

Cromwell and the Interregnum

The Essential Readings

Edited by David L. Smith

Cromwell and the Interregnum

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Editor's Introduction¹

Ever since his own lifetime, Oliver Cromwell has inspired fascination and controversy in equal measure. Some of the finest historians in the English language have worked on his life and times, and interest shows no sign of drying up. Love him or hate him, historians, students and the wider public continue to find his story compelling. This book brings together eight of the most influential recent articles on Cromwell and the Interregnum and deliberately concentrates on the period from Charles I's execution in 1649 to Cromwell's own death in 1658. Any such collection is bound to be personal, and others will no doubt have their own ideas about what constitute the 'essential readings' on this subject. The particular focus of this selection is on the relationship between Cromwell's personality and politics, religion and society during the Interregnum. The nature of his aims, and the reasons why he failed to generate lasting stability, form recurrent themes. Other areas, such as foreign policy or the settlement of Ireland and Scotland, are also covered but much less extensively.

The essays are wide-ranging and indicate the diversity of approaches and perspectives that historians have brought to these issues. This introduction sets the scene by surveying some of the recent writings on the subject, and is divided into three sections. The first examines Cromwell's personality, beliefs and motives; the second considers the nature of his role and influence during the Interregnum, especially through his relationships

1 I am most grateful to John Morrill for his helpful comments on an earlier draft of this introduction.

with Parliaments, the Army and the Council; and the third explores the impact and legacy of the Interregnum.

I Cromwell's Personality and Motives

In 1980, John Morrill wrote that there were 'innumerable biographies of Oliver Cromwell', and that he 'would be very surprised' if Cromwell were 'not the most biographied Englishman'.² Since then, at least three more major biographies have appeared, together with an important collection of essays and a string of other articles, all of which explore Cromwell's personality and beliefs.³ Although these writings have their different perspectives and emphases, their common denominator is an attempt to understand Cromwell as a man of his times and to examine his complex character on its own terms. They try, in particular, to reconstruct his mental world using the ideas and categories of the seventeenth century and consciously to avoid imposing anachronistic values and ideas. This has had the effect of moving discussion beyond terms such as liberty or tyranny and instead placing his religion at the centre of the stage. That religion needs to be seen not as a rationalization for some other secular or material motive, but as part of a web of beliefs that locates Cromwell within the world of mid-seventeenth-century England.

One of the beliefs that Cromwell shared with many of his contemporaries was his conviction that God's will manifested itself regularly in the events of this world in 'providences'. The idea of a providentialist God, whose interventions offered guidance and signified divine approval or anger, lies at the heart of Cromwell's surviving letters and speeches. Blair Worden has shown how this providentialism was typical of the Puritan background from which Cromwell emerged.⁴ Cromwell may have differed in the intensity with which he held this belief, and in the way in which his military and political careers enabled him to apply it directly to national events, but the

2 J. S. Morrill, *Seventeenth-Century Britain, 1603–1714* (Folkestone, 1980), p. 43.

3 The three major biographies are: Barry Coward, *Oliver Cromwell* (Harlow, 1991); Peter Gaunt, *Oliver Cromwell* (Oxford, 1996); and J. C. Davis, *Oliver Cromwell* (London, 2001). The important collection of essays is John Morrill (ed.), *Oliver Cromwell and the English Revolution* (Harlow, 1990), two of which appear as chapters 6 and 8 in this volume. Of the many other recent articles that focus directly on Cromwell, some of the most significant, in addition to those collected here, are Blair Worden, 'Toleration and the Cromwellian Protectorate', in W. J. Sheils (ed.), *Persecution and Toleration: Studies in Church History*, 21 (Oxford, 1984), pp. 199–233; Blair Worden, 'Providence and Politics in Cromwellian England', *Past and Present*, 109 (1985), pp. 55–99; Peter Gaunt, 'Oliver Cromwell and his Protectorate Parliaments: Co-operation, Conflict and Control', in Ivan Roots (ed.), *Into another Mould* (Exeter, 1998), pp. 70–100; and the Cromwell Day addresses collected in Peter Gaunt (ed.), *Cromwell 400* (Brentwood, 1999).

