

## Review Article

# Oliver Cromwell Revisited

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Ronald Hutton, *The Making of Oliver Cromwell*, Yale: Yale University Press, 2021, pp. 424, £25.00, ISBN 9780300257458

The publication of a biography devoted to Oliver Cromwell was long overdue. Although he has been the subject of constant scholarly study, many of the recent publications have focused on specific aspects of his career, rather than providing an overview of his life. Ronald Hutton, a historian perhaps best known for his work on historical paganism and folklore, has also published extensively on the English Civil Wars.<sup>1</sup> Now, his *The Making of Oliver Cromwell*, the first of a two-part highly accessible biography, has filled that gap in the market. As a Council Member of the Cromwell Association, whose purpose is to promote the education of Cromwell's life and legacy, I welcome its publication.

This volume focuses on Cromwell's life from his birth in 1599 until the end of the first Civil War in 1646, when he was 48. Hutton begins with a statement that Cromwell is the 'most heavily studied ruler in the whole story of these islands' (p. 1), noting that he also has over 250 roads and streets named after him. All publications since 1990 have painted him as 'an intensely courageous, devout and high-principled' man who was driven by his desire to bring to fruition 'God's intentions for the English'. Hutton's motivation for writing this biography was that much of our perception of Cromwell comes from mythical stories about him, and that the true Cromwell has eluded historians. They have taken Cromwell at his word, rather than analysing his actions impartially, or paying heed to the contemporary criticisms; indeed, some of his contemporaries branded Cromwell 'ruthless, devious and self-promoting' (p. 3). Hutton seeks to place Cromwell in the

<sup>1</sup> For example: *The Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991). Hutton's work on the civil wars include *The Royalist war effort 1642-1646* (London: Longman, 1982), *The British Republic, 1649-1660* (London: Longman, 1990), and *Charles the Second: King of England, Scotland and Ireland* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

context of his own time, but also to reveal ‘a man who was more pragmatic and more devious’ (p. 5) than the one we think we know.

The first chapter opens with a lamentation about the lack of surviving evidence about Cromwell’s early life, a problem which Hutton said has plagued authors since the day Cromwell died. Not even the vitriolic smear campaign launched at the Restoration could find much to say about the years before the Civil Wars, although efforts were made to lower his reputation. Fraudulent stories were created about his parents running a brewery, or falsified entries made in parish registers to record points at which Cromwell had to serve penance.

After a lengthy description of the early seventeenth century environment of the Fens and its towns, as well as the farming practices necessary for those who lived and worked there, Hutton provides an overview of how the Cromwell family rose to prominence from their fifteenth century roots in Wales to prosperous minor landowners in Huntingdonshire. Oliver Cromwell, the only son born to Robert and Elizabeth Cromwell, had six sisters who survived to adulthood. As the son and heir he was sent to grammar school in Huntingdon, and aptly part of the building has survived and now houses the Cromwell Museum. Cromwell entered Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, as a fellow commoner in 1616. However, the death of his father in June 1617 ended his studies, and he was compelled to return to Huntingdon to support his mother and sisters. He then disappears from the written record until 22 August 1620, when he married Elizabeth Bourchier at the church of St Giles, Cripplegate, a union which resulted in mutual devotion and seven children. A new stained-glass window commemorating the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this marriage was installed at the church by the Cromwell Association in 2021. Speculating about his personal temperament as a young man, Hutton concluded that Cromwell ‘would have been impulsive, and given to fits of savage temper, brooding withdrawal and boisterous good humour; because that is what he was like all his life’ (p. 20).

Cromwell’s election as the MP for Huntingdon in 1628 was his first foray into national politics, although a brief one: Parliament was dissolved the following year and would not sit again until 1640. Following a minor local political misfortune in 1631, Cromwell left Huntingdon and relocated to St Ives, where he rented Slepe Hall and ‘became a working tenant farmer’, a considerable decline in status. Hutton is dismissive of the theory that Cromwell suffered from depression during this time, claiming that there is no supporting evidence. After inheriting property from his uncle in 1636 Cromwell and his family moved to Ely, a house which also survives and is now a museum aptly named Cromwell’s House. During this time Hutton argued that Cromwell confined himself to issues of local significance, such as the drainage of the Fens, and not to matters of national interest. Evidence of his

religious sympathies before 1630 points to 'an evangelical, Calvinist, strain of English Protestantism' which gave way to Puritanism by the late 1630s (p. 40).

Cromwell's rise to national prominence is charted in the second chapter, from his election as a freeman of Cambridge in 1641 to the circumstances which led to his election as MP for the city. Hutton explores the main aims of the Long Parliament, and how Cromwell's personal beliefs merged with them. He concludes that Cromwell was more inclined to pursue 'personal agendas' rather than to include himself in the great political events.

