

## Chapter One

# Formative Influences

### I

The family into which Oliver Cromwell was born owed its fortunes directly to the break-up of the monastic orders and to the Protestant Establishment. Its wealth can be traced to Richard Williams, nephew to Henry VIII's chief adviser and agent in the dissolution of the monasteries, Thomas Cromwell, Earl of Essex.<sup>1</sup> This Richard Williams adopted his uncle's surname, "Cromwell" or "Crumwell", in return for his patronage; he was knighted while his uncle was still in power and managed to retain the King's favour after Thomas Cromwell's fall, and he passed on a considerable fortune to his son, Sir Henry "Cromwell", who was knighted by Elizabeth, and whose liberality earned him the title "the golden knight".

Sir Henry was a vigorous local organizer against the threat of the Armada – an activity in keeping with one whose wealth was bound up with the Protestant succession – and of his daughters, one became the mother of Major-General Whalley, and another became the mother of John Hampden. His heir was knighted "Sir Oliver Cromwell" at the accession of James I, and one of his younger sons was Robert Cromwell, the father of the future Lord Protector. Sir Oliver Cromwell was a man "who from love of ostentation pushed his father's liberality to extravagance";<sup>2</sup> and eventually had to sell Hinchinbrook House to the Montagus, who thus became the leading family within the shire; which seems to have led to some rivalry between them and the Cromwells. Sir Henry's second son, Robert, inherited an estate at Huntingdon,

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1. Thomas Cromwell's sister married Morgan Williams, a man from Glamorganshire who had settled in London. Her son, Richard, followed his uncle to Court, and for his help in the dissolution of the monasteries he was granted the Benedictine Priory at Hinchinbrook, Neath Abbey in Glamorganshire, together with many rich properties in the eastern counties and much that was formerly held by the rich abbey of Ramsey. Cf. Noble, *Protectoral-House* I, 14–17, and J.L. Sanford, *Studies and Illustrations of the Great Rebellion* (1858), 178 note; also W.S. I, 5.
  2. C.H. Firth, *Oliver Cromwell* (1903), 3.

worth about £300 in the money of that time,<sup>3</sup> and he married Elizabeth, the young widowed daughter of William Steward of Ely, who brought with her a jointure of £60 a year. Her great-uncle, Robert Steward, had been the last Catholic Prior of Ely, and with the change in national religion, the first Protestant Dean of Ely Cathedral. In view of Oliver's later influence in the fen country, it is interesting to note Dr. Trevelyan's judgment that Ely Cathedral had for centuries maintained a dominant position over the "County Palatine" of Ely, and indeed, over the whole of Fenland.<sup>4</sup>

From this it will be seen that the fortunes of the family into which Oliver Cromwell was born were strongly linked to the Protestant succession, and primarily to the Anglican settlement of Elizabeth as offering the best hopes of stable government, and hence the continued enjoyment of their wealth.

Oliver's father did the things appropriate to a country gentleman of standing in those days. He was a bailiff of Huntingdon, a Justice of the Peace, a Commissioner of Sewers,<sup>5</sup> and, besides other offices of local importance, he sat at Westminster for the borough in 1593. Dr. George Bates, who hated the Protector cordially, admits that he was "born of honest parents,"<sup>6</sup> and even James Heath was not able to discover anything to the disparagement of Robert Cromwell, apart from the fact that Oliver's mother kept a brew-house, "and thought it no disparagement to sustain the Estate and Port of a younger brother, as Mr. Robert Cromwell was, by those lawful means; however, not so reputable as other gains and Trades are accounted".<sup>7</sup>

Oliver was baptized on April 29, 1599, in the church of St. John, Huntingdon, the second son of his parents. A comparison of the portraits of Robert Cromwell and his wife Elizabeth suggests

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3. Three or four times as much in pre-1939 money. Mr. Hilaire Belloc's estimate of Robert Cromwell's estate as "perhaps four or five thousand all told" seems to be far too high. Cf. Belloc, *Cromwell* (1934), 29. Cf. the article by Mr. Isaac Foot, in *The Contemporary Review*, Vol. CXLVI, July–December 1934, 556–63.

4. *English Social History*, 149.

5. i.e. fen drainage.

6. *Elenchus Motuum Nuperorum in Anglia: Or, a short Historical Account of the Rise and Progress of the Late Troubles in England* (English translation, 1683), 237. First part of the Latin edition was published 1649/50, second part 1661–63, third part (by Thomas Skinner) 1676.

