Introduction: historiography and sources

THE PROBLEM

Amidst the vast body of scholarly writing that has been published on seventeenth-century Britain in general, and on the revolutionary events of the 1640s and 1650s in particular, the period of the Cromwellian Protectorate from December 1653 to May 1659 remains relatively neglected. Several recent writers on Cromwell and the Interregnum have remarked on the lack of a detailed book-length study of the politics of the Protectorate, and specifically of the Protectorate Parliaments. Ivan Roots, for example, has observed that although ‘biographies of Cromwell abound … There is surprisingly little detailed work on the central government and politics of the Protectorate and less still specifically on the Protectorate Parliaments.’

Similarly, Barry Coward has commented that ‘there is no full published account of parliamentary politics during the Protectorate’, while Peter Gaunt has written that ‘the three Protectorate Parliaments … have attracted no … thorough investigation and remain sadly understudied. Moreover, most of the rather meagre attention has tended to focus on the second Protectorate Parliament, to the further neglect of the other two.’

A symposium on the Protectorate held in January 2004 at the History of Parliament Trust in London revealed both the limitations of the historiography to date and the remarkable potential for further research on this period. At present, there is no detailed monograph, focused on


4 Revised versions of the papers presented at this symposium have recently been published in Patrick Little, ed., The Cromwellian Protectorate (Woodbridge, 2007).
parliamentary history, that spans the period between the end of 1653 (when the studies by Blair Worden and Austin Woolrych end)⁵ and the autumn of 1658 (when that by Ronald Hutton begins).⁶ There are a number of relevant unpublished doctoral theses, notably those by Sarah Jones, Peter Gaunt, Carol Egloff, and Paul Pinckney, but these are not readily available to a wide audience.⁷ The present book is therefore intended to fill this major historiographical gap.

Although the nature of parliamentary politics during the Protectorate is the book’s central focus, this will be set within a broad context. The scope of this study includes the British and Irish dimensions of the Protectorate Parliaments, the political and social nature of factions, problems of management, the legal and judicial aspects of Parliament’s functions, foreign policy, the reasons why Oliver and Richard Cromwell were never able to achieve a stable working relationship with any Parliament, and the nature of the parliamentary franchise and elections in this period. The aim is thus to construct a wide-ranging analysis of Parliaments and politics throughout the Protectorate. The volume examines both Lord Protectors and all three Protectorate Parliaments, and its chronological coverage extends to the demise of the Protectorate in May 1659. This opening chapter will briefly survey the existing historiography surrounding the Protectorate Parliaments, Oliver and Richard Cromwell’s relations with them, and the politics of the Protectorate in general, and will indicate how the present study will add to or qualify that historiography. The chapter will also describe the principal categories of primary sources, both printed and in manuscript, on which the book is based.

**HISTORIOGRAPHY**

Historians in search of a really detailed narrative of the Protectorate and its Parliaments still have to go back to the works of S.R. Gardiner and

---


Introduction: historiography and sources

Sir Charles Firth. These provide a deeply researched and thorough account of the period that has not yet been superseded. The fullest recent study of the politics of the Protectorate, by Barry Coward, offers an excellent overview but makes no claim to analyse parliamentary proceedings in any great depth. The more detailed historiography of particular aspects of the Protectorate Parliaments will be discussed more fully in the relevant chapters, but it is worth noting here that to date only three articles have focused specifically on the Protectorate Parliaments as a group, and all three largely confined their attention to the first two without more than a brief look at Richard Cromwell’s Parliament.

