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978-1-107-66071-7 - Oliver Cromwell: And the English People

Ernest Barker

Excerpt

[More information](#)OLIVER CROMWELL AND
THE ENGLISH PEOPLE

I

OLIVER CROMWELL has no grave. His dead body, dug up by the Royalists after the King came back, at the beginning of 1661, was hung and beheaded, and then thrown into a pit.¹ As he has no grave, so, until recent times, he has had no memorial. It was not until 1845 that the first great book was dedicated to his memory; and then it was dedicated by a Scotsman, Thomas Carlyle, who collected and elucidated, in three volumes, his letters and speeches. It was not until 1899 that a statue was at last erected in his honour at Westminster, under the shadow of our Houses of Parliament. In

II

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general recognition, he is a late-comer into our national house of fame. But he has come at last, free from the shadows by which he was long obscured, and visible in his own true lineaments. To-day we can interrogate him freely.

‘What is your substance? Whereof are you made?’

What is his significance in English history? What is the cause for which he stands, and what are the elements of our national life which are embodied and incarnate in his memory?

He was born in the April of 1599, at the end of the reign of Queen Elizabeth, in the Eastern Counties of England, in a fen-land country which was the home of a deep and devout Protestantism. He had the genius of this country, and above all its religious temper, deep in his blood.² He was over forty-one when he first appeared on the stage of public events, as member for the town of Cambridge, in the Long Parliament

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which met at the end of 1640. He died eighteen years later, in the September of 1658, a little short of his sixtieth year. In these eighteen years he had wrestled, in Parliament and outside, with grave religious and political problems: he had made himself a great soldier, and ridden from victory to victory in nine long years of war, from the middle of 1642 to the end of 1651; and finally, for the last five years of his life, from 1653 to 1658, when he was already weary and spent, he had carried on his shoulders the general burden of government, as 'His Highness the Protector of the Commonwealth of England, Scotland and Ireland'. He had served his generation simultaneously in the political parliament, the military camp and the religious congregation. The last of the three had always been his true home. From that home he went out to war and politics, and wherever he went he carried its spirit with him. But military fame and political power weighed with him as well as

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religious faith: he was no pure saint, but a thunderer of war and a calculator of political expediencies mixed with a seeker who sought for God. In his mixed and comprehensive nature, which in the world of action was what Shakespeare's was in the world of literature, there were different and conflicting elements. His achievement is as various as himself, and it leaves room for different and conflicting interpretations.

II

Shall we interpret him as the maker of the unity of the United Kingdom; the author of unification; the creator of one *Reich* or *Respublica*, which transcended and abolished local particularisms, and embraced all the British Isles? In a sense he was. The Lord Protector governed a single *Respublica*, in the Parliament of which representatives of England, Scotland and Ireland sat together for the first time. There was a single citizen-

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ship, a common constitution, a single system of trade, a common ordering of the basis of religious life, through all its borders. But this was not so much his own intention, as the aftermath and consequence of a civil war, in which all three countries had been engaged, and which, ending in the victory of one cause, necessarily ended in the enthroning of that cause over all the three countries. In any case—and this is the fundamental thing—the achievement did not last. It perished within two years of his death, when Charles II was restored to the throne in 1660. Scotland and Ireland went back to their old positions. If Scotland afterwards consented to a Union, in 1707, she consented to a voluntary and negotiated union, which owed nothing to the memory of Cromwell's experiment. If Ireland was afterwards, long afterwards, brought into a Union, in 1801, that union too was independent of his memory; and it has not lasted. What Cromwell did in Scotland and

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Ireland was written on wind and running water. The wind blew; the waters ran; and it went. Even the part of the Cromwellian settlement of Ireland which seemed most permanent—the planting of English landlords on more than half of the soil of Ireland—is gone. It began to go in 1870, when the principle of land purchase, or in other words of the substitution of peasant proprietorship in lieu of tenancy, was introduced in favour of Irish tenants: it finally went in the first decade of the twentieth century.

III

Another interpretation of Cromwell would make him the author of colonial expansion and imperial policy—the arch-founder, if not the first begetter, of the British Empire. In these days of a conscious passion for colonial expansion this is a natural interpretation. We always tend to interpret the past in the light of the prepossessions which

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we cherish in the present; and when we idealize colonial expansion as a sign of national vigour, a symbol of national prestige, and an expression of national responsibility towards undeveloped peoples and regions, we are apt to project our ideals into the past. There is a sense in which the interpretation of Cromwell's achievement in colonial and imperial terms is correct. His Admiral Blake pushed into the Mediterranean, partly in pursuit of fugitive Royalists who had taken to privateering, partly to police the seas against the Algerian pirates, and partly to make a display of English naval strength which might overawe Catholic powers inimical to the English Protestant Republic. This was the beginning of a policy of the acquisition of Mediterranean power which was afterwards steadily pursued. Again there was Cromwell's war with Spain, which virtually began at the end of 1654 and lasted for the rest of his life. This may be viewed as a challenge

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to the great colonial empire of Spain; and it certainly resulted in the conquest of Jamaica, in the West Indies, during the summer of 1655. Nor is this all. During his ascendancy a common Puritanism—a common basis of Free Church feeling—cemented more closely the colonies of New England to the government of Old England. Again a new Navigation Law of 1651 (not, it is true, due to Cromwell, and resulting in a Dutch War which ran counter both to his religious feelings and to his political sympathies) practically reserved the commerce of English colonies for English shipping. There even seems to have been a conscious theory of the necessity of the expansion of England. The words of Harrington, a political theorist of Cromwell's time, may be cited. 'You cannot plant an oak in a flower pot: she must have earth for her roots, and heaven for her branches.'

All this is well worth noting; and it all seems to lead naturally to the view that

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Cromwell, and Cromwell's England, were imperialists. But there are deep and cogent reasons against accepting such a simple and categorical explanation. Those reasons may be stated in one word—the word 'religion'. We must never forget that the England of the years in which Cromwell spent his active life—the England of the years 1620 to 1660—was an England in a great mood of religious exaltation. This exaltation was not a show or a cloak or an hypocrisy: it was the genuine spirit of the age. Moved by the influence of this spirit, the expansion of England was a religious expansion. This is apparent in two ways, different from one another, and yet complementary to one another. In the first place, the effective and permanent expansion of England—antecedent to Cromwell, and beginning about 1620 in the form of Puritan emigration—was in no way due to political or 'geopolitical' reasons. It was not promoted by the State: it was undertaken from motives of religion in

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order to enable men to escape from the State and its policy of compulsory religious unity, and to find a religious haven or 'free port', like your own great port of Hamburg. 'The expansion of England in the seventeenth century was an expansion of society and not of the State. Society expanded to escape from the pressure of the State.'³ In the second place, and in the days when, under Cromwell, the State began to take a hand, the State itself—the Puritan State of the period of the Commonwealth—was predominantly moved by considerations of religion. We should be committing treason against the spirit of the age, and we should be guilty of false history, if we did not recognize the dominance of these considerations. When Cromwell embarked on war against Spain in 1655 (and it is by this war, and not the earlier Dutch War, which was *not* his, that we must judge his motive), he was not acting on grounds of colonial expansion and imperial policy. The evidence