

Does Cromwell's legacy have any relevance in the 21st Century?

Characterising Cromwell's legacy presents many difficulties. Even determining exactly what impact Cromwell had on his own times is a daunting task; let alone tracing that impact over succeeding years, decades and even (in this case) centuries. The question of his "relevance in the 21st Century" should not concern Cromwell in isolation – from whose life we can draw out morals that apply to contemporary society, as was the intention of Carlyle,¹ for instance – this would lead to analysis which would be largely ahistorical. Instead, we must view the question as addressing the extent to which the effects of the Cromwellian legacy can be identified in the present day. I argue that under this approach, the impact of Cromwell and his actions continues to have some relevance in the 21st Century. Considering the impossibility of encapsulating all aspects of a life such as Cromwell's in the short space provided for this essay, I will focus on two specific areas: that of his foreign policy (now only relevant as a result of Empire) and that of his Irish policy (which has much more widespread relevance).

In terms of foreign policy, Cromwell's legacy was generated over his tenure as Protector alone, with the Instrument of Government² (and later, the Humble Petition and Advice)³ allowing him to have almost full control over its direction. Many commentators in the immediate context of the Restoration attempted to point out that Cromwell's attitude to Europe, especially in his controversial alliance with Catholic France, became quickly irrelevant when France itself came to dominate Europe in the latter half of the 17th Century. Edmund Ludlow argued that, by this alliance, "the balance of the two crowns of Spain and France was destroyed, and a foundation laid for the future greatness of the French," a sentiment echoed in Slingsby Bethel's influential pamphlet, *The World's Mistake in Oliver Cromwell*.⁴ Whilst this assessment may not be entirely fair (many have traced France's territorial expansion in the Thirty Years War, aided by Spain's loss of much of the Low Countries to the new Dutch Republic in the Peace of Westphalia (1648), as a more pivotal moment in its ascendancy)⁵, it remains hard to trace much of Cromwell's legacy with regards to European policy much beyond his time, and certainly not to the 21st Century. Not only is this because of the constantly shifting balances of power in Europe (making much of Cromwell's attitudes towards it defunct anyway), but also because the "basic assumptions"⁶ of Cromwellian European policy are contended to be rooted in his religion^{7,8,9}. Under this analysis, Cromwell wished to further the aims of Protestantism by making alliances which would aid him in a struggle against Papists on the Continent (especially Spain), even if it meant entering into an alliance with Catholic France.¹⁰ Whilst it is possible to take into account "secular" motivations,¹¹ we must still concede

¹ For Carlyle, the ideas of which Cromwell's century was the "ultimate manifestation" were something to which English society "must endeavour to return" [F. Carlyle, *The Letters and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, 1: (1846), p.1]

² S.R. Gardiner, *The Constitutional Documents of the Puritan Revolution 1625-1660* (1899), p.406: *The Instrument of Government*, Article V.

³ Ibid. p.448: Article I [implicit], p.452: Articles VII and VIII

⁴ S. Bethel, *The World's Mistake in Oliver Cromwell* (pub. anon.) (1668), p.4:

"[Cromwell] made an unjust war against Spain, and an impolitick league with France ... and by that means broke the balance between the two Crowns of Spain and France."

⁵ See P.H. Wilson, *Europe's Tragedy: A New History of the Thirty Years War*, (2015), p.3, for instance. The Congress of Westphalia happened almost a decade before France signed their military accord with England in March 1657.

⁶ D.L. Smith, *Oliver Cromwell: Politics and Religion in the English Revolution* (1991), p.8

⁷ G.M.D. Howat, *Stuart and Cromwellian Foreign Policy* (1974), p. 70

⁸ M. Prestwich, *Diplomacy and Trade in the Protectorate*, *The Journal of Modern History*, 22(2): (1950), pp.103-121

⁹ N. Greenspan, *Selling Cromwell's Wars: Media, Empire and Godly Warfare 1650-1658* (2015), p.123-124

¹⁰ Howat, *Stuart and Cromwellian Foreign Policy*, p.93. In this case, Cromwell's legacy was nullified within a month of his death by the Treaty of the Pyrenees (1659), which guaranteed an uneasy peace between the France and Spain only punctuated by minor territorial disputes in the Netherlands and Catalonia until the War of the Spanish Succession broke out in 1701 [see D. Maland (1991): *Europe in the Seventeenth Century*, p.225-30].

