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Keith C. Sewell

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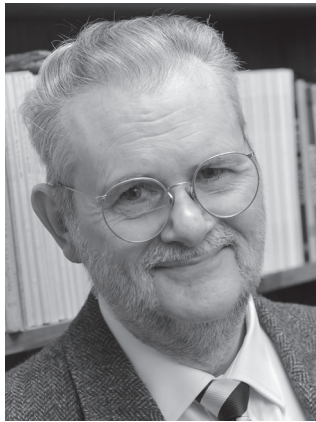
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The Soldier, the Parliamentarian, the Statesman, and the Historian



by Keith Sewell

In a previous article I drew attention to the reservations expressed by Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer (1801-76) concerning the constitutional crisis and civil wars that took place in England in the mid-seventeenth century. Were these revolutionary in character—in some ways anticipatory of the French Revolution? In this article I will address this question. The soldier in my title is Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658), the parliamentarian is Edmund Burke (1727-97), the Statesman is Groen van Prinsterer himself, and the historian is his friend Jean-Henri Merle d’Aubigné (1794-1872).

I will discuss Burke’s view of Oliver Cromwell as expressed in his *Reflections on the Revolution in*

France (1790), and Groen’s deep reservations concerning events in England between 1640 and 1658. I will also draw attention to the assessment of these matters offered by Merle d’Aubigné (1794-1872), who first drew Groen’s attention to Burke’s critique of the French Revolution.²

In his *Unbelief and Revolution* (1847), Groen stated that also in England,

...religion was more influential than historians are wont to acknowledge. Yet, commingled with the dutiful resistance born of attachment to denominational creed or polity, the nature of sovereignty was misunderstood, the rights of the people were exaggerated, and government was conceived in terms of a commonwealth. This was especially evident in the Revolution of 1642-49; less so in 1688...³

Clearly, Groen had deep reservations about events in England 1640-60, rather “less so” concerning the events of 1688. Indeed, so apprehensive was Groen towards any sudden and dramatic change that he even wondered if the Reformation was a revolutionary movement.⁴

Were Groen’s carefully couched reservations justified? Did England then experience a revolution, more than a century before the 1789 French variety? Were the Puritans and parliamentarians true revolutionaries, acting in the spirit of 1789 before their time—and if not they, exactly who were the revolutionaries in those turbulent times?

Initially, I will consider how Burke himself

Dr. Keith C. Sewell is Professor Emeritus of History, Dordt University, now living in Melbourne, Australia.

viewed this period of English history. I will then summarise the complexities of the period 1637-49 in England, and then pay specific attention to the role of Oliver Cromwell. I will then turn to the views of Groen and draw attention to those of Merle d'Aubigné.

The Whig Party, of which Burke was a member, was broadly sympathetic to the parliamentary cause of the 1640s. In the eighteenth century its radical wing continued to support the execution of Charles I in 1649. This point is not tendentious. Already in the early stages of the French Revolution it was possible to see a parallel of sorts with events in England in the early 1640s. When the French revolutionaries executed Louis XVI (1754-93) and Marie Antoinette (1755-93), it was perhaps inevitable that comparisons were made with the execution of Charles I.

Moreover, I previously drew attention to the passage in Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* in which he anticipated the emergence in France of an all-powerful military dictator:

In the weakness of one kind of authority, and in the fluctuation of all, the officers of an army will remain for some time mutinous and full of faction, until some popular general, who understands the art of conciliating the soldiery, and who possesses the true spirit of command, shall draw the eyes of all men upon himself. Armies will obey him on his personal account. There is no other way of securing military obedience in this state of things. But the moment in which that event shall happen, the person who really commands the army is...the master...of your king, the master of your Assembly, the master of your whole republic.⁵

Of course, when he wrote this, Burke did not have the actual Napoleon in mind. Napoleon had not yet risen to such prominence. So whom might he have had in mind? One possibility is that he thought back to the English crisis of the 1640s, to the life and times of Oliver Cromwell.

However, those who take the time to *read* Burke will find that elsewhere in the *Reflections* he considers Cromwell (and the struggles of the Huguenots in France) in distinctly non-revolutionary and non-Napoleonic terms. He compared the men of 1789 unfavourably with those Protestants who sought

change by way of reformation in earlier times:

Other revolutions have been conducted by persons who, whilst they attempted...changes in the commonwealth, sanctified their ambition by advancing the dignity of the people whose peace they troubled. They had long views. They aimed at the rule, not at the destruction of their country. They were men of great civil and great military talents, and if the terror, [also] the ornament of their age.⁶

Specifically towards the supposedly “great bad man” Oliver Cromwell, Burke gently parried his latter-day detractors by quoting the words of the poet Edmund Waller (1606-87):

