

CROMWELL DAY ADDRESS 2013
HONOURING CROMWELL? CROMWELL AND HONOUR

By Prof JC Davies

Since their inception, the observation of these annual ceremonies' addresses and the accompanying addresses published in *Cromwelliana* have both commemorated and honoured Oliver Cromwell; not always in an uncritical manner. This morning I am not so much concerned with honouring him as with asking what value Cromwell himself attached to honour and specifically to his personal honour. How significant was 'honour' in his own attitudes, thinking and utterance?

Let me begin by noting a few indicators of the central place of honour in the political environment which Cromwell inhabited. For example, the great, mid-seventeenth century, political philosopher, Thomas Hobbes, is often depicted as the hard-headed analyst of a politics driven by fear. In fact, he saw the three great determinants of western political culture as honour, fear and profit, and in that order.¹ Of the titles of works printed between 1640 and 1660 in the Thomason collection a quarter contain the word honour. Or, using the textual word counts available on Early English Books Online for the same period (1640 to 1660), in 7,050 works there are 83,412 hits for the word honour, indicating an average usage of the word twelve times per printed work. The language of honour was commonplace and historians of the civil wars have recently begun to take a renewed interest in its influence on recruitment, conduct and even the behaviour of turncoats.² To quote Dan Beaver, "the violent competition for honour [was] at the heart of orderliness and power in the seventeenth century"³, while Michael Braddick has argued for the importance of honour as a "crucial currency" in a world of civil conflict and shifting alliances.⁴ Richard Cust's magisterial biography of Charles I repeatedly stresses the importance of honour in the political actions and attitudes of the King. Even Charles' refusal to plead at his trial was in this view substantially driven by his sense of honour.⁵ And, Sir Keith Thomas has recently written of honour as one of 'the ends of life' towards which all were exhorted to strive.⁶ The maintenance of reputation and the symbols of honour has become a preoccupation, not only of contemporaries and of historians studying them, but of historical novelists and television documentaries and dramas and we are still apparently dazzled by it.

CROMWELL DAY ADDRESS 2013
HONOURING CROMWELL? CROMWELL AND HONOUR

By contrast, Cromwell's own references to honour are scarce and there are virtually none to his personal honour. The most frequent use of the language of honour in his letters and speeches relates to the honour of God and often suggests that the obligation to honour God relegated human honour to irrelevancy.⁷ Secondly, Cromwell saw service to the cause of civil and religious liberty, "the honour and liberty of Parliament", as honourable.⁸ Occasionally the two are linked. Writing to Colonel Jones on 14 September 1647, he reminded him that service to God and the public good would in the end be to his honour.⁹ But, because it was judgement by the standards of the world, too worldly, there are also strong indications of Cromwell discounting honour. Service to God was no guarantee of honorific status in the world's eyes. "The Lord may lay us in the dust when He pleaseth, yet we serve Him - He is our Master, this is our boasting"¹⁰ The victory at Langport was the work of "poor ignorant men".¹¹ There was no honour in it but that of God. In 1651 he warned his son's father-in-law of Richard's prodigality and deplored the vanity of the desire to impress others which was worldly honour.¹² At the other end of the scale, dissolving his first Parliament in January 1655 he observed that they had been "like other nations sometimes up, and sometimes down, in our honour in the world". Yet what mattered was they were always a people who "have had a stamp upon them from God".¹³ In August 1651, attempting to persuade Lord Wharton and others to rejoin the cause which the regicide had alienated them from, he urged that they offer themselves willingly for God's work. "Wherein to be accepted, is more honour from the Lord than the world can give or hath."¹⁴ Even military honour which Cromwell is often alleged to have taken more seriously appears infrequently and sometimes slightly in his letters and speeches.¹⁵ On 15 February 1650 he reported to Lenthall that the Irish town of Fethard had surrendered "upon terms which we usually call honourable".¹⁶ The values Cromwell was more likely to stress in his own communications were 'honesty', 'integrity', 'fidelity' and 'faithfulness' rather than 'honour' and his personal honour barely featured at all.

Why does this matter?

What I am proposing is that Cromwell should be seen in the context of negotiation and coalition building and that the relative absence of a preoccupation with personal honour freed him for what that involved.¹⁷

CROMWELL DAY ADDRESS 2013
HONOURING CROMWELL? CROMWELL AND HONOUR

A lack of key coercive, bureaucratic and fiscal resources, necessarily meant that early modern government functioned through negotiation. The personal government of Charles I, ignoring this necessity in the 1630s, ordering rather than negotiating, came to be regarded as misguided and tyrannical.

