

by Michael Byrd

Introduction: Cromwell's Character and Significance

Samuel Rawson Gardiner, the great English historian of the seventeenth century (who traced his descent from the marriage of Bridget Cromwell and Henry Ireton in 1646) described Cromwell as 'the most typical Englishman of all time...he stands there not to be implicitly followed as a model, but to hold up a mirror to ourselves, wherein we may see alike our weaknesses and our strength'. Cromwell is one of those figures who invite, almost demand, a personal interpretation, never still, full of paradoxes, dividing men for and against - but he stands unshakeable in the seventeenth century as its greatest central figure, as a man of faith, a statesman and when necessary an autocrat in politics but a democrat in religion.

Cromwell Family Background

The Cromwell family rose to wealth and importance at the time of the reformation and owed its name and fortune to Thomas Cromwell, Earl of Essex, Henry VIII's Chief Minister and suppresser of the monasteries. In 1494 Thomas Cromwell's sister Katherine married Morgan Williams - wealthy brewer of Putney from Glamorganshire - and her eldest son Richard took the name of Cromwell, entering the king's service as assistant to his uncle. Rewards naturally followed including in 1538 the Benedictine priory of Hinchinbrooke and in 1540 Ramsey Abbey with its most valuable manors. Knighted on May Day 1540, Sir Richard survived his uncle's fall and execution (even daring to wear morning dress at court at his uncle's death) and stayed in the king's favour up to his death in 1546.

Sir Richard's son Henry built Hinchinbrooke house from the Priory ruins and was knighted by Queen Elizabeth I following one of her several visits. Known as 'The Golden Knight', he was reckoned among the richest men in the district. Oliver, his heir, extravagantly entertained James I and was duly knighted. Robert, the second son, inherited an estate at Huntingdon worth about £300 a year - a middling sort - and married Elizabeth, widow of William Lynn and daughter of William Steward of Ely - relatives of the last prior and first Protestant Dean of Ely - acquiring church leases and tithes. A point to be stressed here is that the family were not related to the royal Stewarts, nor did the Lord Protector ever claim such kinship.

Oliver the future Lord Protector was the fifth child of this Robert Cromwell and the only son to survive infancy. Cromwell was thus, like most Englishmen of the upper class, of very mixed ancestry - Welsh, Norman and Anglo-Saxon - and it is tempting to draw superficial conclusions from these racial characteristics. But certain contradictory elements come to light. There was within him a fanaticism, a vision, a subdued fire capable of blazing up suddenly to consume all obstacles and all opponents but yet he was also capable

6. Raimondo Montecuccoli discusses the comparative advantages of this style of cavalry deployment in his 'Sulle Battaglie' - Concerning Battle. This is accessible in an English translation, Thomas Barker, *The Military Intellectual and Battle, Raimondo Montecuccoli and the Thirty Years War* (State University of New York Press, 1975); the section on this style of cavalry formation appears on pp. 95-6. The manuscript 'Sulle Battaglie' is thought to have been written between 1639 and 1642 while its author, then a cavalry colonel in Imperial service, was a prisoner of war. It provides a valuable insight into the developing military theory and practice of professional officers serving in the Imperial army. This is the same period that Prince Rupert was a prisoner of the Imperialists and he is likely to have discussed military theory with the Imperialist officers who guarded him and, more importantly, those he met at the Imperial Court at Vienna prior to his release. Those with an interest in Montecuccoli's career and the later impact of his military thought will find an interesting chapter in A. Gat, *The Origins of Military Thought from the Enlightenment to Clausewitz* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1989). Both Barker and Gat give detailed references to European articles on Montecuccoli, the most notable being Piero Pieri, *Raimondo Montecuccoli. Teorico della guerra, Guerre e politica negli scrittori italiani* (Milan, 1954).
7. Glenn Foard, *Naseby, The Decisive Campaign* (Pryor Publications, 1995).

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or great compassion and tenderness of heart, displayed in his later letters and actions. We see this, for example, in his letter to Col Valentine Walton on the day following Marston Moor, telling him of the death of his son in battle. John Maidstone, his personal servant, was to single out this trait in Oliver's character, when he wrote: 'He was naturally compassionate towards objects in distress, even to an effeminate measure.' Oliver's own observation on his station in life was 'I was by birth a gentleman, living neither in any considerable height nor yet in obscurity', which typically is both objective and a plain statement of the facts.