In 1956, Hugh Trevor-Roper published a highly influential article on ‘Oliver Cromwell and his Parliaments’ in which he suggested that the main problem lay in Cromwell’s failure to manage his Parliaments effectively. ‘They failed’, he wrote, ‘through lack of that parliamentary management by the executive which, in the correct dosage, is the essential nourishment of any sound parliamentary life.’ Taking Elizabeth I’s handling of Parliaments as his yardstick, Trevor-Roper claimed that by comparison Cromwell was inept, inconsistent, and lacking in coherent purpose: he was ‘a natural back-bencher’. The article was compellingly written and elegantly sustained, and it was only in 1988 that it received significant criticism, from Roger Howell. Howell argued persuasively that the comparison with Elizabethan Parliaments was inappropriate, that the main problem was not one of management, and that the army ‘both stood in the way of the legitimation of the government via the parliamentary route and heightened the level of the politics of frustration and confrontation within Parliament itself’. Although Howell’s untimely death in 1989 prevented him from developing these ideas further, subsequent work has generally underlined the validity of his criticisms. Sir Geoffrey Elton, Michael Graves, and others have challenged Sir John Neale’s interpretation of Elizabethan Parliaments on which Trevor-Roper relied, thus making it even clearer that later sixteenth-century Parliaments cannot be treated as a model against which to judge the Protectorate

9 Barry Coward, The Cromwellian Protectorate (Manchester, 2002).
Parliaments. Most recently, Peter Gaunt has also revised the Trevor-Roper thesis by suggesting that Cromwell’s failure to secure parliamentary co-operation owed most to his own and the members’ inexperience, and to his ultimately unrealistic hope that they would share his pursuit of ideals such as liberty of conscience.13 The present volume will offer a further refinement to this picture by drawing out the underlying tensions and contradictions within Cromwell’s own vision of Parliaments. In particular, the book will explore the inherent difficulty that he faced in his attempts to use an institution intended as the ‘representative of the whole realm’ to promote a radical agenda that was never espoused by more than a minority of the nation.14

Thanks to Elton and Graves, the story of Elizabeth I’s Parliaments now looks very different from when Trevor-Roper, drawing on Neale’s work, used them as his point of comparison for the Protectorate Parliaments. This ‘revisionism’ has also characterised recent research on early seventeenth-century Parliaments, most notably by Conrad Russell.15 One of the key features of the ‘revisionist’ history of late Tudor and early Stuart Parliaments has been to accentuate how much they were the successors of medieval Parliaments rather than the forerunners of modern Parliaments. By highlighting Parliament’s significance as the monarch’s Great Council and High Court, and the political implications of those functions, ‘revisionism’ has emphasised that Parliament remained what it had been in the Middle Ages: part of the machinery of royal government rather than a counterbalance to it. Indeed, Elton’s account of Elizabethan Parliaments owed an explicit debt to F. W. Maitland’s earlier work on the Parliament Roll of 1305.16 The importance of this medieval context was similarly evident when Russell wrote that: ‘it could still be said in the seventeenth century, as Fleta said in the thirteenth, that “the King has his court and council in his Parliaments”’.17 These continuities in parliamentary history have likewise formed a central theme in David Smith’s recent survey of Stuart Parliaments.18

13 Gaunt, ‘Oliver Cromwell and his Protectorate Parliaments’.
14 Cromwell’s religious policies, and in particular his attempts to extend liberty of conscience more widely, are discussed in detail in chapters 6 and 9.
The ‘revisionist’ emphasis on Parliament as an institution of royal government raises interesting questions when applied to the Parliaments of the Interregnum, and in particular those of the Protectorate. What was the status and significance of the Parliaments that met while the monarchy was abolished? Sarah Jones recounts that, when she told Geoffrey Elton that she was doing doctoral research on the Protectorate Parliaments, he replied that there were no such Parliaments because there was no monarch to summon them.¹⁹ The study of Parliaments in a republican setting necessarily involves adopting a different approach from the ‘revisionist’ account of Elizabethan and early Stuart Parliaments, so much of which rests on the assumption that parliamentary history can be fully understood only within a monarchical framework. Furthermore, the Protectorate Parliaments operated within a very different political and constitutional context from their sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century predecessors. Between 1642 and 1653, Parliament had assumed an unprecedented degree of executive power, and this created a legacy of administrative and legislative control with which the Protectorate Parliaments necessarily had to engage. The Protectorate Parliaments were also the only Parliaments in British history that met and conducted their business under the terms of a written constitution: first the Instrument of Government (1653) and then the Humble Petition and Advice (1657). This was very different from the web of unwritten custom and tradition that had provided the setting for earlier Parliaments. The role of the Lord Protector as head of state in relation to Parliaments was ambiguous: the paper constitutions granted him extensive but not unlimited powers, and he did not have complete freedom to determine when Parliament met, and for how long, in the way that the monarch had done prior to 1641. The Instrument of Government also gave the council much greater control over the membership of Parliament than ever before, although the Humble Petition and Advice later curtailed these powers. All these very significant contrasts surely justify taking a different approach from the one that historians have applied to Elizabethan and early Stuart Parliaments.

