

'A person to be truly admired for nothing but apostasy and ambition and exceeding Tiberius in dissimulation' [Slingsby Bethel 1668] Given that in 2002, Cromwell was voted the third greatest Briton of all time, how do you explain the contempt shown him by some of his contemporaries?

Undoubtedly Cromwell is a challenging figure, having pursued religious toleration and persecution, championed the parliamentary cause and reverted to military rule. Given this complexity, one-sided portrayals deserve scrutiny. The adulation Cromwell seems to have received in the 2002 popular poll is likely attributable to a degree of public ignorance. The popular exaggeration of Cromwell's seismic rise to power from 'humble' origins has made him appear heroic - Cromwell was actually a gentleman by birth, his brief time as a tenant farmer the consequence of his own intemperance in Huntingdon in 1630.¹ Moreover, an emphasis on Cromwell's self-represented integrity, propelled by Carlyle, has perhaps masked the cruelty and ruthlessness of some of his actions.² Pejorative characterisations of Cromwell can be similarly explained. Cromwell was accused of being personally ambitious, radical, hypocritical, cruel and lawless, by contemporaries before and after the Restoration in 1660. Cromwell's creation of the Protectorate in 1653 was his most controversial moment, to many an indication of his ambition, hypocrisy and lawlessness.

Despite insisting he only intended to 'keep the peace of the parish', Cromwell was accused, as early as 1648, of being driven by 'ambitious ends'.³ Many, including Edmund Ludlow, who denounced Cromwell's 'ambitious designs', were republicans angered by Cromwell's apparent hijacking of the revolution in 1653.⁴ To these republicans, by expelling the Rump - a legitimate instrument of republican development - and becoming Lord Protector, Cromwell was abandoning the 'old cause'.⁵ It was the creation of the 'pretended Protectorship' which to Bethel betrayed Cromwell's 'unpardonable' drive for his 'own single advancement', with Ludlow perceiving both moves as part of Cromwell's 'design of destroying the civil authority, and setting up of himself'.⁶ As Lord Protector, Cromwell's expensive policies were further cited as evidence of his design. '[I]gnorant' and doing 'irreparable [...] damage' to England, Bethel found Cromwell's costly foreign policy reflective of personal greed.⁷ Ludlow also viewed the domestic 'Act of General Pardon and Amnesty' suspiciously.

¹ <https://www.cromwellmuseum.org/cromwell/significance>; J. Morrill., *Cromwell, Oliver*; J. C. Davis., *Oliver Cromwell*, p. 16.

² J. Morrill., *Cromwell, Oliver*

³ D. L. Smith., *The Double Crown*, p. 183; W. Prynne., *The Machiavellian Cromwellist*, p. 4.

⁴ E. Ludlow., *Memoirs Part 1*, p. 7.

⁵ http://www.olivercromwell.org/wordpress/?page_id=28

⁶ S. Bethel, *The World's Mistake in Oliver Cromwell*, p. 17; E. Ludlow., *Memoirs Part 1*, p. 185.

⁷ S. Bethel, *The World's Mistake in Oliver Cromwell*, p. 5 & 13.

It seemed Cromwell was 'fortify[ing] himself by the addition of new friends for the carrying on his designs' because it cost 'great sums of money'.⁸ Ultimately, Cromwell was characterised as autocratic by republicans because of his dissolution of the Rump and creation of the Protectorate, events seen as part of a 'design' to enhance his own power. They were acts which seemed to contradict what republicans had fought for, instances of an individual abusing their power. Subsequent policy decisions strengthened this idea that Cromwell was personally ambitious, not acting in the cause of establishing republican rule, but trying to advance himself.

Parliamentarian Presbyterians voiced their contempt for the Independent Cromwell during the first civil war. Whilst Cromwell's dispute with the Earl of Manchester, the Lord General of the Parliamentarian army, in 1644, arose from the Earl's lacklustre efforts following the Battle of Marston Moor, the charges levelled against Cromwell rested on a sense of his radicalism. In the Lords Manchester admonished Cromwell for attacking the principle of hereditary peerage, vilifying of the Assembly of Divines, and displaying a violent animosity towards the Scots.⁹ To Manchester, Cromwell was a radical troublemaker, who had said 'that he hoped to live to see never a Nobleman in England', and 'could as soone draw his sword against [the Scots] as against any in the king's army'.¹⁰ Manchester even suggested during a private meeting in December 1644 that Cromwell should be proceeded against as an incendiary between the two Kingdoms. This charge persisted, with Cromwell in 1648 painted as 'the very abstract of sedition'.¹¹ Therefore, Cromwell was resented by Manchester because of a perception that he was socially subversive.