The First Forty Years

Oliver was born at 1.30 am on 25 April 1599, the son of Robert Cromwell, gentleman, and of Elizabeth his wife, and he was baptised on the 29th of the same month in the church of St John the Baptist at Huntingdon. He was christened Oliver in honour of his uncle the Knight of Hinchinbrooke. Out of ten children born to the Cromwells, seven survived, six of them girls. Oliver was the only boy to grow to manhood amidst the brood of sisters. We know from later years that a close family relationship developed between all members of the family and Oliver held his mother in particular esteem and respect throughout her long life until she died at the remarkable age of 89 in 1654.

Little survives from Cromwell's childhood save a few isolated facts, some fanciful embellishments and much spiteful gossip. Stories later told of his marvellous deliverance from danger and of strange prognostications of his future greatness. The Rev Michael Russell writing in his *Life of Oliver Cromwell* in 1833 quoted more ancient biographers, principally Heath who took delight in darkening the character of the young Oliver. Russell following Heath records that his grandfather, Sir Henry having sent for him when an infant in nurse's arms to come to Hinchinbrooke, a monkey took him from the cradle onto the roof but the sagacious animal appreciating the value of this treasure brought the infant safely down and replaced him in his bed. On another occasion he made a narrow escape from drowning and was saved by a local clergyman, Mr Johnson, who many years later was recognised by Oliver when marching at the head of his soldiers through Huntingdon. He asked the aged and loyal curate whether he remembered the incident. 'I do', replied the curate, 'but I wish I had put you in, rather than see you in arms against your king'. Heath also records without foundation that he was notorious for the robbing of orchards, breaking of hedges, and the eating and merchandising of young pigeons and, for good measure, the tale that he was flogged by his headmaster Dr Beard at the request of his father for speaking of a dream in which it was revealed to him 'that he should be the greatest man in England and should be near the king'; also recounted is the tale of a dramatical entertainment in which the boy is supposed to have shown signs of his vaulting ambition whilst acting the part of king by crowning himself with 'majestical mighty

words'.

As soon as he was old enough, Cromwell was sent to the freeschool attached to the hospital of St John at Huntingdon, the headmaster being then the puritan Dr Thomas Beard, an austere man who believed the pope was antichrist and showed in his *Theatre of God's Judgement* that human crimes never go unpunished by God even in this world. He imbued his pupils with faith in, and fear of, a God who neither overlooked nor forgave the shortcomings of the unrepentant in this world or the next. It is recognised that Beard corrected the manners of the young Oliver 'with a diligent hand and careful eye'.

Thus the earliest influences which without doubt did much to shape Cromwell's character were, firstly, in his most formative years both at school and later at college the influence and guidance of pronounced puritan teachers; secondly, the influence of his mother, who was a woman of strong character, sterling qualities and simple piety; and thirdly, at his uncle's mansion contact with the virtues and ideals of a true descendant of the Elizabethan country gentleman proud to recall the golden age of the great queen.

On the 23 April 1616 (the day on which Shakespeare died) he was admitted as fellow commoner at Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge. Its master was the learned, conscientious and severe disciplinarian puritan, Samuel Ward. Tradition asserts that his favourite subjects at college were mathematics and the history of Greece and Rome - an assertion borne out by his advice (much later) concerning the study of his son Richard. His favourite book is said to have been Raleigh's *History of the World* and he is said to have been good at all sports. At Cambridge, so Cromwell's enemies asserted, he had passed his time drinking, whoring, playing football and utterly neglecting his studies.

Bishop Burnet assures us that Oliver 'had no foreign language but the little Latin that stuck to him from his education which he spoke very viciously and scantily'. But whilst not distinguishing himself, he by no means wasted his time at Cambridge and as Lord Protector he remembered enough Latin to carry on a conversation in that language with the Dutch ambassador. C.V. Wedgwood in her great lives biography asserts that

at Cambridge he doubtless worked as little and amused himself as much as the young men of his time, which is to say that he worked more and played less than the average undergraduate of to-day.