4 See especially Worden, 'Providence and Politics'.

basic premise was one that he shared with many of his contemporaries. In his letters and speeches, Cromwell referred constantly to the role of 'providences' in pointing towards God's will and the 'necessity' of conforming to it. To give just two examples from many, in November 1648, amidst the events leading up to the trial and execution of Charles I, Cromwell wrote to his cousin Robert Hammond:

As to outward dispensations, if we may so call them, we have not been without our share of beholding some remarkable providences, and appearances of the Lord . . . If thou wilt seek, seek to know the mind of God in all that chain of Providence . . . Let us look into providences; surely they mean somewhat. They hang so together; have been so constant, so clear and unclouded.⁵

Later, in April 1657, as he wrestled with the dilemma of whether or not to accept the offer of the kingship, Cromwell declared:

Truly, the Providence of God hath laid aside this title of King providentially de facto; . . . God hath seemed providentially, seemed to appear as a Providence, not only to strike at the family but at the name . . . I will not seek to set up that, that Providence hath destroyed, and laid in the dust; and I would not build Jericho again.⁶

Such rhetoric pervades most of Cromwell's recorded utterances, and the thrust of recent scholarship has been to take these statements very seriously as a genuine indication of his inner frame of mind. Most recent writers have inclined towards seeing Cromwell as basically sincere even if there was an element of self-deception that allowed him to put the most favourable possible gloss on his own motives.⁷

One good reason for believing in the sincerity of Cromwell's providentialism is that he followed the logic of it even when it was deeply troubling for him to do so. The clearest case of this was in 1655–6, when the failure of his campaign against Spain in the West Indies forced him to wonder why God had ceased to favour English troops in battle. In chapter 2 of this book, Blair Worden charts Cromwell's prolonged period of self-examination in which he wondered if it was some sin in himself that had provoked God's anger. Old Testament parallels, especially the story of the 'sin of Achan',

5 S. C. Lomas (ed.), *The Letters and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell with Elucidations by Thomas Carlyle* (3 vols., London, 1904), 1, pp. 393–6 (Cromwell to Colonel Robert Hammond, 25 November 1648).

6 Lomas (ed.), *Letters and Speeches*, 3, pp. 70–1 (Cromwell to the representatives of the second Protectorate Parliament, 13 April 1657).

7 See, for example, Davis, *Cromwell*, pp. 128–30; Morrill (ed.), *Cromwell and the English Revolution*, pp. 13–14; Gaunt, *Cromwell*, pp. 233–8.

haunted Cromwell during these introspective reflections and may well have contributed to his decision to decline the kingship in 1657 lest he be thought self-seeking and greedy.

This in turn leads to another aspect of Cromwell's religious beliefs that looms large in recent biographies, namely his constant drawing of parallels between England's experiences during the late 1640s and 1650s and those of the Israelites in the Old Testament. Just as the Israelites had broken free of bondage in Egypt by crossing the Red Sea, so England had overthrown Stuart tyranny by executing Charles I. Now the English were journeying across the desert towards the promised land, guided by 'providences' (the equivalent of a pillar of fire). This metaphor cast Cromwell – in both his own eyes and those of his supporters – in the role of Moses. Intriguingly, in all his surviving letters and speeches, Cromwell never defined what the promised land would look like; indeed, he probably believed that this could not be known until it was actually reached.

