordant Past (Cambridge, 1995); J. C. Davis, Oliver Cromwell (London and New York, NY, 2001); Blair Worden, Roundhead Reputations: The English Civil Wars and the Passions of Posterity (London, 2002).Back to (2)

3. John Morrill, 'The making of Oliver Cromwell' in Oliver Cromwell and the English Revolution, *ed*. John Morrill (London, 1990), pp. 19–48; Andrew Barclay, Electing Cromwell: The Making of a Politician (London, 2011); Simon Healy, '1636: the unmaking of Oliver Cromwell', in Oliver Cromwell: New Perspectives, ed. Patrick Little (Basingstoke, 2009), pp. 20–37; David Farr, 'Oliver Cromwell and a 1647 case in Chancery', Historical Research, 71 (1998), 314–17; Ian Gentles, Oliver Cromwell: God's Warrior and the English Revolution (Basingstoke, 2011), ch. 10.Back to (3)
4. J. C. Davis, 'Cromwell's religion", in Oliver Cromwell and the English Revolution, ed. John Morrill (London, 1990), p.188.Back to (4)
5. J. C. Davis, Oliver Cromwell (London, 2001), p. 128; see also pp. 122, 125–7, 138, 173. I hope to publish shortly an essay in which I argue that Cromwell's politics, while always engaged under God's supervision and final determination, were essentially about coalition building and in critical respects represented a new form of politics (rather than a return to normal political means – whatever that may be held to signify).Back to (5)
6. For the surprisingly complex and comparatively sophisticated perception of Cromwell in contemporary Italy see the excellent study by Marco Barducci, Oliver Cromwell Negli Scritti Italiani del Seicento (Firenze, 2005).Back to (6)

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