Equally, to fight a civil war without those resources necessarily meant negotiating for support - for men, money and materials. Look at Cromwell's correspondence in 1643 when he was beginning to emerge as a potential military leader and you will see what I mean. He is pleading for men - and men of the right quality - money and support. His bargaining counters are security, protection, the cause. Moreover, both sides in the civil war were negotiated coalitions which experienced periods of great fragility and had to be renegotiated - militarily, politically and religiously. Cromwell's quarrel with Manchester is a good example of a military coalition passing the limits of fragility only to be replaced by a new one with the Fairfaxes and the formation of the New Model Army. Religiously too, Cromwell negotiated hard for a broad spectrum protestant coalition which would not press too heavily on tender consciences.

From late 1646, victory and the blank sheet created by the abolition of the episcopal church meant that the centrifugal forces within the parliamentary coalition could barely be contained. And yet Cromwell made a determined effort - at some cost to his reputation for plain dealing - accepting on occasion the possibility of a presbyterian church, working through 1647 to keep parliament and the army together in the face of provocations from both sides, and supporting that remarkable attempt to reconcile all, or most, parties, the Heads of Proposals. Even in 1648, following the defiance of providence by the King and the Scots which was, to him, the second civil war, Cromwell sought, despite considerable pressure from the irreconcilables in the army, a negotiated peace. Post-regicide, it was he above all who persuaded moderates and those who could not abide the killing of the King to come back on board. By the mid-1650s, we could argue that, even in post-conquest Ireland and Scotland, Cromwell was trying to make rather than impose peace, looking for alliances out of which to shape national coalitions.

CROMWELL DAY ADDRESS 2013
HONOURING CROMWELL? CROMWELL AND HONOUR

Negotiation and coalition building required flexibility and a willingness to compromise which often involved setting aside the demands of personal honour. Cromwell, I would argue, was distinguished from many contemporaries in this regard. For example, in terms of military capabilities, others such as Fairfax or Lambert might be at least equally outstanding, but neither were negotiators or coalition builders. Or, consider again Charles I, who according to Richard Cust, was “seemingly oblivious to any priority except the vindication of his honour” which he pursued regardless of “any prospects of success”. Such “oversensitivity” ultimately induced inflexibility, “often serving to personalise confrontations, and making it harder to back down”.¹⁸ Cust’s verdict is that the inflexibility of his honorific codes limited the king’s capacities to that of a party, rather than a national, leader. The mature Cromwell, I suggest, strove to reverse that formula - to move from party to national leadership. In that regard, the absence of a preoccupation with personal honour was an asset.

Negotiation and coalition building took their toll in terms of dignity, reputation and honour. Cromwell’s negotiations of 1647/8 were branded as scheming driven by personal ambition. Throughout the 1650s his dignity as Lord Protector was exposed to the frustration and serial humiliations of trying to reach accommodations with old republicans like Ludlow, Fifth Monarchists like John Rogers and Quakers like George Fox. What is surprising is the degree of his persistence with such people, his tolerance of their obduracy, even their rudeness and the range of people with whom he was prepared to engage. Presbyterians, Prayer Book Anglicans, old royalists and even Roman Catholics were on the list of those with whom accommodation might be sought. Imposing peace meant the military occupation of Britain at what was probably a politically and economically unsustainable cost. Making peace, the option Cromwell increasingly turned to, meant negotiation in the name of healing and settling and that could and did involve reversals, frustrations and humiliations.¹⁹ Personal honour was at a discount - and Cromwell was capable of discounting it.

Many of those critics of the Lord Protector most admired by posterity, men such as Milton, Vane and Richard Baxter saw the Good Old Cause in terms of a party, rather than a national, coalition. Such people favoured rule by a select coalition of the saints, the godly or of the better sort. Edmund Ludlow identified this with “those of all sorts who had acted with fidelity

CROMWELL DAY ADDRESS 2013
HONOURING CROMWELL? CROMWELL AND HONOUR

and affection to the public” - i.e. people like us.²⁰ This was to settle for an alliance so narrow that it could only be sustained and made effective by military force. Cromwell, in contrast, was seeking a broad coalition which would facilitate the civilianisation of the regime and a substantial restoration of local autonomy. His struggle with the offer of the Crown in 1657, itself a negotiating process, can be seen as essentially a struggle over what coalition could best deliver that future of the Protectorate most desired by Cromwell. Was it to be a partisan triumph or a reconfiguration of the political nation? Unless we make the assumption that he was playing an extraordinarily and, in my view, implausibly long game, what was not an issue for him, in the face of that offer, was the personal and dynastic honour of the royal title.²¹

Coalition building, which I believe to be a crucial key to Cromwell’s career, made ideological purity and personal honour negotiable. The rainbow coalition, which healing and settling implied, involved finding and appealing to common interests. As Cromwell himself ruefully observed of the failure to find a negotiated settlement after the civil war, “we had our humours and interests, and indeed I fear our humours were more than our interests”.²² To recalibrate the thesis of Mervyn James’ seminal work on honour in this period²³ the politics of lineage and honour were giving way to the politics of interest and that appeal to shared interest remains a cardinal feature of modern politics. Was Cromwell then in some sense the practitioner of a new politics, the first of the modern politicians?

