The Cromwell Association 2018 Annual Essay Prize

**Does Cromwell’s legacy have any relevance in the 21st century?**

by Olivia Shelton (15 July 2018)

In order to evaluate whether Cromwell’s legacy has any relevance in the 21st century, it is necessary to identify what his legacy actually consists of. There are two sides to his legacy – the tangible legacy consisting of his impact on current British institutions, such as the Navy and the Army; and his intangible legacy, much of which is shaped by the reactions to the radical changes he sought to introduce. A key example of his intangible legacy is the attitude of the Irish towards Cromwell as a result of the massacres he ordered at Drogheda and Wexford. Clearly, aspects of Cromwell’s direct legacy have much relevance to the 21st century, as they continue to influence essential institutions of the British state. However, there are other examples of Cromwell’s legacy which have subsequently been dismantled and therefore seem, perhaps, to be of little current significance. The most obvious example of this is the collapse of the Protectorate, which remains Britain’s first and only attempt at a republic. In a very real sense, however, the failure of the Protectorate and the subsequent restoration of the constitutional monarchy is perhaps still relevant and could be viewed as the most important indirect legacy of Cromwell to Britain, as it has profoundly affected the country’s psyche and reverberated across the centuries. Similarly, it can be argued that an indirect, long-term consequence of Cromwell’s fundamental Christian views, expressed through the Major-General’s rule, influenced Britain’s increasing religious tolerance and thereby contributed to the decline in religious observance. Overall, therefore, Cromwell has had a profound impact on British life which endures to the present day. Whether or not Cromwell’s indirect legacy is acknowledged, it is true to say that, without it, the country would be a very different place, and might still even be solely ruled by a monarch.

Cromwell’s actions in Ireland, although in his eyes justifiable as an attempt to reduce further bloodshed and as revenge for the massacre of Protestants at Ulster in 1641, are regarded by many as the foundation for the Irish Troubles whose bloody legacy remains of huge relevance to modern British society. The bloodbath at Drogheda in September 1649 claimed the lives of over 2,800 Irish soldiers and 800 civilians. The most controversial aspect of this campaign and the one which ensured that Cromwell would leave a lasting and bitter legacy in Anglo-Irish relations was the fact that Cromwell’s troops deliberately targeted innocent people, including women, children and priests. Cromwell personally ‘forbade [his troops] to spare any that were in arms in the town’, which ensured that carnage followed the eventual breach in the town walls. In addition to destroying private houses, troops set fire to a church where civilians were sheltering. Even defenders who had already surrendered were massacred, with 30 being burnt alive and another 200 being shot. This bloodthirsty breach of the ethical code of war and the fundamental disrespect for the principle of surrender incensed the Irish, an attitude that remained for many into the 21st century. Irish wrath was further increased by Cromwell’s attempt to excuse the slaughter, calling it a ‘righteous judgement of God on these barbarous wretches’. Although historians have sought to explain his mercilessness as a reprisal for the Irish massacre of English Protestants in 1641, the fact that Cromwell’s massacre at Drogheda was repeated at Wexford less than a month later calls this into question and further stoked religious conflict, highlighting that his brutality had been no error of judgement but calculated ruthlessness. That Cromwell’s forces then ordered Catholics to live west of the Shannon River – the infamous injunction ‘To Hell or to Connaught’ – led directly to Protestants taking 80 per cent of the Irish Catholic land. This in turn led to famine, plague and the death of a fifth of the population. To many in Ireland, Cromwell’s cruelty at Drogheda and Wexford has a direct link to the sectarianism between the Protestants and Catholics in the 20th century. With the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, it is to be hoped that this legacy has now been laid to rest.

The establishment of the British Army and Navy owed much to Cromwell, and as they have continued to provide the basis of security both at home and abroad they remain an enduring legacy, certainly retaining their relevance today. The New Model Army, created in 1645 after widespread dissatisfaction with the Parliament’s local county forces, was the first full-time professional army in Britain and promoted meritocracy and equality of opportunity. The motivation for the foundation of the New Model Army stemmed from an argument between Cromwell and Edward Montagu, a Parliamentary general, on whether a Parliamentary victory in the First Civil War could be achieved with the local militia being used at the time. As Cromwell rightly argued, unless military forces were improved and personal motives for the continuation of the war given up, the conflict would either carry on for much longer than necessary or, worse still, end in a Royalist triumph, jeopardising Cromwell’s and his supporters lives. The New Model Army was the solution, with 11 regiments of horse, 12 regiments of foot and 1,000 dragoons, totalling around 25,000 men. Interestingly, the oldest regiments in our modern Army, including the Coldstream Guards and the Grenadier Guards, can trace their roots directly back to the New Model Army. Cromwell’s legacy was a centrally supplied, full-time, disciplined, professional field army that could be deployed across the country where promotion was on merit – military principles that seem obvious today but were revolutionary in Cromwell’s time.