Hutton places the personal experiences of Cromwell in the context of wider, national events. He traces Cromwell's political manoeuvres during the country's descent into civil war from 1641 to 1642, noting that he both harassed selected supporters of the king and also took the opportunity to settle some old scores of his own. He became an ever-busier member of parliament, with particular focus on the reform of religion, the suppression of Irish rebels, and the mechanics of military preparation. Hutton also traces the beginnings of Cromwell's own military career, which would become such an integral part of his identity, to August 1642. It was then that he summoned a volunteer force, described by Hutton as a 'vigilante squad' (p. 80), in Cambridgeshire in response to the King's request for money and plate from the university colleges. His success in preventing the goods reaching Charles I led to a military commission. The Earl of Essex commissioned him to be the captain of a cavalry troop of sixty harquebusiers in his regiment as both King and Parliament began raising troops against each other.

The third chapter is largely dedicated to Cromwell's career as a cavalry colonel. There was a brief experience at the Battle of Edgehill on 23 October 1642, which he and his troops arrived at too late to make an impact due to being quartered too far away from the battlefield. Cromwell then received a new commission as colonel of a regiment of horse in the newly-formed Eastern Association in January 1643. With his account of Cromwell taking the town of Lowestoft in March, Hutton begins a theme which runs through the book: that Cromwell manipulated situations for personal gain, and that his reports to the House of Commons attributed greater importance to his actions than was due. Although Cromwell had reported that he had prevented a dangerous royalist uprising in Lowestoft, Hutton found no evidence of this and instead highlighted that Cromwell's troops took the opportunity to plunder local residents.

A similarly over-hyped account of Cromwell's success was presented following the siege of Crowland in Lincolnshire, although Hutton stated that there is 'no indication' (p. 103) that Cromwell commanded the force which had driven out the royalists. He summed up this period by describing Cromwell as 'an enforcer and bully-boy' (p. 104), rather than

a talented colonel. The account to the Commons of a God-given easy success at Belton was contrasted with another account Cromwell himself had written nineteen months after the fight. The latter admitted that it had been far more complicated and messy than originally reported, a view supported by accounts from Gainsborough. Hutton accused Cromwell of consistently airbrushing out his colleagues, and instead exaggerating his own success and employing damage limitation when necessary. This is not a common interpretation of his letters, and although Hutton makes a convincing argument to support his assertion, I remain unconvinced by it. I await the publication of the second part of this book to see how this argument is drawn out in the later years of Cromwell's life.

When the command of the Eastern Association was transferred to the Earl of Manchester its military forces underwent considerable expansion. Cromwell's cavalry regiment expanded from five troops to eleven by September 1643, although he had increasing difficulty in acquiring funds to pay them. However, he maintained their loyalty, and during a close call at Bolingbroke when his horse was killed under him and a royalist moved to run him through he was saved by his men and helped onto a new horse. By the end of 1643 Cromwell had established himself 'as the leading horse commander in the Eastern Association, and the most active soldier within it defending its territory' (p. 151).

By the spring of 1644, Cromwell's regiment had increased even further to fourteen troops. In the fourth chapter Hutton charts the relationship between the rising strength of the army under the Earl of Manchester, and the attempts made by its officers, including Cromwell, to suppress religious activity at odds with their own Puritan beliefs. He also chronicled the role played by Cromwell's troops in the military campaigns of 1644. His victory against the royalist Prince Rupert at the Battle of Marston Moor in July is highlighted as a turning point for his career. Hutton describes the cavalry charge Cromwell led as 'thunderous' (p. 182). He accuses Cromwell of dehumanising and demonising the enemy in his subsequent written accounts of the battle, arguing that by doing so he demonstrated 'habitual bloodthirstiness' (p. 190).

Hutton also charts the breakdown of the working relationship between Manchester and Cromwell, which had been shaky at best from the outset, but which was now almost destroyed. There had been bad blood between the two men at the outset of war, because Manchester's father was responsible for Cromwell's ejection from local power in Huntingdon. Cromwell and Manchester had also butted heads when the latter was Lord Mandeville over the enclosure of the village of Somersham in 1641. An uneasy truce was reached at the outbreak of war, but the two men were never easy with each other.

Hutton argues that in 1644 the parliamentary forces had achieved ‘absolutely nothing’ (p. 217). The sieges of Banbury, Donnington, and Basing House ‘had all failed’, and the Battle of Newbury was an ‘illusory’ victory, not the ‘much-vaunted’ (pp. 217-8) success the commanders hoped to paint it. Cromwell had received some personal success, but had not turned the tide of the war. Hutton opens his fifth chapter with the culmination of hostilities between Manchester and Cromwell, which fractured both the House of Lords and the House of Commons and ultimately ended with the introduction of the Self-Denying Ordinance. This piece of legislation was supposed to prevent MPs from holding positions in the military, but, unlike his rival, Cromwell evaded this and retained both posts.