This book therefore seeks to place the Protectorate Parliaments within their wider political context in the Britain of the 1650s. It is a political rather than a procedural or institutional study. The book does not attempt to analyse in depth the social background of the members who sat in the Protectorate Parliaments. We felt that this would only anticipate the full-scale analysis that will in due course appear in the History of Parliament volumes for 1640–60, and that it would therefore be better to devote the present volume to other problems and issues. One of its chief priorities is to

¹⁹ Jones, ‘Composition and Activity of the Protectorate Parliaments’, p. 1.
deepen our understanding of the nature of political groupings – such as the Presbyterians, the courtiers, and the army interest – and the tensions that existed between them. It seeks to reconstruct as carefully as possible the motives of the leading political actors, especially the two Protectors, and among its conclusions will be that Richard Cromwell was more different from his father than has often been suggested, and that his fall in 1659 was by no means a foregone conclusion. This book analyses the range of activities that took place within these Parliaments, and the diversity of issues that preoccupied their members. This in turn reflected the Protectoral regime’s relations with the social and political elite more broadly, and one of the insights that the book does absorb from ‘revisionism’ is Conrad Russell’s seminal suggestion that the early Stuarts’ problems were ‘not difficulties with their Parliaments; they were difficulties which were reflected in their Parliaments’. Much the same was true of the Cromwellian Protectors and their Parliaments.

Interestingly, despite the important contrasts between the Protectorate Parliaments and their Elizabethan and early Stuart predecessors, there is considerable evidence that they sought to follow established procedures and looked to ‘ancient’ precedents for guidance. For instance, one of the first actions of the first Protectorate Parliament was to follow the customary practice of establishing a committee for privileges. In similar vein, members affirmed that ‘the privilege of Parliament did begin from the very day of the election’, and that the power of making war historically rested with Parliament. It was not so much that members of the Protectorate Parliaments were indifferent to precedents as that they were often uncertain about how to apply them to new situations and in novel circumstances. During the trial of James Nayler in December 1656, for example, members disputed which precedents were relevant and how they related to the present case. Equally, much of the ceremonial that attended the giving of Protectoral assent to bills was traditional in form. Elizabeth Read Foster has likewise observed that when the Other House was established under the terms of the Humble Petition and Advice, the use of Black Rod as messenger was revived; the House adhered to ‘a corpus of procedure’ that had been ‘firmly established’ in the Lords in ‘the years 1603–49’; and in January 1658 the committee for petitions in the Other House was chosen on the third day

20 These political groupings, and relations between them, are discussed in detail in chapter 5.
22 Burton, I, xxi.
23 Burton, I, xliv–xlv, xlviii.
24 See, for example, Burton, I, 30, 120–1, 163. This is discussed more fully in chapter 8.
25 Burton, I, cxci.
of the session, following the usual pre-1649 procedure. The members of the Other House regularly asked for the records of the Lords to be examined for precedents that could be used to guide them in their deliberations. The Other House was thus very conservative in outlook. Much the same can be said of the Commons, despite the radical political, religious, and constitutional upheaval of the Protectorate. It was thus possible to be conservative in form and radical in debate, and this paradox will form another theme of this book. This helps to nuance and extend recent work on the Cromwellian Protectorate, and to underline that we can do justice to the conservative aspects of the Protectorate, and the continuities that persisted within it, without simply depicting it as a slow trek back towards a Stuart restoration.