These accusations of radicalism were strongly religious in nature. Presbyterians, such as Major-General Crawford and Lieutenant-Colonel Dodson, viewed Cromwell as supporting Independent officers over more orthodox godly men in his strategy for recruitment and promotion. Morrill has noted Cromwell's 'insistence that no religious test be applied to those volunteering for service', and it was this toleration which led to heated exchanges.¹² Indeed, Cromwell bitterly disagreed with Crawford over his dismissal of William Packer, a Baptist junior officer.¹³ Not only was Cromwell tolerating religious radicals, he also appeared to be dismissing godly men. Dodson accused Cromwell

⁸ E. Ludlow., *Memoirs Part 1*, p. 402.

⁹ J. Morrill., *Cromwell, Oliver*

¹⁰ I. Gentles., *Montagu, Edward, second earl of Manchester*

¹¹ J. C. Davis., *Oliver Cromwell*, p. 45.

¹² J. Morrill., *Cromwell, Oliver*

¹³ J. Morrill., *Cromwell, Oliver*

of dismissing 'honest gentlemen' for 'common men' who 'onely he would give [...] the title of godly'.¹⁴ They believed this because Cromwell had been clamouring for the dismissal of many of Crawford's Presbyterian officers, as well as Crawford himself for 'a number of pretended faults'.¹⁵ These charges were expounded in a *Statement by an opponent of Cromwell*, which accused Cromwell of seeking to make the army an enclave for religious radicals.¹⁶ Therefore, Cromwell was disliked by Presbyterians during his time in the Eastern Association for his subversive toleration of religious radicals. However, it is noticeable that these early accusations of a political and religious radicalism were essentially replaced by later accusations of personal ambition, indicating that 1653 was more significant in arousing contempt against Cromwell, with the quarrel with Manchester and the Presbyterians quickly forgotten.

The frequent denunciations of Cromwell as a hypocrite can be primarily explained by his apostasy of adopting the Instrument of Government. To republicans, such as Sir Henry Vane, it was the moment God's purpose in the revolution was betrayed. Vane opined that Cromwell, since the Civil War, like Achan after the fall of Jericho, had 'brought not in the fruit and gain of the Lord's treasure, but covetously went about to convert it to his own use'.¹⁷ These accusations were clearly strong because Cromwell saw the need to reassure MPs, 'I would not build Jericho again'.¹⁸ Moreover, they persisted through the 1650s. Following an audience with Cromwell in 1655, Giovanni Sagredo, a Venetian diplomat, was sceptical of the Protector: 'he makes a great show of his zeal [...] this way he stimulates the troops to second his designs'.¹⁹ This accusation of a false profession of religious drive for personal ends was reflected frequently by detractors such as Colonel Edward Lane and Fifth Monarchist Christopher Feake.²⁰ Therefore, Cromwell was accused of hypocrisy, mainly because of his seeming abandonment of godly will to pursue earthly greed, an apostasy particularly apparent with the creation of the Protectorate.

What often explains resentment of Cromwell then, is a sense of betrayal. Bethel admonished Cromwell's 'turning out' those who had supported him.²¹ Having hoped their *Agreement of the*

¹⁴ C. Holmes., *The Eastern Association*, p. 199.

¹⁵ C. Firth & S. Kelsey, *Crawford, Lawrence*; C. Holmes, *The Eastern Association*, p. 199.

¹⁶ <https://academic.oup.com/ehr/article-abstract/129/541/1371/2769622>

¹⁷ D. L. Smith., *The Double Crown*, p. 191.

¹⁸ D. L. Smith., *The Double Crown*, p. 191.

¹⁹ J. C. Davis., *Oliver Cromwell*, p. 112.

²⁰ J. C. Davis., *Oliver Cromwell*, p. 46.

²¹ S. Bethel., *The World's Mistake in Oliver Cromwell*, p. 16.

People would predicate a new constitution, the Levellers were appalled when it was discarded in 1649.²² Such bitterness was, of course, what disaffected many republicans, who believed that Cromwell had betrayed republican principles by traitorously creating the Protectorate. Moreover, large sections of the army felt betrayed by Cromwell's negotiations with Charles, 'that man of blood', in the summer of 1647, and petitioned against the Heads of Proposals, while the Scots felt scorned by Cromwell when he took full credit for the victory at Marston Moor in 1644, belittling their role by claiming there were only 'a few Scots in the rear'.²³ Therefore contempt, often arose from a feeling of betrayal, with the ultimate hypocritical betrayal to republican detractors being Cromwell's apostasy of 1653.

