

## Introduction

The late W.C. Abbott of Harvard listed nearly 3,700 works dealing with Cromwell,<sup>1</sup> and any addition to that list demands a very formidable excuse on the part of the author. The only justification that can be offered is the enigma of Cromwell's character itself.

It fascinates because it is full of paradox, and yet the paradox within his life was not merely political: it was not simply that of a man who began by fighting for individual liberties and ended by becoming an absolute dictator. The issue is complicated by religion, and at its deepest level the contradiction is between the Independent<sup>2</sup> who held "democratic" ideas in ecclesiastical matters, and the man who tried to remedy England's political impasse by becoming Lord Protector. To solve the dilemma historians have resorted to a wide variety of theories, the most simple being that of the royalists, who by denying the genuineness of Cromwell's religion are able to present the picture of a black-hearted tyrant who schemed for power from the beginning, while at the other end of the political rainbow there is the answer of nineteenth-century Liberalism – Cromwell the Great Democrat, who was forced by circumstance into absolutism. It would seem that between Clarendon's royalist convention of the "brave bad man" and Carlyle's noble "hero" there is a great gulf fixed, and if this is so, there can be no answer to the dilemma, and one's estimate of Cromwell must be consigned to the arbitration of prejudice.

Although there have been modern attempts to cut the Gordian knot and present a "realistic" view of Cromwell,<sup>3</sup> most of the

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1. *A Bibliography of Oliver Cromwell* (Harvard University Press, 1929). Also Addenda to the Bibliography in *The Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell* (Harvard University Press, 4 vols., 1937–47), IV.

2. Where capitalized, the word is intended in its ecclesiastical sense.

3. Cf. G. R. Stirling Taylor, *Oliver Cromwell* (1928); W.C. Abbott, *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell* (hereafter abbreviated to *W.S.* in references). The place of publication is mentioned in first references to books, and where it is not specified it must be presumed to be London.

theories fail because they reflect not so much the background of Cromwell's England as ideas current at the time of writing. No aspect of the seventeenth century has suffered so much in this respect as that of religion. G.M. Trevelyan has observed that in pre-Restoration England "it would have been difficult to find more than a handful of men who openly avowed a disbelief in the miraculous sanctions of the Christian faith, in one or other of its forms".<sup>4</sup> By the great majority of people in the seventeenth century the reality of God and the Devil, Heaven and Hell, was never doubted, and yet historians have more often than not ignored the fact that such beliefs were bound not only to colour the thought of that time, but also to condition the life and conduct of the people who held them. Hence if we are to attempt to understand Cromwell's career it is of the utmost importance that we should discover to what extent he shared the theological beliefs common to his time.

A similar facet of the same problem is to be seen in the usual treatment given to Cromwell's association with Independency. To treat the possibility of Cromwell's acceptance of these ecclesiastical views as a matter of incidental importance is entirely to misunderstand the Independent's emphasis upon membership in the Church. It is therefore of some importance to discover whether Cromwell regarded his Christian responsibility seriously enough to have joined an Independent Church. If he did, the relationship between religion and politics in his life may shed light not only upon his character but also upon the later development of political consciousness in English Nonconformity.

If this book then starts from Thomas Carlyle's premise that "a man's religion is the chief fact with regard to him", it does so not with any hope of weaning any from their cherished prejudices about the great Oliver, but upon the ground that religion was an indispensable part of the seventeenth-century environment, and that without giving it its due place we cannot hope to understand either the man or his age. At the same time, if religion and life were so closely related within seventeenth-century Puritanism we should also expect to discover that the mundane situations of political experience were not without significance in our understanding of Cromwell's religion.

To attempt an extended discourse on Cromwellian biography

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4. *English Social History* (1944), 232.

would be to invite comparison with W.C. Abbott's exhaustive survey,<sup>5</sup> and yet we cannot ignore the subject entirely, if only because Abbott's own great work needs to be given the place it deserves.

Throughout this book the original authorities have been regarded as primary, but it is clear that in travelling such a well-trodden historical path any writer must owe an immense debt to historians like S.R. Gardiner, C.H. Firth, and W.C. Abbott whose researches made the way plain. The debt to Abbott's *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell* is evident, and its text of Cromwell's written and spoken word is accepted as authoritative. My previous debt to Mrs. S.C. Lomas's edition of Carlyle's *Letters and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell* is almost equally great.<sup>6</sup>

Of the early biographies James Heath's *Flagellum* was perhaps the most important,<sup>7</sup> more for the extent of its influence than for its value as history. Carlyle regarded it as "the chief fountain indeed of all the foolish lies that have been circulated about Oliver since",<sup>8</sup> and W.C. Abbott's restrained irony is perhaps even more damning.<sup>9</sup> There is a passage in Galsworthy's *Loyalties* where it is remarked of one of the characters who was facing libel, "If he's as innocent as Christ, mud will stick to him", and that seems to have been the avowed principle of James Heath: he discovers a murderer in the Cromwell ancestry, he passes on with evident relish gossip of Cromwell's crude manners, and he is at pains to hint at an immoral relationship between Cromwell and Mrs. Lambert.<sup>10</sup> At the same time it is for his collection of anecdotes that Heath's book has more value than many more reputable volumes, for its author has provided us with some

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5. Cf. Introduction, *A Bibliography of Oliver Cromwell*.