The amalgamation of Parliament’s military forces into the New Model Army led by Sir Thomas Fairfax was good news for Cromwell, who was promoted to the rank of lieutenant-general of horse due to his previous cavalry successes. Unpicking the Battle of Naseby and the reasons for Parliament’s success is a key theme of chapter six, although Hutton argues that for the first time Cromwell had not taken part in the cavalry charge himself but had remained behind the lines to orchestrate operations instead. Subsequent successes at Langport and Bridgwater in July, and the capture of Prince Rupert’s stronghold of Bristol in September, meant that they had won the war; the King was rapidly losing support, and had no money and no reinforcements. The New Model Army had shown itself to be organised and effective, and its commanders to be capable and strategic. Cromwell’s growing reputation as a military leader was well deserved, and his influence both in the army and in Parliament continued to rise. Hutton closes his narrative with the events leading up to the king’s surrender of his person to the Scottish army in Newark on 5 May. Cromwell resumed his political career in Westminster in July, having been rewarded by the House of Commons with money and land as tokens of thanks for his work.

Hutton’s concluding analysis is that Cromwell’s success was attributable to his superb military leadership, his work in Parliament, and ‘a tremendous measure of good luck, or as he saw it, divine providence’ (p. 326). He also emphasises the importance of Cromwell’s Puritan religiosity, and how this impacted his sense of purpose. However, alongside this was a ‘relentless pursuit of self-promotion’ (p. 330) and ‘a tendency to demonize his opponents’ (p. 332). Hutton’s agenda throughout the book is was to weigh up both facets of Cromwell’s personality.

The question of the extent to which Cromwell can be taken at his word is a prevalent theme throughout the book. This was also addressed by Hutton at a debate organised by the Cromwell Association on 16 October 2021. Hutton’s opponent in the debate was Professor John

Morrill,<sup>2</sup> although both agreed at the outset that they were broadly in agreement about many facets of Cromwell's career.

During the debate, Hutton expanded on the point of using Cromwell's own letters as evidence. Citing one which had been published in a newspaper claiming an easy victory at a battle, Hutton contrasted it with a statement Cromwell himself later gave at the court-martial trial of his co-commander, Sir John Hotham, in which he admitted that it had ended in a draw. Similarly, although their engagement at Gainsborough had begun with the routing of the enemy, Cromwell and his army were surprised by the arrival of a royalist field army and were forced to retreat. Cromwell fled all the way back to Cambridge, where he sent a series of letters trying to highlight their achievements in the morning and downplaying the retreat. He framed the victory in the morning as evidence that they could still win, a tactic which Hutton described as a 'damage limitation exercise'. Hutton argued that Cromwell's letters do not represent his true actions, stating that careful analysis of them and comparison with other accounts reveals a man who was 'more devious and ruthless' than he is generally painted in biographies.

This point was refuted by Professor Morrill, who argued that Cromwell was not writing letters in the expectation of publication. At this stage of his career, Morrill argued, he was not manipulating his own image, and the letters were sent to the press by others. Morrill's interpretation was that Cromwell's attribution of easy victories was actually a demonstration that by the help of God he had been able to achieve success. He was trying to mobilise people who did not want to be mobilised by convincing them that they were doing God's work, and that with His help they would be victorious. In other words, godly, honest men would win the war. Morrill did not deny that there were episodes in Cromwell's career from which he directly benefited, such as his retention of both military and political posts following the self-denying ordinance, but stated that there is no direct evidence that he influenced them. He concluded with his belief that Cromwell was not involved in self-promotion, but rather that he had a particular view of what he and his men could and did achieve.

Hutton found it convenient that Cromwell's God always wanted him to come through and end up on top and in power, but without making him take responsibility for failure. He counter-argued that Cromwell was good at covering his tracks, making sure that there

<sup>2</sup> Professor John Morrill is a distinguished historian of the the English Civil War, whose publications include *Revolt in the Provinces: The People of England and the tragedies of war 1634-1648* (London: Longman,1999) and *Oliver Cromwell and the English revolution* (London: Longman,1990). He is a Past President of the Cromwell Association, and has recently finished editing a new four-volume edition of Cromwell's letters and speeches, due to be published in 2022.

was no surviving evidence of his mistakes. Hutton did concede considerable admiration for Cromwell's extraordinary talents in so many areas, but stated that he does not trust him.

The view of Cromwell presented in biographies from the nineteenth century onwards has gradually become more subtle and complex, but the basic sense of Cromwell as a man of sincere piety, instinctual deviousness, and ability to outmanoeuvre his peers is a defining feature of *The Making of Oliver Cromwell*. Hutton's biographical approach offers a fascinating study of a complex and flawed human being who did not seem destined for glory. Hutton portrays Cromwell as a man who made mistakes, who was able to manipulate situations to his own advantage, and who coupled this with genuine military skill and a zeal for his work. The publication of the second part of this biography, dealing with the most controversial years of his life, is eagerly awaited.