

History Insights
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Oliver Cromwell

Graham Goodlad

*'... Old Noll, Copper-face,
Great Leviathan of Men,
His Noseship,
The Sagest of Usurpers,
The Town Bull of Ely ...'*

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Contents

Note on the author

Part 1: Oliver Cromwell: Career Outline

- Chapter 1 From country gentleman to political general, 1599–1646
- Chapter 2 From regicide to Lord Protector, 1646–58

Part 2: Issues and debates

- Chapter 3 Cromwell as military commander
- Chapter 4 Seeking power or seeking the Lord?
- Chapter 5 The Protectorate at home
- Chapter 6 Cromwell and the international scene

Part 3: The Legacy

- Chapter 7 Cromwell's reputation in historical perspective

A Chronology of Oliver Cromwell's Career

Bibliography

A Note on the Author

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Part 1 Oliver Cromwell: Career Outline

Chapter 1 From country gentleman to political general, 1599–1646

1.1 Introduction

Three and a half centuries after his death, Oliver Cromwell continues to fascinate both academic historians and the wider public. It was a tribute to his enduring hold on the popular imagination that he reached tenth place in the BBC poll for the title of ‘Greatest Briton’ in 2002. This came shortly after the four hundredth anniversary of Cromwell’s birth in 1999, which was commemorated by a number of events, including major exhibitions at the Museum of London and in Cambridge. He has been the subject of a number of television documentaries and of at least one major feature film, *Cromwell* (1970), with Richard Harris in the title role. He is one of a handful of figures from British history to be commemorated by an organisation dedicated to the study of his career and legacy: the Cromwell Association, which can be located at www.olivercromwell.org. A museum devoted to Cromwell is to be found in his East Anglian birthplace, Huntingdon; and at nearby Ely, the house that he occupied for a short time in the 1630s is also open to the public.

Why has Cromwell attracted this level of attention? It was in the nineteenth century that he first began to attain heroic stature, especially after the publication of Thomas Carlyle’s *Letters and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell* in 1845. The leading Victorian scholar, Samuel Rawson Gardiner, described him as ‘the greatest because the most typical Englishman of all time’.¹ For historians writing today, however, the era of Gardiner is perhaps almost as remote as that of Cromwell himself. This may make us less inclined to ascribe to him ‘national’ characteristics capable of application across the centuries. We may reflect instead on the way in which Cromwell embod-

1 Christopher Hill, *God’s Englishman: Oliver Cromwell and the English Revolution* (London: Pelican Books, 1972), p. 259.

ies key features of his own time, a period that retains its importance and fascination as a genuinely revolutionary age. He is identified with the assertion of parliamentary power against the traditional authority of the Crown in the 1640s, with the puritan challenge to the established Church of England, and the attempt to find a viable political and religious settlement after the upheavals of the Civil Wars. The way in which Cromwell's success as a military commander propelled him to the forefront of national politics, ultimately making him the only commoner to become head of state, also gives his career unique interest.

The paradoxes of Cromwell's career have often been remarked upon. He struggled against royal despotism yet established an authoritarian regime of his own and proved no more able to work with representative institutions than the king whom he displaced. He was a socially conservative figure who played a leading role in the abolition of the monarchy and the House of Lords. Regarded by many as an advocate of religious toleration, he has also been reviled as an implacable foe of Catholicism in Ireland. To many of his contemporaries, Cromwell's political life was a disappointment, as the radical of the 1640s gave way to the conservative Lord Protector of the 1650s. This book seeks to address the key debates and controversies that surround his career. Firstly, it traces Cromwell's development from his relatively obscure beginnings, through the military and political conflicts of the Civil Wars, to eventual leadership of his country.

1.2 Out of the fenland shadows

The outline facts regarding Oliver Cromwell's early life are well known. He was the eldest surviving son of Robert and Elizabeth Cromwell of Huntingdon, and the dates of his birth and baptism in April 1599 are recorded. He was educated at the local grammar school, now the site of the Cromwell Museum, and attended Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, leaving early on the sudden death of his father in June 1617. Cromwell may have studied Law at one of the Inns of Court in London but there is no proof of this. Detail of his upbringing and education unfortunately is hampered by a shortage of hard documentary evidence.

Another difficulty is the doubtful provenance of several stories told about Cromwell's formative years. These are problematic because of the way in which they so obviously seem to prefigure his later life. Some reflect his opponents' desire to portray him in the worst possible light, whilst others reinforce the image of an individual marked out by providence for leadership. Among these is the tradition that the

baby Oliver was taken up on to the roof of his grandfather's house by the family's pet monkey. In the same category is the claim that, as a young child, he fought with the young Prince Charles during a royal visit to the home of Cromwell's uncle—an apocryphal foreshadowing of more serious conflict in later life.