If I am right, the ironical question I leave you with is this: should we honour Oliver Cromwell for discounting the politics of personal honour?

This Cromwell Day address was given on 2nd September 2013.

¹ Thomas Hobbes, *Eight Books of the Peloponnesian War, Written by Thucydides The Son of Olorus*, in Sir William Molesworth (ed.), *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*, vols. 8 and 9 (London, 1843), I, 82. Also noteworthy is Hobbes’ extensive treatment of honour in Chapter 10 of his masterwork *Leviathan* (1651).

CROMWELL DAY ADDRESS 2013
HONOURING CROMWELL? CROMWELL AND HONOUR

- ² Barbara Donagan, 'The Web of Honour: Soldiers, Christians and Gentlemen in the English Civil War', *Historical Journal*, 44 (2001) pp. 365-89; Monica Patterson-Tutschka, 'Honour Thy King: Honouring as a Royalist Theory of Praxis in Civil War England 1640-1660', *History of Political Thought*, 32:3 (2011) pp. 465-98; Andrew James Hopper, 'The Self-Fashioning of Gentry Turncoats during the English Civil Wars', *Journal of British Studies*, 49:2 (2010) pp. 1-22.
- ³ Dan Beaver, "'Bragging and daring words": honour, property and the symbolism of the hunt in Stowe, 1590-1642', in Michael J. Braddick and John Walter (eds.), *Negotiating Power in Early Modern Society: Order, Hierarchy and Subordination in Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge, 2001) p. 164. See also Markku Peltonen, *The Duel in Early Modern England: Civility, Politeness and Honour* (Cambridge, 2006).
- ⁴ Michael J. Braddick (ed.), *The Politics of Gesture: Historical Perspectives* (Oxford, 2009) p. 26. For honour as a social cement offsetting religious diversity see Mervyn James, *Society, Politics and Culture: Studies in early modern England* (Cambridge, 1986) p. 435.
- ⁵ Richard Cust, *Charles I: A Political Life* (London, 2007) p. 459 and *passim*.
- ⁶ Keith Thomas, *The Ends of Life: Roads to Fulfillment in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2010) Chapter 5.
- ⁷ W. C. Abbott (ed.), *The Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell* (4 volumes, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1937-47). References to this work will be in the form of A followed by volume and page(s) number(s). A, I, 96, 340; II, 110-11; III, 157, 284, 335, 591, 859; IV, 72, 388-9. The language of honour creeps more regularly into his Latin, diplomatic correspondence but this was invariably drafted by others, including John Milton.
- ⁸ A, I, 292; for examples see also A, I, 127-8, 360; II, 462-3; III, 58-9, 531; IV, 225, 241, 482, 486, 819.
- ⁹ A, I, 506; see also I, 374-8; III, 361.
- ¹⁰ Cromwell to Colonel Hammond, 13 May 1651, A, II, 418.
- ¹¹ A, I, 365.
- ¹² A, II, 425.
- ¹³ A, III, 579.
- ¹⁴ A, II, 453.

CROMWELL DAY ADDRESS 2013
HONOURING CROMWELL? CROMWELL AND HONOUR

- ¹⁵ Alan Marshall, *Oliver Cromwell Soldier: the Military Life of a Revolutionary at War* (London, 2004) p. 274 for the view that Cromwell's military aims were not glory and honour but "a just peace and a righteous religious settlement".
- ¹⁶ A, II, 213. Compare II, 216, 226-7, 196, 368.
- ¹⁷ The fuller version of the argument I am drastically summarising here will appear in Michael J. Braddick (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the English Revolution* (Oxford, 2014).
- ¹⁸ Cust, *Charles I*, pp. 61, 260, 473, 30; see also 215-6.
- ¹⁹ For the significance of this distinction see J. C. Davis, 'Oliver Cromwell Peacemaker', *Cromwelliana* (1998) pp. 2-7.
- ²⁰ A, IV, 221.
- ²¹ See his enigmatic remarks on the offer of the crown associating honour with worldliness and weakness. The offer made in the Humble Petition and Advice was "exceeding high honour and respect" .."according to what the world calls good". A, IV, 444-6. Speaking amongst his intimates, he was famously, according to Ludlow, prepared to compare the crown with a "feather in a man's cap" or a child's rattle. A, IV, 509.
- ²² A, IV, 435.
- ²³ James, *Society, Politics and Culture* .

JC Davis is Emeritus Professor of History at the University of East Anglia. He has written extensively on the history of utopian thought and on political and religious thought in the English Revolution His books include *Oliver Cromwell (Reputations)*; *Utopia and the Ideal Society: A Study of English Utopian Writing 1516-1700*; *Fear, Myth and History: The Ranters and the Historians*.