The compliment made to one of the great bad men of the old stamp (Cromwell) by his kinsman, a favourite poet of that time, shows what it was he proposed, and what indeed to a great degree he accomplished in the success of his ambition: —

Still as *you* rise, the *state*, exalted too,
Finds no distemper whilst 't is changed
by you;
Changed like the world's great scene,
when without noise
The rising sun night's vulgar lights
destroys. [7]

These disturbers were not so much like men usurping power as asserting their natural place in society. ... Their conquest over their competitors was by outshining them. The hand, that, like a destroying angel, smote the country, communicated to it the force and energy under which it suffered. I do not say, (God forbid!) I do not say that the virtues of such men were to be taken as a balance to their crimes; but they were some corrective to their effects. Such was ... our Cromwell.⁸

Burke did *not* view Cromwell as a revolutionary in the 1789 sense. He signalled that he was aware of Cromwell's reputation as a “bad man,” but he distanced himself from that assessment. Yet we will see that Groen did have clear grounds for placing a question mark over those Protestants who struggled for liberty in the seventeenth century.

II

One of the great difficulties confronting us is that *for over two centuries the literature on England in the seventeenth-century has been shaped and re-shaped by the rival ideological standpoints* (including versions of liberalism or Marxism) *that arose from the French revolution and its aftermath.*

Edward Hyde (1609-74), Earl of Clarendon,

One of the great difficulties confronting us is that for over two centuries the literature on England in the seventeenth-century has been shaped and re-shaped by the rival ideological standpoints (including versions of liberalism or Marxism) that arose from the French revolution and its aftermath.

offered the first detailed account of the English civil wars. Clarendon did not speak of an “English revolution,” but of a “rebellion” and “civil wars.”⁹ Initially he adhered to the parliamentary side, but after 1641/42, he gravitated towards the king. He experienced the conflict from both sides. Furthermore, when Burke referred to Cromwell as a “great bad man,” he was actually alluding to a statement in Clarendon’s *History*.¹⁰

A clearly pro-Whig interpretation of the seventeenth century emerged in the following two centuries. The “Whig interpretation” is usually associated with the famous *History of England*, by Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800-59), who actually took a moderating “trimmer” rather than a dogmatically Whig standpoint.¹¹ Whig-liberal historiography viewed English history as a long, continuous, and seemingly inexorable process towards parliamentary government, individual liberty, and commercial enterprise—and the national greatness that these made possible. The most comprehensive nineteenth-century study of the period was by Samuel Rawson Gardiner (1829-1902).¹² The liberal Gardiner saw himself as a follower of Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886)—a self-understanding later astutely challenged by R. G. Usher (1880-1957).¹³ Charles H. Firth (1857-1936), Godfrey Davies (1892-1957), and David Ogg (1887-1965) ably con-

tinued the work of Gardiner.¹⁴ The American historian Wallace Notestein (1878-1969) stood very much in this lineage.¹⁵

From the later nineteenth century, the near hegemony of the Whig interpretation began to crumble. Detailed research tended to challenge the received narrative at pivotal points.¹⁶ By the time Herbert Butterfield (1900-1979) wrote on the Whig interpretation (1931), its assumptions were

seen as questionable, and its optimism without justification.¹⁷ This helps to explain the durability of Macaulay’s “whig-literary” approach, exemplified by the success of G.M. Trevelyan (1876-1962) and C.V. Wedgwood (1910-97).¹⁸

However, by contrast, the 1920s to the 1940s were marked by the rise of a left-socialist and increasingly Marxian approach to English seventeenth-century history. The Christian Socialist R. H. Tawney (1880-1962) initiated this development with his *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (1926).¹⁹ Where Gardiner sought to follow Ranke, Tawney laboured in the shadow of the German sociologist Max Weber (1864-1920).²⁰ Tawney’s book stimulated protracted discussion,²¹—offering a socio-economically focused view that attracted intense criticism.²² Christopher Hill (1912-2003) proclaimed the Marxist interpretation in his *The English Revolution* (1940)²³ and a host of later works.²⁴ Tawney and Hugh Trevor-Roper (1914-2003) engaged in bitter controversy on the “rise of the gentry.”²⁵ For some, class was *the* key factor. Another prominent advocate was Lawrence Stone (1919-99), whose socio-economic reductionism in *The Crisis of the Aristocracy* (1965) provoked deep criticism and can now be seen as marking the beginning of the decline of the Marxian standpoint.²⁶

Moreover, a careful scrutiny of Hill’s output

reveals a gradual mellowing of his earlier stance. Heavy ideological interpretations can initially seem to be overwhelmingly cogent. However, the “spell” can be broken when once the undergirding religious-dogmatic assumptions are detected and exposed. The more Hill explored seventeenth-century England, and not least the self-understanding of actual Puritans, the more his initial Marxism became modified, attenuated, and ameliorated, although not eliminated.²⁷ This mellowing did not take place in a vacuum.