7. *Flagellum*, 8. Walter Cromwell, maternal grandfather of Richard Williams, had been a brewer among other things. These facts probably account for royalist gibes at Oliver as a brewer.

that she had the stronger character.<sup>8</sup> She came from a family with strong Puritan leanings,<sup>9</sup> and in this way she may have influenced her husband, for while there is no reason to doubt that Robert Cromwell was a loyal member of the established Church, his choice of school and college for Oliver suggests that he had Puritan sympathies.<sup>10</sup>

There were good reasons for Puritanism to flourish in the Cromwell family. The family fortunes were entirely dependent upon the Protestant succession, and at the time Oliver was born, less than fifty years had elapsed since the Catholic reversion under Mary. The threat of the Armada was still too recent for Englishmen to forget the Catholic menace from abroad, while the tendencies at court gave cause for disquiet; the truculence of James I at the Hampton Court Conference in 1603, the discovery of the Gunpowder Plot in 1605, and the weak Stuart foreign policy towards Spain all tended to encourage Puritan reaction among those families which had most to lose in the event of a Catholic triumph.

East Anglia was certainly infected with Puritan ideas earlier than most of the country, to some extent because of its geographical relationship with Holland.<sup>11</sup> Also, the religious persecutions in Europe were bringing Protestant refugees to this country, many of them weavers who settled near the cloth manufacturing town of Norwich. The city was becoming something of a Puritan centre, and it is not surprising to find here some of the first experiments in religious Separatism which eventually spread throughout the eastern counties.<sup>12</sup>

These counties, too, contained the seats and estates of great Puritan landowning families like those of Cecil, Montagu,

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8. Cf. *W.S.*, I, 13, and the portraits in John Morley's *Oliver Cromwell* (1900 edn.).

9. Oliver's uncle, Sir Robert Steward, was a Puritan. Cf. *Flagellum*, 13; *Elenchus*, 238.

10. Cf. *infra*, p. 29 ff. Sidney Sussex College was noted for an unconsecrated chapel and lack of sympathy with Laud's reforms; G.M. Edwards, *Sidney Sussex College* (1899), 42 f., 100; J.B. Mullinger, *History of Cambridge University* (Cambridge, 3 vols., 1873, 1884, 1911), III, 130 and n.

11. The ports and mercantile centres tended to be Puritan; *English Social History*, 241.

12. Robert Browne's views spread through the surrounding counties at least as far as Bury St. Edmunds; R.W. Dale, *History of English Congregationalism* (1907), 120–5; H. M. Dexter, *The Congregationalism of the last three hundred years* (U.S.A., 1879), 70; Williston Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism* (New York, 1893), 10 n. 4.

Devereux, and Rich, together with many lesser names, like the Barringtons of Essex, the Hampdens of Buckinghamshire, and the Cromwells of Huntingdonshire, all of which had built fortunes on the ruins of the old Church. The Puritan nobility extended its protection to persecuted members of the party,<sup>13</sup> and as family alliances grew, the influence of the new ideas became ever wider and stronger. To this we must add the influence of Puritan teaching in the University of Cambridge,<sup>14</sup> and the fact that the standard of preaching and ministration held by the Puritans contrasted very favourably with the general slackness and ignorance of the older clergy.<sup>15</sup>

In a sense these influences are all too abstract to be assessed accurately or to be over-stressed, but they indicate that the young Cromwell was born and bred in a part of the country which was alive to the new religious temper. Such influences must be seen in relationship to the ideas of prelacy remembered by an impressionable youth from the episcopal visitation of Huntingdon by the Bishop of Lincoln when Cromwell was five years old, or the impression of monarchy gained from the lavish entertainment of James I at Hinchinbrook in 1603.

## II

Oliver was born the second of three sons in a family which contained seven daughters, but since his brothers, Henry and Robert, died in childhood, he was left his father's heir in a family circle which was predominantly feminine. At the end of his year at Cambridge, when he was barely eighteen years of age, his father died<sup>16</sup> and left him at the head of the family. There is not much material to estimate the effect on Oliver of this feminine

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13. For the protection afforded Robert Browne by his kinsman William Cecil, Lord Burleigh, see *Dale, Hist. of English Cong'ism*, 124 f., 132 f. Lord Warwick gave protection to Jeremiah Burroughes, after the latter had been deprived by Bishop Wren; *A Vindication of Mr. Burroughes Against Mr. Edwards his foule Aspersions in his spreading Gangraena, and his angry Antiapologia*, etc. (1644), 19.

14. Martin Bucer's influence at Cambridge had been in marked contrast to Peter Martyr's failure to impress Oxford, J.B. Mullinger, *Hist. of Cam. Univ.*, II, 109–25. The Marian exiles returned in full force to Cambridge, *ibid.*, 171–4, and the University had recently witnessed the brief but influential tenure of office of Thomas Cartwright.