How long Cromwell remained at university is not known but he left prematurely in June 1617 on account of the death of his father. His mother, it is said, wished him to study law and whilst no documentary evidence has come to light associating him with any Inns of Court, tradition asserts that he attended Lincoln's Inn. Again the Restoration critics became vociferous about his alleged misconduct whilst in London and Wood relates he became 'a debauchee and a boisterous and rude fellow'.

On 22 August 1620 Cromwell married Elizabeth Bouchier at St

Giles Church, Cripplegate. She was the daughter of Sir James Bouchier, a city merchant living at Tower Hill and owning property at Felsted in Essex. She was one year older than her husband and is traditionally said to have been a prudent, sensible and accomplished housewife, despite later royalist attempts to portray her as uncomely, undignified and miserly. There was undoubtedly life-long affection and respect between them and she was to write in 1650 'my life is but half in your absence'. Perhaps the most remarkable testimony to the sincere and life-long attachment between Cromwell and his wife is given in a private letter written on Wednesday 4 September 1650, the day after the great victory of Dunbar, when he wrote,

My dearest, I have not leisure to write much. But I could chide thee that in many of thy letters thou writest to me that I should be unmindful of thee and thy little ones. Truly if I love you not too well, I think I err not on the other hand much...Thou are dearer to me than any creature; let that suffice.

Oliver then relates the news of 'the crowning mercy' of Dunbar. This is one of seven letters written by Oliver from the field of battle which survive, but the only personal one.

From this marriage nine children followed including a son James, born in 1632, who died within a few days. The surviving children were:

Robert 1621-1639, died at Felsted school;

Oliver 1623-1644, died of smallpox at Newport Pagnall serving in the army, unmarried;

Bridget 1624-1662, i) married Henry Ireton, died 1651, ii) married Charles Fleetwood - Bridget had daughters by Ireton of whom there are descendants today - of her marriage to Fleetwood the only child, Anne, died an infant;

Richard 1626-1712, Lord Protector, married Dorothy Mayor, Richard's only son died unmarried in 1705 and his daughters likewise had no descendants;

Henry 1628-1674, Lord Deputy of Ireland, married Elizabeth Russell, Henry had five sons and two daughters - through him the Protector's male line descended until the death of Oliver Cromwell of Cheshunt in 1821. From his daughter and heiress, Elizabeth Olivaria Cromwell, descend the Cromwell Bush family to the present day;

Elizabeth 1629-1658, married John Claypole - Betty Claypole had four children but they left no descendants;

Mary 1637-1713, married Thomas Lord Fauconberg, died 1700;

Frances 1638-1720, married i) Richard Rich, died 1658

ii) married Sir John Russell - one of the many descendants of Cromwell through his youngest child, Frances Lady Russell, is the present Duchess of Kent.

Finally, in 1638 there occurred the culminating event which was profoundly to shape his character and the remainder of his life, his 'conversion'. After much soul searching and reoccurring fits of melancholy over several years, probably from 1630 onwards, he reached the profound conviction that he was saved; or as he put it that his soul was 'with the congregation of the first born'. It must be stressed that neither this process nor the result was considered odd or self righteous to the great majority of Cromwell's Protestant contemporaries either in England or abroad. Cromwell did not regard himself as the infallible interpreter of God's wishes, but henceforth he tested his actions no longer by the criticism of other men but by reference to his bible and their own effectiveness. If he did God's will, he must succeed, and such successes he called 'providences'; failure meant that somewhere the divine inspiration had been lost and sin had crept in.

A letter written in 1638 to his cousin Mrs St John clearly confirms this process and the subsequent condemnation of his former self:

You know what my manner of life hath been, oh, I lived in and loved darkness, and hated the light; I was chief, the chief of sinners. This is true; I hated godliness, yet god had mercy on me. O Riches of his mercy.

This letter has been widely quoted by critics to substantiate their attacks on Cromwell's dissolute and reprehensible early life, but it is more probable that such statements related to his perceived spiritual shortcomings rather than his youthful vices. If the epoch-making nature of this spiritual event in the life of a puritan is borne in mind, it is hardly surprising that the years preceding it should be recalled as steeped in 'darkness'. Indeed, other contemporaries, including Thomas Goodwin, Thomas Bouchier, Richard Baxter and John Winthrop, recorded similar conversions and 'newbirth'. It was also profoundly believed that once given, this 'grace' would never be withdrawn, and Burnet wrote of Oliver himself, 'his beloved notion was, once a child of God, always a child of God'.