The nature of Cromwell's social status has been a controversial area for historians. As Lord Protector he famously recalled that he was 'by birth a gentleman, living neither in any considerable height, nor yet in obscurity'.¹ The exact socio-economic meaning of this statement has been extensively debated. Cromwell's father had served as a Member of Parliament and a Justice of the Peace. His grandfather and uncle were substantial property owners in Huntingdonshire as a result of the family's acquisition of church property following the dissolution of the monasteries. Cromwell himself was elected MP for Huntingdon in 1628–29. It seems, however, that the family's local standing was undergoing a process of relative decline during Cromwell's youth.² His inheritance from his father was of limited value. In 1631 Cromwell slipped further down the social hierarchy when, following a dispute over the remodelling of the borough's charter, he left Huntingdon for St Ives where he became a tenant farmer. The position improved five years later when a legacy from his mother's brother, Sir Thomas Steward, enabled him to move to Ely, where his income improved as an administrator of church lands and tithes. Even this left Cromwell on the margins of the gentry and it is worth recalling that his later nickname, 'Lord of the Fens', was intended to suggest that he had merely achieved prominence in a regional backwater.

We should however beware of seeing Cromwell's rise as the spectacular, unaided ascent of a man wholly excluded from the dominant elite of his time. J. C. Davis has emphasised the importance in his life of a series of overlapping networks, based on family ties and shared values, which he strove to cultivate throughout his career.³ Martyn Bennett has described Cromwell's gentry background as providing a 'cocoon' which fostered his development, and which was by no means unusual in seventeenth century society.⁴ Cromwell certainly made an advantageous connection in 1620 when he married Elizabeth Bouchier, the daughter of a London fur trader and leather dresser, who owned land in Essex. His marriage drew him into the circle of Robert Rich, Earl of Warwick, the patron of Felsted School in Essex, at which Cromwell's

1 Speech to Parliament, 12 September 1654, quoted in Ivan Roots, ed., *Speeches of Oliver Cromwell* (London: Everyman, 1989), p. 42.

2 The fullest examination of this phase is John Morrill, 'The making of Oliver Cromwell' in John Morrill, ed., *Oliver Cromwell and the English Revolution* (London: Longman, 1990), pp. 19–48.

3 J. C. Davis, *Oliver Cromwell* (London: Arnold, 2001), pp. 78–80

4 Martyn Bennett, *Oliver Cromwell* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 8

own sons were educated. He counted a number of influential connections among his cousins, including John Hampden and Oliver St John, who were to play an important role in the coming political upheavals. It has been calculated that when Cromwell was elected once more to Parliament in 1640, he numbered at least fifteen kinsmen among his fellow MPs.

1.3 The emergence of a revolutionary

Central to Cromwell's identity was the development of his religious beliefs. In his adult life he became closely associated with the puritan movement within English Protestantism. Puritans rejected what they regarded as surviving 'popish' elements in the practice of the Church of England. Their faith was based not upon attachment to outward ceremony and ritual but upon a personal faith in God, whose word was to be found in the Bible. Puritanism promoted a desire for the moral reform of society and, at a deeper level, gave a conviction of God's direct intervention in the life of the individual.¹ It is not clear when Cromwell became seriously influenced by these ideas. It used to be believed that the Huntingdon schoolmaster, Thomas Beard, played an important part, early in Cromwell's life, in influencing him in this direction. John Morrill's work has however cast serious doubt on this notion. He has uncovered evidence that Beard was 'a greedy pluralist', motivated primarily by his own self-interest, who remained within the Church of England establishment.²

It seems more likely that Cromwell experienced a kind of religious conversion in the late 1620s or early 1630s, and that this was associated with a deep personal crisis, amounting to a nervous breakdown. It is known that Sir Theodore Mayerne, a noted London physician, treated him for depression during his term as a Member of Parliament in 1628–29. The exact date of Cromwell's conversion is not clear but it seems to have been complete by 1638. It is important to understand its significance for his career. Cromwell described himself in a letter to a relative as having 'lived in and loved darkness' before his spiritual experience, and as having been 'the chief of sinners'.³ This exaggerated characterisation of an individual's unworthiness was

1 A good short analysis is Patrick Collinson, *English Puritanism* (London: Historical Association, 1987). See also Christopher Durston and Jacqueline Eales, ed., *The Culture of English Puritanism, 1560–1700* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1996).

2 John Morrill, 'The Making of Oliver Cromwell', in John Morrill, ed., *Oliver Cromwell and the English Revolution*, pp.27–8

3 Cromwell to Mrs St John, 13 October 1638, quoted in W. C. Abbott, ed., *The Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, Volume 1 (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1937), p. 97.