By contrast, the Irish Catholics were actively estranged rather than passively left to become disaffected. As such, Cromwell was hated in Ireland because of his cruelty. Clearly, a major reason for this was the brutality of his dealings with Drogheda and Wexford. As Ó Siochrú relates, the massacres 'shocked contemporary opinion, not only in Ireland, but also on the continent'.²⁴ However, accusations of cruelty did not all stem from violence. The callous plundering of Ireland was highly significant. Nearly forty per cent of the land was confiscated, with the 1652 Act of Settlement clearing six Irish counties of their Catholic landholders. These colossal changes had a stark physical impact on contemporaries, leading 'to the deaths of thousands of innocent Irish citizens', spreading discontent that persists to the present day.²⁵

Whilst Cromwell's Irish campaign was actually celebrated in England, with only the Levellers providing any murmurs of opposition, many Englishmen raised similar complaints of ruthlessness. In the 1640s, Cromwell was accused of ruling the Isle of Ely oppressively.²⁶ Unsurprisingly, the Royalists saw Cromwell's role in the execution of Charles I as a barbaric depredation, the Penruddock uprising in March 1655 a clear instance of their disaffection. Indeed, satanic depictions of Cromwell by post-restoration writers such as James Heath and William Winstanley, were largely inspired by his role in the regicide.²⁷ Bethel evidenced his characterisation of Cromwell's rule as being 'full of oppression

²² D. L. Smith., *The Double Crown*, p. 173.

²³ J. Morrill., *Cromwell, Oliver*; <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/746>

²⁴ <https://yesterday.uktv.co.uk/blogs/article/cromwell-hero-villain/>

²⁵ <https://www.irishpost.com/news/boris-johnson-says-removing-statues-of-controversial-figures-is-to-lie-about-our-history-186751>

²⁶ <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/746>

²⁷ J. C. Davis., *Oliver Cromwell*, p. 48.

and injustice', by Cromwell's cruel mistreatment of Lilburne and Sir Henry Vane.²⁸ The Leveller's, unsurprisingly, had also lectured Cromwell on his oppressive treatment of Lilburne, one of their own, in April 1649.²⁹ To the republican Algernon Sidney, Cromwell was a Caesar-like figure, 'a tyrant' as signified by his 'usurpation' of 1653.³⁰ Therefore, Cromwell was depicted as 'England Monster' in England and Ireland for his violence and ruthless political acts.³¹

Cromwell was also condemned for riding roughshod over the law. MP Bulstrode Whitelocke refused to enforce Cromwell's ordinance for reforming the Court of Chancery in June 1655 as it lacked parliamentary approval. Whitelocke's subsequent dismissal further confirmed to detractors that Cromwell was a law unto himself.³² Similarly, Prynne denounced Cromwell's impeaching of eleven MPs without any 'proof of guilt (contrary to all law [...]) only to strengthen his own faction in the House though he [...] acknowledged them to be innocent [...] in private'.³³ Dissimulation went hand in hand with an evasion of the law. Again, 1653 was key. A tyrannical usurpation of established forms, the Instrument of Government was regarded as nothing more than 'monarchy bottomed by the sword'.³⁴ Arguing that parliament could constitute a government, about 80 MPs refused to take an oath recognizing the Instrument's authority.³⁵ Overall, there was clear dissatisfaction with Cromwell's lawless forgoing of parliamentary consent.

In conclusion, Cromwell's success and personality celebrated in 2002 were actually aspects despised by his contemporary detractors, who saw Cromwell as a personally ambitious hypocrite. Ultimately, it was Cromwell's actions (too religiously and politically radical for many, too conservative for some, too brutal for others), which gave inveterate opponents as well as disgruntled former allies ample cause to criticise him. Davis's judgement that Cromwell's act of implementing the Instrument of Government 'was the moment [his] reputation for scheming ambition and personal aggrandizement took hold' bears scrutiny.³⁶ Whilst Cromwell was accused during the 1640s of being rash and radical by Presbyterians, the creation of the Protectorate, a huge national development, was far more

²⁸ S. Bethal, *The World's Mistake in Oliver Cromwell*, p. 13.

²⁹ Ed. G. E. Aylmer, *The Interregnum*, p. 69.

³⁰ B. Worden., *Literature and Politics in Cromwellian England*, p. 360.

³¹ J. C. Davis., *Oliver Cromwell*, p. 48.

³² R. Spalding, *Whitelocke, Bulstrode*

³³ W. Prynne., *The Machiavellian Cromwellist*, p. 5.

³⁴ M. Kishlansky, *A Monarchy Transformed*, p. 207.

³⁵ J. C. Davis., *Oliver Cromwell*, p. 38.

³⁶ J. C. Davis., *Oliver Cromwell*, p. 37.

Word Count: 1999

significant in impacting contemporary opinion, with accusations of apostasy and personal ambition accelerating after 1653.

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