Thus Wedgwood wrote in her biography:

such as he was in 1639 before he entered the open field of history, such he was nineteen years later, when as Lord Protector of Great Britain and Ireland he died. The essential features were all present in the farmer of Ely - the impulsive love of justice, the honest over confidence in his own opinions, the rough and moody temper, the generous heart and that impregnable faith in God.

It is probable that had there been no civil war, Cromwell would have passed the remainder of his life in relative obscurity as a country gentleman enjoying the good opinion of his neighbours, having been elected to parliament in 1628, concentrating on local issues and religious matters. During the second session of this parliament Cromwell had

spoken against the popish tendencies of the Bishop of Winchester, and championing the rights of the local people in connection with the fen drainage dispute later earned himself the nickname 'Lord of the Fens' from the royalist adventurers. It is known that during this period Cromwell followed European affairs with a keen interest, especially the career of the Great Swedish commander, Gustavus Adolphus, which was to become of some significance as England slid towards civil war.

The Later Cromwell

Perhaps the most remarkable facet of Cromwell's character was the ability to develop rapidly unsuspected talents to the point where not only was he the right man to perform the task his country required, he ultimately became the only man capable of the task.

'I was a person', Oliver said to one of his later parliaments, 'that from my first employment was suddenly preferred and lifted up from lesser trusts to greater, from my first being a captain of a troop of horse'. Even the royalist Earl of Clarendon was later to write, 'yet as he grew to place and authority, his parts seemed to be renewed, as if he had concealed faculties till he had the occasion to use them'.

From the first, vigour and application to the public good became his standard, often in the face of bitter enmity and fierce opposition. An inner strength moulded from adversity enabled him to remain indifferent to personal abuse, as if awaiting vindication in a higher court. 'Let the Lord be the judge', said Cromwell in 1654 to his First Protectorate Parliament, 'Let uncharitable men, who judge others as themselves, judge as they please'.

If any man say we seek ourselves in doing this, much good may it do him in his thoughts. It shall not put me out of my way.

The trial and execution of the king in 1649 is an event which is commonly laid at Cromwell's charge and certainly he endorsed the action in public and must accept his share of the responsibility. In his speech to the Nominated Parliament on 4 July 1653 he refers to

the bringing of offenders to justice - and the greatest of them. Bringing of the state of this government to the name (at least) of a commonwealth. Searching and sifting of all persons and places. The king removed and brought to justice; and many great ones with him. The house of Peers laid aside, the House of Commons itself, the representative of the people of England, sifted, winnowed and brought to a handful.

None the less, it is a mistake to regard Cromwell as the only mover in the events which led to the king's execution. The fate of Charles rested with the army of which Fairfax was the head; but Fairfax, whilst opposing the death sentence, proved ineffectual against a determined majority of influential members of the army party.

The ultimate tragedy of Charles I was that he could not live like a king but merely die like one. Whether we accept the Earl of Southampton's later record published in the eighteenth century regarding the supposed nocturnal visit by Cromwell to view the corpse of the king and his murmur of 'cruel necessity', much as the deed has been condemned on political as well as humanitarian grounds, it is difficult to see what could have been the alternative. In his letters to his personal friend Lord Wharton in 1650, Cromwell gives hints of his mental struggles over the issue, his attempts to find religious warrant for the deed and in the end his weary admission that perhaps there was no other way left.

Cromwell's Irish campaign began in 1649. On 11 September he attacked and stormed the town of Drogheda. His response to this event was typical of the man -

This is righteous judgement of God upon these barbarous wretches, who imbued their hands in so much blood...it will tend to prevent the effusion of blood for the future, which are satisfactory grounds to such actions, which otherwise cannot but work remorse and regret.

- a sentiment echoed by the Duke of Wellington 150 years later.

Wexford followed on 11 October 1649 and whilst he had not intended that Wexford should be sacked, this was arguably the greater blot on his career since it took place not on his orders but despite them; his men lost control yet no effort was made to check them either by Cromwell or by his subordinate officers. Cromwell's stark account to parliament following the battle confirms this and the weak attempt later to justify the action by recounting 'Catholic atrocities' cannot remove this stain.