Nevertheless, one very important step along the way was to ensure that 'liberty of conscience' was extended as widely as possible among the godly. Much recent work has drawn out the significance of this goal, and again discussion has focused on Cromwell's own phrase, 'liberty of conscience', rather than the vaguer and possibly anachronistic term 'toleration'. Indeed, Blair Worden has argued that there were significant limits to how far Cromwell was willing to accept religious diversity outside the godly Protestant mainstream.⁸ Against this, Colin Davis has suggested that Cromwell's sympathies may have been rather broader than Worden allows, and that Cromwell perceived 'liberty of conscience' as only the first step towards reuniting the godly.⁹

Davis in turn links this to another idea that he believes is central to our understanding of Cromwell's religion, namely his antiformalism. Davis argues that Cromwell deeply mistrusted human institutions and outward forms of religious practice, and believed that the godly should rise above differences of form in order to rediscover what united them. It is for this reason, Davis suggests, that Cromwell so resolutely resists being identified with any one church or religious group. Just as he was not 'wedded and glued to forms of government', so he was never 'wedded and glued' to any particular religious form.¹⁰ This also helps to explain why so many different groups or sects initially regarded him as an ally yet later came to see him as an apos-

8 See especially Worden, 'Toleration and the Cromwellian Protectorate'.

9 On this, see chapter 6 of this book, and Davis, *Cromwell*, chapter 6.

10 See chapter 6, below; Davis, *Cromwell*, chapters 6–8; Lomas (ed.), *Letters and Speeches*, 3, p. 362 (Cromwell at the Putney Debates, 28 October 1647). Davis explores the issue of antiformalism more generally during this period in J. C. Davis, 'Against Formality: One Aspect of the English Revolution', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th series, 3 (1993), pp. 265–88.

tate or a hypocrite. That charge forms a recurrent theme in many contemporary accounts of Cromwell, and the importance of antiformalism in his thought is vital in understanding why.¹¹

Cromwell's mistrust of forms went along with a consistent commitment to the ends of government. In Morrill's view, he 'cared about ends not means', and 'was loyal to no one but God'.¹² Similarly, Davis feels that Cromwell's 'religion was almost invariably the ultimate determinant of his action'.¹³ Cromwell seems to have believed that God had a purpose for England, and that it was his duty to drive that forward. He had a consistent, albeit very vague, vision of the 'necessity' of creating a godly nation. But he was pragmatic about the means that might be used to achieve that end. His own preference was probably for government by a 'single person and a Parliament',¹⁴ but equally, if a Parliament failed to 'do the work of the Lord, in fulfilling the end of [its] magistracy', then he was willing to resort to more authoritarian solutions, such as the Major-Generals experiment of 1655–7.¹⁵ This was the outlook that lay behind Cromwell's chilling intention to rule 'for [the people's] good, not what pleases them',¹⁶ and that enabled him to justify breaking the rule of law on the grounds that 'if nothing should ever be done but what is according to law, the throat of the nation may be cut while we send for some to make a law.'¹⁷ His contempt for human forms, be they religious or governmental, as 'dross and dung in comparison of Christ' helps to explain his periodic disregard for legal and constitutional propriety.¹⁸

Cromwell's overarching hope was that the godly would become more and more numerous until they ultimately comprised the whole nation. He insisted that there should be no incompatibility between their interests and those of England as a whole. As he put it on 3 April 1657:

If anyone whatsoever think the interest of Christians and the interest of the nation inconsistent, or two different things, I wish my soul may never

11 Morrill (ed.), *Cromwell and the English Revolution*, chapter 8.

12 Morrill (ed.), *Cromwell and the English Revolution*, p. 14.

13 Davis, *Cromwell*, p. 128.

14 Lomas (ed.), *Letters and Speeches*, 2, p. 381 (Cromwell to the first Protectorate Parliament, 12 September 1654).

15 Lomas (ed.), *Letters and Speeches*, 1, p. 343 (Cromwell to William Lenthall, 20 August 1648). On the Major-Generals, see chapter 5 below, and the recent excellent study by Christopher Durston, *Cromwell's Major-Generals: Godly Government during the English Revolution* (Manchester, 2001).

16 Lomas (ed.), *Letters and Speeches*, 3, p. 345 (Cromwell to the 'Council of War' at Reading, 16 July 1647).

17 Lomas (ed.), *Letters and Speeches*, 2, p. 543 (Cromwell to the second Protectorate Parliament, 17 September 1656).

18 Lomas (ed.), *Letters and Speeches*, 3, p. 373 (Cromwell at the Putney Debates, 1 November 1647).