The modern British Navy also owes much of its powerful status and success abroad to Cromwell. Under his control, the Rump Parliament passed the Navigation Act of 1651, which authorised the Commonwealth to regulate trade between countries and to eliminate Dutch influence on English trade. This Act and others formed the basis of English overseas trade for the next 200 years. Cromwell’s investment in controlling and expanding the Navy, building 40 new ships between 1650 and 1654, laid the political foundations for centrally organising and supplying the Navy, which later enabled Britain to dominate trade and conflict at sea thus opening up the rest of the world to British economic and political influence. Cromwell’s general-at-sea, Robert Blake, is usually referred to as the ‘Father of the British Navy’ both for his exploits in battle against the Dutch and Spanish and for codifying naval rules for the first time.

In both the New Model Army and the Navy, Cromwell and his officers created highly disciplined, well-trained professional forces recruited on merit. The Self-Denying Ordinance of April 1645 forced MPs in the Long Parliament who were also officers to choose between their seat or their military role, paving the way for younger, more committed and efficient military leaders. Clearly, Cromwell’s policy of strengthening armed forces had a profound effect on the course of both British and world history, providing as it did the basis for British dominance of the sea and, through its control of trade, the creation of the British Empire. Although the Empire is now history, it is the basis of the new Commonwealth, and so arguably, an indirect legacy of Cromwell’s Commonwealth.

Cromwell’s most important indirect legacy was the creation of an enduring British political consensus hostile to republics. Since Charles II’s restoration to the throne in 1660, Britain has never again flirted with the idea of a republic. In a poll undertaken by YouGov in 2015, 68 per cent of British people favoured retaining the institution of the monarchy, with a further 62 per cent thinking that a hereditary monarchy will still exist in Britain in 100 years’ time. Although much of this continuing support for an albeit largely ceremonial monarchy is down to the British love for tradition, some not insignificant part can also be ascribed to an aversion to the turmoil, repression and upheaval experienced during Cromwell’s republic. Cromwell sought to dispense with traditional privilege and replace it with ideas and institutions that were new and meritocratic. Although the British people rejected these ideas after Cromwell’s death, it was ultimately that rejection that was Cromwell’s indirect legacy. Cromwell’s desire to overturn tradition and create a new political order was ahead of its time. This strong attachment to a constitutional monarchy suggests that there is still very little appetite for Britain to become a republic in the 21st century.

Finally, the Church under Cromwell was still at the centre of the state. To Cromwell, it was of the utmost importance to rule in line with the word of God and the Bible played a large role in his decision-making, such as in the election of radical religious preachers and zealots to the Nominated Assembly. Although this Parliament collapsed just six months after its formation, it was heavily religiously motivated, with the majority of debates centring around issues such as the national Church and tithes. In today’s multicultural Britain, while Christianity no longer shapes political discourse as it did in Cromwell’s era, the rise of violent and intolerant religious views means that Cromwell’s legacy is still relevant.

Again, in this respect, Cromwell’s legacy to the 21st century is indirect. During the rule of the Major-Generals, who executed the Protector’s religious reforms from 1655 to 1657, the ‘reformation of manners’ beloved by Cromwell sought to please God by suppressing immorality and encouraging virtue, by clamping down on drinking, music, bear-baiting, stage plays and, most famously, Christmas. This period of authoritarian rule by the Major-Generals was widely unpopular and may in some way have contributed to Britons’ resentment of government interference in their lives. Cromwell’s attempts at imposing radical Christianity on the country certainly failed. According to the 2011 Census, less than 60 per cent of the population identify as Christian, with a quarter identifying as completely irreligious. It is clear that Cromwell’s vision of a fervently Christian state is largely irrelevant in the 21st century.

Undoubtedly, the radical vision that Cromwell both created and built in the short period of his rule between 30 January 1649 and 3 September 1658 has had a profound and lasting impact. Ultimately, while it is difficult to point to a direct and tangible legacy from his rule his intangible legacy is vast and has shaped not only the course of British history but also that of world history. From sowing the seeds of religious conflict in Ireland to creating the conditions to enable British rule around the globe through naval dominance, Cromwell’s indirect legacy has been and remains substantial. In Britain, the violence and fear that he used to suppress opposition has created an enduring hostility to the idea of creating another republic. Finally, his attempt to create a state based on principles of faith instead created a template for fundamental religious intolerance of abiding and universal relevance. Cromwell’s own place in history may be debatable but his legacy is unquestionably relevant today.