¹¹ R. Crabtree, *The Idea of a Protestant Foreign Policy*, in I. Roots (ed.) *Cromwell*, (1973), p.160-189

that Cromwell often reviewed his policy in a providential context¹² which meant that, although England's interests would be preserved, they would necessarily coincide with the wider Protestant cause. The consequence of this is that much of the *idea* of Cromwell's foreign policy bears little relevance to the largely secular nature of contemporary international relations.

Furthermore, The role that religion played in underpinning Cromwell's foreign policy is evidenced in his peace negotiations with the Protestant Dutch Republic in 1653. Cromwell originally proposed a close coalition, which Thomas Burton MP believed "might have brought them to oneness [full political union] with us ... in four or five months".¹³ This, along with plans for a Dutch sphere of influence in the East Indies and an English sphere of influence in the West, can be regarded as an attempt by Cromwell to create a strong "nucleus"¹⁴ of Protestant political power in Europe, as well as serving England's economic interests by dealing with the competitive influence of the Dutch East India Company. However, not only did the Dutch reject such plans, never giving the idea any serious credit, but the concept of any kind of union of states under the supranational authority of the Protestant faith never truly resurfaced, although some argue that it continued to shape international conflict well after the turmoil of the early 17th Century.¹⁵ At the very least, it is fair to say that religion does not significantly inform current British foreign policy, let alone dictate it – and therefore, much of Cromwell's legacy in this area, with his conception of political blocs based around religion, is now irrelevant in the 21st Century.

That being said, one specific aspect of Cromwell's foreign policy continues to have an impact on the social and political relations both in the UK and in the wider world. Linked to Cromwell's ambition to expand Protestant influence in the Americas and challenge Catholic Spain in a new theatre,¹⁶ his "Western Design" and subsequent annexation of Jamaica from the Spanish in 1655 represented a significant expansion of what would become the British Empire, following St. Kitts, Barbados and Nevis as one of the first permanent English colonies in the Caribbean. Some significance to the 21st Century therefore lies in his colonial legacy: that is, the continuation of this fledgling Empire. Even after the decolonisation process of the 20th Century (and the success of Jamaica's own independence movement in 1962) concluded, Empire continues to have a heavy influence on post-colonial Britain and Jamaica to this day, as well as on the numerous other parts of the former British Empire. The effect to which the conquest of 1655 still has an indirect effect on current affairs in both countries can be illustrated by the "Windrush scandal" of March 2018, which involved the infringement of the legal rights of Caribbean migrants (including 15,000 Jamaicans)¹⁷ from territories in the British Empire by the UK government.¹⁸

Of course, the indirect nature of Cromwell's legacy on post-colonial Britain and the Commonwealth means that we should still limit its importance somewhat, considering the fact that the nature of the British Empire (even in Cromwell's original conquests, such as Jamaica) was drastically different in the 20th Century than the 17th Century, as a result of developments cannot in any way be attributed to him. However, Cromwell's significance to Ireland can be felt much more directly than his foreign policy. Due to its proximity to England itself, Cromwell began to play active part in its internal affairs from an early stage in his career, being heavily influenced by the Irish uprising of 1642: he became one of the commissioners in Parliament for Ireland in 1642,¹⁹ attending 12 out of the 16 meetings of the commission despite his other duties as an MP.²⁰ It was later, however, that Cromwell's actions came to bear on Ireland in any serious manner, although it is likely that those actions were influenced by his

¹² See T. Carlyle (ed.), *Oliver Cromwell's Letters and Speeches*, 3: (1846), pp.232-233 for a good example of this in the latter half of Cromwell's letter to Vice-Admiral Goodson in Jamaica (1655).

¹³ J.T. Rutt (ed.), *Diary of Thomas Burton*, 1: (1828), p.112

¹⁴ Prestwich: *Diplomacy and Trade*, p. 105

¹⁵ Such as in D. Onnekink (ed.), *War and Religion after Westphalia, 1648-1713* (2009).