15. For Richard Baxter's description of the low state of the clergy intellectually and morally during his boyhood, see *Reliquiae Baxterianae* (1696), ed. Matthew Sylvester, Pt. I, 1.

16. He was buried at All Saints, Huntingdon, on June 24, 1617.

family circle, but there may have been a tendency for a few years to revolt from maternal control.

Of his boyhood and youth we know very little that is reliable. Heath informs us that he received his earliest education under “the slighted Governance of a Mistris”, until “his Father removed him to the Tuition of Dr. Beard Schoolmaster of the Free-School of that Town, where his Book began to persecute him, and Learning to Commence his great and irreconcilable Enemy”.<sup>17</sup> Of Dr. Thomas Beard’s influence we shall have more to say, but speaking of Cromwell’s character at this early stage, Heath speaks of the “Vices which were so predominant and visible in him” that Dr. Beard was unable to make any impression on “his obstinate and perverse inclination”;<sup>18</sup> then, as if warming to the subject, the author of the *Flagellum* says that “Among the rest of those ill qualities which fructuated in him at this age, He was very notorious for robbing of Orchards”, which crime was continued to such excess by “this Apple-Dragon” that the offence “ripened in him afterwards to the throwing down of all Law or Conscience, and the stealing and tasting of the forbidden fruit of Sovereignty”.<sup>19</sup>

A modern reader will discover less significance in these youthful escapades than did James Heath, writing just after the Restoration, but the local gossip probably had a residuum of truth in it, and there is no reason to think that young Oliver Cromwell was any more pious than the average lad of his age. There is, however, a persistent rumour, duly recorded by Heath, that as a youth Cromwell had curious dreams and presages of future greatness,<sup>20</sup> and a similar story is told by Dr. Bates, who says that as a child Cromwell reported that “one appeared to him in the likeness of a Man, who told him that he should be a King”,<sup>21</sup> and that Dr. Beard whipped him for it.

There is also the account of Oliver’s part in a play, *The Five Senses* (placed by Heath at Huntingdon, and by Carrington during Cromwell’s year at Cambridge)<sup>22</sup> in which the youthful

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17. *Flagellum*, 4.

18. *Ibid.*, 5.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*, 6.

21. *Elenchus*, 337. Probably it was copied from Heath.

22. Carrington, *Hist. of the Life and Death of Oliver*, 3. However, in the 1657 edition of Anthony Brewer’s *Lingua, or the Combat of the Tongue and the Five Senses*, it says, “First acted at Trinity College, Cambridge, after at the Free School at Huntingdon”, and this may explain the confusion; cf. Abbott, *W.S.*, I, 24 n. 13.

Cromwell is reported to have set a crown upon his head and added “beyond his Cue some Majestical mighty words”.<sup>23</sup> It sounds, as Professor Abbott has remarked, “too apt to be true”, and yet we must admit it is the kind of incident which, in the light of future events, would have remained in people’s memories.

There is considerable divergence of opinion as to the extent Oliver benefited by his education at Cambridge. Carrington says that while there he perfectly acquired the Latin tongue, “which Language as all men know he made use of to treat with Strangers”.<sup>24</sup> A more fulsome account of his university career, and even more vague, comes from the sycophantic pen of Richard Fleckno, who observed that “He was bred a scholar in the University where, during his youth, he gave the first Essay of that Admirable vivacity of spirit, profoundnesse of judgement, and indefatigable industry, which afterwards inform’d all the Actions of his life”.<sup>25</sup>

The royalist writers were rather less vague concerning Cromwell’s scholastic accomplishments, and purport to give us some, idea how that “vivacity of spirit, profoundness of judgement, and indefatigable industry” were employed.<sup>26</sup> Sir William Dugdale says that in Cambridge Oliver “made no great proficiency in any kind of Learning; but then and afterwards sorting himself with Drinking Companions, and the ruder sort of people (being of a rough and blustering disposition) he had the name of a Royster amongst those that knew him”.<sup>27</sup> Heath says that Cromwell was placed in Sidney Sussex College “more to satisfie his Fathers curiosity and desire, than out of any hopes of Completing him in his Studies”, and adds that while he was there “he was more Famous for his Exercises in the Feilds than in the Schools, (in which he never had the honour of, because no worth and merit to a degree)<sup>28</sup> being one of the chief Matchmakers and Players at Foot-ball, Cudgels, or any other boisterous sport or game”.<sup>29</sup>

That an undergraduate, not yet seventeen years of age, preferred

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23. *Flagellum*, 6 f.

24. *Hist. of the Life and Death of Oliver*, 4; cf. *infra*, p. 33 n. 3.

25. *The Idea of His Highness*, 4. Fleckno was apparently a Catholic priest (cf. Leslie Stephen’s article in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, VII, 260).