6. New York and London, 1904, 3 vols. References to this edition appear as *L-C*.

7. *Flagellum: Or the Life and Death, Birth and Burial of Oliver Cromwell The late Usurper* (1663). All references are to the second enlarged edition of the same year.

8. *L-C*, I, 12.

9. "Thus what the newspapers of his day omitted, Heath supplied, following, or founding, that great journalistic principle of giving the people what they want – abuse and personal gossip; and, based on these unflinching recipes for popularity, it is small wonder that his book was a success." *Bibliography of O.C.*, p. xviii.

10. *Op. cit.*, 128. There was no basis for the rumour in fact, but it was a favourite subject in Restoration "comedy"; cf. *Cromwell's Conspiracy. A Tragic-comedy Relating to our latter Times*, by "A Person of Quality" (1660). The importance of Heath is that his gossip was retailed by men like Dr. Bates and Sir W. Dugdale.

material – albeit of a doubtful kind – for a period of the Lord Protector’s life which is otherwise more or less a blank.

In contrast, Samuel Carrington, whose favourable biography had appeared four years earlier, in a book of over two hundred pages,<sup>11</sup> devotes only two pages to his hero’s early life, and only nine pages to the whole period of the Civil War up to the invasion of Ireland! The same criticism to a lesser degree must be levelled against the anonymous author of *The Perfect Politician*, although it is undoubtedly the best of the early lives.<sup>12</sup> The rest of the earlier biographies range from the almost useless panegyrics of Henry D’Awbeney and Richard Fleckno[e]<sup>13</sup> to more sanely-balanced works published anonymously by Isaac Kimber<sup>14</sup> and John Banks<sup>15</sup> at the beginning of the eighteenth century, but our interest in them is limited, since their material is largely secondhand. The Rev. Mark Noble’s *Memoirs of the Protectoral House of Cromwell*, published in 1784,<sup>16</sup> falls, however, within an entirely different category. As Mrs. S.C. Lomas has shown,<sup>17</sup> for all Carlyle’s gibes at “poor Noble”, the work was one of painstaking and often invaluable research, and really introduces the period of modern scholarship in Cromwellian studies.

Of Carlyle’s own contribution it is sufficient to say that style, temperament, and literary prestige united in him to make him the ideal prophet, and the *Letters and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*<sup>18</sup> presented for the first time material which stimulated the great reassessment of the seventeenth century associated with the names of Dr. S.R. Gardiner and Sir Charles Firth. All later biographies of Cromwell are dependent upon the literary

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11. *The History of the Life and Death of His most Serene Highness, Oliver, Late Lord Protector*, etc. (1659), dedicated to the Lord Protector Richard.

12. *The Perfect Politician: Or, A Full View of the Life and Actions (Military and Civil) of O. Cromwel.* (1660), attributed to Henry Fletcher and William Raybould; (cf. Abbot, *Bibliography of O.C.*, 135, item 1066.) Quotations from 3rd edition (1681).

13. *Historie and policie re-viewed, in the heroick transactions of his most serene highness, Oliver, Late Lord Protector, from his cradle to his tomb* (1659), by H.D.; and *The Idea of His Highness Oliver, late Lord Protector, &c.* (1659) by Richard Fleckno. The latter can be compared with *Panegyrici Cromwello* (1654) by the Roman Catholic chaplain of the Portuguese Ambassador.

14. *The Life of Oliver Cromwell, Lord Protector of the Commonwealth of England, impartially collected* (1724).

15. *A short critical review of the political life of Oliver Cromwell* (1739) “by a Gentleman of the Middle Temple”.

16. Two vols. References are to the 3rd edition of 1787.

17. *L-C*, I, p. liv seq. Cf. *Ibid.*, 13 f, for Carlyle’s remarks on Noble.

18. First published 1845.

evidence amassed by Carlyle and the detailed research of Gardiner and Firth, from the “popular” books of John Morley and Frederic Harrison at the beginning of this century, to the recent biographies by John Buchan, Hilaire Belloc, Maurice Ashley and G.R. Stirling Taylor. All these books, however, were written prior to the monumental work of the late Wilbur Cortez Abbott. His debt to previous scholars like Gardiner, Firth, and Mrs. Lomas is recognizable and, as we shall discover, his interpretation is often open to serious criticism, but this in no way detracts from a piece of scholarship which perhaps marks the greatest advance in Cromwellian studies since the publication of S.R. Gardiner’s histories.<sup>19</sup>

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19. *History of the Great Civil War 1642–43* (1886–91, 3 vols.); *History of the Commonwealth and Protectorate 1643–60* (1894–1901, 3 vols.). References are to the 4 vol. editions of 1893 and 1903.