Needless to say neither the majority of the English public nor the press saw the Irish campaign in this light and on his return to England he was acclaimed and feted as a hero. *Mercurius Politicus* referred to his

famous services in Ireland; which being added to the garland of his English victories, have crowned him in the opinion of all the world, for one of the wisest most accomplished of leaders, among the present and past generation.

Cromwell the soldier did not, however, glorify war, nor was he unmoved by the sad consequences of it and he was impatient to end it where he could. Writing from Ireland to Lenthall, the speaker of the house, he said:

We are willing to be out of our trade of war, and shall hasten by God's assistance and grace, to the end of our work, as the labourer doth to be at his rest.

Of Bristol, he wrote:

The town was fired in three places by the enemy, which we could not put out: and this begat a great trouble to the general and us all, fearing to see so famous a city burnt to ashes before our faces.

Similar sentiments followed the victories of Preston and Dunbar. Cromwell never spoke of war except with a sense of horror and when, with the crowning mercy of Worcester, he could discard the sword, he earnestly sought the settlement which would prevent renewed civil war. As late as 1658 we find him expressing his fear of another war in England:

What hinders this nation from being an Aceldama - a field of blood? I never look to see the people of England come into a just liberty, if another civil war overtake us.

For the remainder of his life all measures were designed to secure what he called 'healing and settling', including the rejection of the title of king. Addressing his last parliament in 1658 he said:

It were a happy thing if the nation would be content with rule, if it were but in civil things, with those that would rule worst; because misrule is better than no rule, and an ill government, a bad one, is better than none.

The end came on Friday 3 September 1658, the anniversary of Dunbar and Worcester, attended by his doctors, members of his protectoral council, his wife and his son Richard, whom Fauconberg told Henry Cromwell afterwards had been named successor either by a nod or whispered word to his council. It is to the groom of the bedchamber, Charles Harvey, that we owe the account of his last moving Prayer beginning 'Lord, though I am but a miserable and wretched creature, I am in covenant with thee through grace', before he died at Hampton Court of a malarial attack about 3 o'clock (although Thurloe said 4 o'clock, Whitelock two).

Whether or not we ascribe to him the epithet of hero, we cannot deny greatness, since even his enemies did not do this. But it was his personal servant, John Maidstone, who spoke the final epitaph:

A larger soul hath seldom dwelt in a house of clay.

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THE ENGLISH CIVIL WAR AND THE AMERICAN CONNECTION

by Barry Denton

In the seventeenth century the English puritans began what was to them a great adventure, the migration to and colonization of the New World - the young and still untamed America. Such great men as William Lord Saye, Robert Lord Brooke, Sir Arthur Haslerig, Sir Henry Vane the younger and Oliver Cromwell helped young families to emigrate to America, their aim to expand trade and found a land where men could be free.

Just over a hundred years later in 1775, the British constitutional theorist, Edmund Burke, spoke in the House of Commons of the North American colonist as

In this character of the Americans a love of freedom is the predominating feature, which marks and distinguishes the whole; and as an ardent is always a jealous affection, your colonies become suspicious, restive, and untractable, whenever they see the least attempt to wrest from them by force, or shuffle them by chicane, what they think the only advantage worth living for. This fierce spirit of liberty is stronger in the English colonies, probably, than in any people of the earth.

These words, expressing the nature of the love of liberty and freedom which had evolved in America, were spoken 140 years after the first settlement of Connecticut and Massachusetts Bay. Yet when the shots 'heard round the world' echoed from Concord and Lexington in 1775, it was the inheritance of freedom from the earlier puritan colonization, and the shots fired by their great grandfathers in the England of Charles I, which formed in their hearts that choice for liberty against tyranny. For this reason the 350th anniversary of the English civil war is an integral part of the quest for the wider American heritage - the American connection if you like.

For this reason, is it possible that by looking to America, where the spirit of their Constitution embodies many of the aspirations of the common soldiers from the English civil war, we will find a new insight into the conflict? America was old England with the slate wiped clean, and written on that slate were the words Liberty and Freedom.

This early desire for freedom was encompassed in two ways, in religion and in commerce. Some would argue that 'religion is the opium of the masses', but to the people of the seventeenth century, the search for their heavenly salvation was the search for their humanity. Life was for religion, religion for life. This whole concept was truly a chicken and egg situation, but the early colonists had a deep desire to find their form of salvation, before their time led them either to it, or