**Sources**

Finally, it is worth briefly describing the main categories of primary sources on which this book is based. What follows cannot claim to be in any way an exhaustive list, even of materials cited in the footnotes, but it will at least give a rough sense of the surviving evidence and what this can reveal about the Protectorate Parliaments. It can broadly be divided into official and unofficial sources.

First of all, the institutional records generated by Parliament’s conduct of business provide a vital foundation for any kind of parliamentary history, and they have been the starting-point for the present volume. The printed Commons’ Journal offers an authoritative record of matters discussed, decisions reached, committees appointed, orders and letters issued, and bills read and passed. The journal of the Other House in 1658–9 is a similar source and has also been printed, although historians have so far made very little use of it. No legislation received the royal assent during the period 1642–60, and Statutes of the Realm therefore does not exist for these years, but Firth and Rait filled this gap in 1911 with three admirable volumes that contain the acts produced by the three Protectorate Parliaments. Between them, these sources constitute the official records of the Parliaments.

28 Cf. Little, *Cromwellian Protectorate*.
The unofficial records include first of all the three private diaries that survive for this period, by Thomas Burton, Guybon Goddard, and Sir John Gell. Of these, only the first has been published in its entirety, in a four-volume edition by John Towill Rutt in 1828 that was reprinted in 1974. Burton’s diary covers only the second and third Protectorate Parliaments, and is rather fuller for 1659 than for 1656–8. Rutt printed, as a preface to the first volume of Burton’s diary, the diary of Guybon Goddard for the first Protectorate Parliament. Goddard also sat in the third Protectorate Parliament, but his diary for that Parliament (which ends on 5 March 1659) so far remains unpublished. Sir John Gell’s diary only covers part of the third Protectorate Parliament, and is less full than that of Burton. W. A. H. Schilling edited the portion from 5 February to 21 March for his dissertation, but the complete diary continues up to 8 April 1659. Gell’s diary is less comprehensive and harder to follow than Burton’s, not least because he was less careful to identify speakers, but his diary does sometimes add to Burton’s, especially on occasions when the latter was absent from the House. Scholars have generally used the diaries of Goddard and Gell much less than that of Burton, and here they are deployed wherever they add significantly to Burton’s account.

Between them, these three diaries all throw useful light on proceedings in the Protectorate Parliaments. In recent years, there has been a lively debate over how far it is acceptable to quote directly from such seventeenth-century diaries given that they cannot be taken as verbatim transcripts of words actually spoken in Parliament. In summarising and commenting in detail

32 The manuscript of Burton’s diary is BL, Add. MSS 15859–64.
33 To illustrate this point, in the printed edition Burton’s account of the first sitting of the second Protectorate Parliament takes up 739 pages, the second sitting 164 pages, and the third Protectorate Parliament 1,082 pages.
34 Burton, I, i-cxcii. All page references to the first volume of Rutt’s edition of Burton’s diary that are cited with lower-case Roman pagination are to the diary of Guybon Goddard. This diary unfortunately breaks off in mid-sentence on 18 December 1654.
35 The original manuscript is apparently lost, but a transcript of 1720 survives as BL, Add. MS 5138: pp. 105–283 cover the period from 19 January to 5 March 1659.
37 Ivan Roots offers a helpful assessment of these three diaries in his introduction to the reprint of Burton’s diary (New York, 1974), and his lives of Burton and Goddard in the ODNB are valuable as well. Derek Hirst usefully discusses the three diaries’ respective qualities in ‘Concord and Discord in Richard Cromwell’s House of Commons’, EHR, 103 (1988), 339–58; and see also Schilling, pp. 1–2.
on this debate elsewhere, David Smith has suggested that there is no reason to avoid altogether quoting from members’ private diaries, provided that one always bears in mind their limitations as sources and does not treat them like a seventeenth-century equivalent of *Hansard*. It also seems important wherever feasible to try to choose the most reliable account rather than merely the most quotable, although the varying degrees of reliability among diarists are not always very easy to establish. In the present book, different accounts of speeches have been compared where possible, but often there are only unique accounts, and this needs to be borne in mind when quotations are given for what a speaker was reported as having said in one of the diaries.