¹⁶ D.L. Smith, *The Western Design and the spiritual geopolitics of Cromwellian foreign policy*, *Itinerario* 40(2) (2016), p.279

¹⁷ The Migration Observatory, *Commonwealth citizens arriving before 1971* (2018), retrieved from <http://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/commentaries/commonwealth-citizens-arriving-before-1971/>. [Source: Migration Observatory analysis of Labour Force Survey, Q3 2016 to Q2 2017.]

¹⁸ Under the British Nationality Act 1948 from the period 1948-1971, these migrants had been granted citizenship in the UK.

¹⁹ *Journal of the House of Commons*, 2: (1640-1643), p.453

²⁰ V.F. Snow, A.S. Young (eds.), *The Private Journals of the Long Parliament*, 3: (1992) p.438, cited in I. Gentles, *Oliver Cromwell: God's Warrior and the English Revolution*, (2011), p.16

original membership of the commission. His controversial military campaign in Ireland (1649-1650), quite apart from producing an indelible stain on his character for many historians,²¹ remains a part of contemporary discussion in Ireland. Debate on atrocities such as the siege of Drogheda is as active in the public sphere as it is in Irish academia today,²² suggesting that Cromwell's personal military involvement in the English occupation of Ireland holds some measure of importance in Irish culture, regardless of the extent to which English atrocities during the Cromwellian invasion of Ireland can be attributed to his generalship. Indeed, such was his profound impact on Irish memory that of the thousands of pieces in the National Folklore Collection, Cromwell ranks second in the amount of material devoted to him,²³ verifying the towering position he holds in Irish history.

It is even possible to trace Cromwell's legacy in Ireland beyond culture, myth and memory, in Cromwell's continuation of the policy of "plantation" as Protector. Although the concept of plantation emerged under Mary I with the creation of Queen's and King's counties,²⁴ with the first major site for New English planters established at Munster in 1584 under Elizabeth,²⁵ Cromwell continued and expanded this policy, supervising the planting of the 11 million acres (around half of Ireland's total area) which had been cleared in the invasion of 1650-1653.²⁶ The Old Irish-English unity over the Catholic faith being decisively broken by New English and Scottish Protestant incursions, and the subsequent Protestant ascendancy is often considered to be Cromwell's most significant mark on Ireland;²⁷ In particular, these religious and ethnic divisions (which arguably were first seriously introduced to Ireland by large-scale Cromwellian plantation) are stressed as fundamental to an understanding of the independence struggle in the 20th Century, especially in Northern Ireland.²⁸ The ramifications of this conflict, informally concluded by the Good Friday Agreement (1998) which finalised arrangements both within Northern Ireland and between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, are still felt to this day. In particular, the border policy between the two has come under pressure in the last year, whilst the UK prepares to leave the European Union.²⁹ As ever with political observations on legacy, we must be sure to heavily qualify the extent to which Cromwellian actions can be brought to bear directly on Ireland's situation in the 21st Century; however, as S.R. Gardiner reflected at the turn of the 19th, in the midst of the debate on Home Rule, "though Ireland's [current] evils were not created by Cromwell's settlement, they were enormously increased by his drastic treatment".³⁰ Cautiously, we may make the same judgement today, albeit in very different circumstances – regardless, it is unlikely that Ireland will forget Cromwell swiftly.

²¹ See M. Ó Siochrú, *God's Executioner* (2008) in particular pp.85-86, for instance.