26. Although all their accounts may have been based upon the *Flagellum*.

27. *A Short View of the Late Troubles in England* (Oxford, 1681), 459.

28. Heath’s bias excels itself here. Cromwell left Cambridge on the death of his father; even had that not been the case, it was common practice for gentry to spend a short time at the university without proceeding to a degree.

29. *Flagellum*, 7 f.

sport to books would hardly be cause for remark in modern times, but in the seventeenth century university “organized games and athletics did not exist, and sports were either discouraged or forbidden”.<sup>30</sup> Games which in these days would be regarded as healthy amusements were regarded at this time as evidence of youthful dissipation, and the author of the *Elenchus* cursorily dismisses Cromwell’s year as an undergraduate by saying, “he laid an unsolid Foundation of learning at Cambridge; but he was soon cloy’d with Studies, delighting more in Horses, and in Pastimes abroad in the Fields”.<sup>31</sup>

Since all our information regarding Cromwell’s boyhood and youth comes through his most violent detractors, it is almost impossible to form a just estimate of his character, although the very silence of Carrington may indicate that according to the judgment of the day there was little to single out for praise. But allowing for the use which the Restoration writers make of the available data, there is not much in these “uncontrolled debaucheries” which would to-day be regarded as evidence of an uncommonly vicious spirit. Boys of all ages seem to run to type, and we cannot err far in judgment if we represent him as a fairly boisterous youth, with not much time for books, but with a keen interest in active outdoor life and considerable prowess in the arts of personal combat.

At the same time we should not ignore the dreams of future greatness, in which both Heath and Carrington saw the evidence that they each wanted to see. Such grandiose imaginings are not uncommon, especially in lads brought up in the shadow of other people’s wealth, and it would appear that Oliver, like many other highly-strung boys, indulged in his day-dreams without evincing much of the application necessary for achievement. The dreams did not prove, however, what James Heath tries to prove, that Cromwell schemed for personal power from his earliest days, and the words of Mr. Hilaire Belloc – by no means the least critical of his biographers – are a useful corrective to Heath’s bias:

If there is one thing certain about the moral character of Cromwell, to the man who reads him and remembers his reading impartially, it is that he was not ambitious.

He lived to be over forty-five without making any effort at fame

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30. Trevelyan, *English Social History*, 184.

31. *Op. cit.*, 237.

or power; and no man ever develops the desire for them long after youth has passed.<sup>32</sup>

### III

We must return to discuss the influence of one whom most of Cromwell's biographers dismiss with little more than the note that Oliver was placed under "Thomas Beard – a Puritan schoolmaster, who wrote pedantic Latin plays, proved that the Pope was Antichrist, and showed in his *Theatre of God's Judgements* that human crimes never go unpunished by God even in this world".<sup>33</sup> It is to be doubted whether Dr. Beard's influence can be dismissed as briefly as that.

Dr. Beard seems to have maintained close connections with the Cromwell family, and Oliver appears to have held him in respect throughout life. As a friend of Robert Cromwell, Thomas Beard had attested his will,<sup>34</sup> and subsequently he acted with Oliver in several offices of local importance; they were signatories together of the Parliamentary indenture for the election of the Huntingdon burgesses in 1620,<sup>35</sup> they were Justices of the Peace for the borough in 1630,<sup>36</sup> while Beard was prominent among those who signed the indenture which saw the election of Oliver as a burgess for Huntingdon in 1627/8.<sup>37</sup> It was largely to uphold Dr. Beard's views against the Bishop of Winchester's nominee, Dr. Alabaster, that Oliver Cromwell made his maiden speech at Westminster on February 11, 1629. From this it would appear that he never lost his respect, or perhaps his affection, for Thomas Beard.

Although Dr. Beard remained within the Church of England, he was a rigid Calvinist and an uncompromising Puritan. He was a graduate of Cambridge,<sup>38</sup> and had been appointed Master of the Hospital and Grammar School of St. John the Baptist,

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32. Belloc, *Cromwell*, 64.

33. Firth, *Oliver Cromwell*, 5. Notable exceptions, however, are W.C. Abbott and Hilaire Belloc; cf. *W.S.*, I, 22–6, Belloc, *Cromwell*, 59.

34. Copy of the will, *W.S.*, I, 29 f.

35. *Ibid.*, 46.

36. Noble, *Protectoral-House*, I, 102.

37. *W.S.*, I, 52.

38. Matriculated at Jesus College, 1584; A. B. 1587/8; A. M. 1591; S. T. B. 1602; S. T. P. ("Bird") 1614. *The Book of Matriculations and Degrees ... in the University of Cambridge from 1544 to 1659* (Cambridge, 1913), compiled by John Venn and J. A. Venn, *in loco*.