With Cromwell’s own words, scholars are on rather firmer – or at least more fully documented – ground. Throughout this book, the basic edition that has been chosen when quoting from Cromwell’s surviving letters and speeches is that by Thomas Carlyle, as revised and extended by S. C. Lomas in 1904. This has generally been preferred to W. C. Abbott’s edition for the reasons that John Morrill has explored in an extended critique of Abbott, namely that Lomas–Carlyle is at least as reliable as Abbott, more readily available, and much easier to use. For Cromwell’s letters, Abbott adds virtually nothing to Lomas–Carlyle. For his speeches, the finest edition is that by Charles L. Stainer, and Ivan Roots took this as the basis of his Everyman edition. For ease of reference and to assist checking, all quotations from Cromwell’s speeches are here cited from Lomas–Carlyle – which remains the most widely available edition – but every extract has been compared with the text in Stainer/Roots and any significant variations are noted in the relevant footnote. The Stainer/Roots and Abbott editions have been quoted only on those (relatively rare) occasions where they add material not printed in Lomas–Carlyle.

Several collections of correspondence throw valuable light on parliamentary proceedings and help us to locate them within a wider political context. This is a large and diverse category of material, and here there is space only to indicate a cross-section of the most important examples. The voluminous papers of Cromwell’s secretary John Thurloe, mostly published in a


Cited throughout as Lomas–Carlyle.


seven-volume edition by Thomas Birch in 1742, are crucial in enabling us to reconstruct the government’s perspective and the information on which it was acting. There is a wide variety of material, especially relating to the council, in the State Papers Domestic. The largely unpublished correspondence of Henry Cromwell also offers helpful sidelights on developments at Westminster and again assists us in exploring the relationship between conciliar and parliamentary politics. The Thurloe State Papers contain many dispatches from foreign ambassadors resident in London, especially the French and Dutch, and these can be supplemented by further French reports, and by the extensive accounts of successive Venetian ambassadors and secretaries. Although they are not always reliable, and need to be tested wherever possible against other sources, these diplomatic dispatches can provide helpful information. The same is true of the various collections of royalist correspondence in this period, especially the Clarendon State Papers and the Carte Papers in the Bodleian Library, and the Nicholas Papers. Further useful newsletters and other documents survive in the papers of William Clarke, who during the Protectorate was secretary to General Monck and the commanders of the army in Scotland. All this and other correspondence helps to integrate parliamentary proceedings into a broader account of Protectorate politics in general.

Contemporary memoirs present particular problems of their own. The most voluminous and the best placed to comment on parliamentary politics are those of Edmund Ludlow and Bulstrode Whitelocke. However, Blair Worden has shown that both are extremely complex and problematic sources. Both Ludlow’s Memoirs and Whitelocke’s Memorials were extensively ‘edited’ during the later seventeenth century to help them to serve the Whig cause, and readers even have to be alert to the retrospective element in

43 TSP. The originals are mainly found in either Bodl., MSS Rawlinson A 9-64, or BL, Add. MSS 4156–8 (Thomas Birch collection: Thurloe Papers).
44 CSPD. The originals are mostly found in TNA, SP 18 (State Papers Domestic, Interregnum), and SP 25 (Council papers, Interregnum).
45 BL, Lansdowne MSS 821–3 (Henry Cromwell correspondence); BL, Add. MS 43724 (Henry Cromwell correspondence).
46 TNA, PRO 31/3/95–103 (Baschet’s transcripts); F. G. P. Guizot, History of Oliver Cromwell and the English Commonwealth, trans. A. R. Scoble (2 vols., 1854); Guizot, Richard Cromwell.
48 Bodl., MSS Clarendon (some of which were published in Clarendon SP); Bodl., MSS Carte; Nicholas Papers.
49 Clarke Papers.