²² Most recently for instance, debate over T. Reilly, *Cromwell Was Framed – Ireland 1649* (2014), (which re-asserted Reilly's view that there is no evidence that unarmed civilians were killed at Drogheda) featured not only as part of the ongoing academic controversy created by his original assessment [T. Reilly, *Cromwell: An Honourable Enemy* (1999)], but also featured in multiple opinion pieces in mainstream publications such as the Irish Times [P. Lenihan, *Do we owe Old Ironsides an apology?* (2014), retrieved from <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/do-we-owe-old-ironsides-an-apology-cromwell-was-framed-ireland-1649-1.1924166>] and the Irish Independent [H. Murphy, "Cromwell is owed a huge apology" (2014), retrieved from <https://www.independent.ie/regionals/fingal/independent/news/cromwell-is-owed-a-huge-apology-30287816>]. For counter-argument, see J. Morrill. "Rewriting Cromwell: A Case of Deafening Silences." *Canadian Journal of History* 38(3): (2003) p.19

²³ S. Covington, "The Odious Demon", p.156

²⁴ I. Roots: *Union and Disunion in the British Isles, 1637-1660*, in I. Roots (ed.), "Into Another Mould": *Aspects of the Interregnum*, (1981), p.12

²⁵ Although ultimately unsuccessful, the Munster plantation did manage to establish some English landlords in the area, as well as illustrating that, despite being poorly executed with regards to the timing and placement of the undertakers, the idea was sound in practice [R. Dunlop, *The Plantation of Munster 1584-1589*, *The English Historical Review* 3(10): (1888), p.269].

²⁶ S. Covington, "The Odious Demon from Across the Sea". *Oliver Cromwell, Memory and the Dislocations of Ireland*, in E. Kuijpers, J. Pollmann, J. Müller, J. van der Steen (eds.), *Memory before Modernity: Practices of Memory in Early Modern Europe* (2013), p.154

²⁷ I. Roots, *Union and Disunion*, p.20; T.C. Barnard, *Cromwellian Ireland: English Government and Reform in Ireland 1649-1660*, (1979), cited in *Ibid*.

²⁸ C. Townsend, *Religion, War and Identity in Ireland*, *The Journal of Modern History*, 76(4): (2004), pp.882-902

²⁹ See European Commission, TF50, *Guiding principles transmitted to EU27 for the Dialogue on Ireland/Northern Ireland* (2017), p.2; and Northern Ireland Office, *The Belfast Agreement, Strand Two: North/South Ministerial Council*, (1998), Article 1, for the root of the issue.

³⁰ S.R. Gardiner, *Cromwell's Place in History* (1897), p.59. Despite accusations of Whiggishness levelled at Gardiner, especially in his *History of England*, [L. Bowen, *Politics*, in G. Walker (ed.), *Writing Early Modern History* (2005), p.185-186] they are certainly not unanimously held [see M. Nixon, *Samuel Rawson Gardiner and the Idea of History* (2011),

In summary, therefore, Cromwell's legacy has little direct relevance to the 21st Century, but much indirect relevance – certain aspects of his life continue to play an often foundational role in social and political issues today. It is necessary to stress in this conclusion does not in any way reflect poorly on the importance of Cromwell as a figure in history; as the very fact that he provides a clearly identifiable link between time periods almost four centuries apart testifies. Indeed, what other relevance could a figure from the 16th Century have on the 21st other than a largely indirect one? The significance of Cromwell, and indeed the period of Interregnum more widely, have in my opinion been unreasonably by the emphasis placed on them in Whig and Marxist accounts, which identify him as epitomising a particular stage of a determinist narrative in history. For the former, Cromwell assumes a role in “forward march of liberal ideas”,³¹ dispelling the “lingering clouds of medieval privilege”,³² if only for a time. For the latter, Cromwell typifies the emergence of the bourgeoisie and a proto-bourgeois state, with Cromwell being seen “not only as the enemy of Charles and ‘feudalism’ but also ... [as that of] of Lilburne and Rainsborough”.³³ At least in this brief survey, the evidence seems to point to a legacy that is exceptional without needing contextualisation within wider theories such as these – not least because it continues to be relevant today.

p.33]. This, along with the supporting evidence discussed, suggests that Gardiner was not significantly influenced in this assessment by a teleological approach, and thus may be extended.

³¹ W. Churchill, *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples*, 2: (1956), p.315

³² G. Smith, Review of: [S. Gardiner, *Cromwell's Place in History*, (1897)], *The American Historical Review*, 3(1): (1897) p.136

³³ D.H. Pennington, *Cromwell and the Historians*, in I. Roots (ed.), *Cromwell*, (1973), p.228