A revisionist challenge to the Marxian left and the right-wing Whig position emerged in the 1960s, heralded by a characteristically forthright essay by Cambridge historian Geoffrey Elton (1921-94).²⁸ He made the point that both Whig and Marxian interpretations rested overly much on the operation of long-term and supposedly inexorable forces, and under-appreciated the operation of contingency in the play of events.

In 1976, Conrad Russell (1937-2004) took up this theme in a landmark call for a thoroughgoing reassessment of the period.²⁹ There followed a breakout from the Whig and Marxian interpretations. The historian Jonathan Clark wrote about the Marxian school as “Old Guard” and the Whig school as “Old Hat.”³⁰ Those who broke away from these orientations include some who exhibited a strong orientation towards local specifics and immediate exigencies.³¹ Russell was prominent, publishing work of lasting importance.³² His “Ford Lectures” for 1987/8 provided an astute elucidation of the interaction of various parties within and between England and Scotland.³³

Those who, with Russell, rejected either the “Old Hat” or “Old Guard” orientations did not form a single “new school” of interpretation, although they effectively displaced their predecessors, imparting depth and nuance to one decisive episode after another.³⁴ Some figures were still influenced by the “Old Hat” school, such as Perez Zagorin (1920-2009), while others were of the “Old Guard” brigade, such as Brian Manning (1927-2004) and in some measure David Underdown (1925-2009), but they were on an ebb tide.³⁵ Eventually Austin Woolrych (1918-2004) penned a great new comprehensive history of this period.³⁶

As if to confirm the point made by Burke, these

later historians have more readily affirmed the importance of Christian belief in the public—and not just ecclesiastical—life of the seventeenth century.³⁷ The emerging picture is one of long-range structural problems and of mounting multiple-compounding crises running out of control, generating civil wars that acquired their own momentum and generated new problems. So, to return to Groen’s concerns, who were the revolutionaries in this situation?

To answer this question, we must recognise that there were two sets of crucial issues in play. The *first* related to the perceived (and actual) threat to the reformed Church of England. The *second* pertained to constitutional questions concerning the exercise and limits of the royal prerogative. These two factors, although each distinct, were intertwined with multiple points of contact.

The *first* concerned the circumstances of the English Reformation, and the contentions of the articulate “Puritan” minority that the English Reformation was not only deficient but now under threat from a counter-reformational high church movement led by William Laud (1573-1645). These “Laudians” were the principal advocates of Arminianism in England.³⁸ The Reformation in England at the time of Thomas Cranmer (1459-1556) was not revolutionary in character. Rather, it sought to reform by returning the doctrine and practice of the English church to those of Apostolic and earliest Christianity. The English reformers may not have succeeded, but that was the aspiration. As much as possible, they preserved the continuities. It was the introduction of Arminian doctrine and “high church” rituals by the “Laudians” that was truly revolutionary. The Puritans were only a small minority within the English church, but many more who were broadly protestant in outlook joined them in opposing the innovations championed by Laud and his followers with the support of Charles I.

The *second* issue was constitutional. At the heart of the problem were incompatible views of law and kingship. The time-honoured constitution of old England—of governance by Crown, Lords, Commons, and the Common Law—eventually came to a breaking point in the years 1640-42. The incoming Stuart monarchs had ruled in Scotland since 1371. They came to the English throne in 1601

with Roman law assumptions, not least concerning the exercise of the royal prerogatives. Congruently, this period also witnessed an immense growth of interest in English history, and especially in the history of the Common Law of England.³⁹ The antiquarians William Camden (1551-1623), Robert Cotton (1586-1631), and Henry Spelman (1562-1641), and the early Society of Antiquaries, were prominent in this development.⁴⁰

Under James I, the parliaments of 1621/24 were marked by discord with the crown.⁴¹ The same may be said of the parliaments of Charles I in 1625/28.⁴²

Most important at this stage was the champion of the common law, Edward Coke (1552-1634), and the polymath jurist John Selden (1584-1654). Under James I, the parliaments of 1621/24 were marked by discord with the crown.⁴¹ The same may be said of the parliaments of Charles I in 1625/28.⁴² Coke and his supporters used the common law to challenge the more “absolutist” Stuart view of the rights and powers of the royal prerogative. Repeated reference was made to the “fundamental law” of England,⁴³ as deeply instantiated in the law of the land and life of the people. In the words of Glenn Burgess, “Absolutism ran counter to deep English assumptions, derived from the common law.”⁴⁴

Faced with the continued hostility of the House of Commons, Charles ruled without parliament from 1629 to 1640, sometimes raising revenue for himself in legally contestable ways.⁴⁵ Arguably it is in this period that England came closest to a regime of royal absolutism. Charles, however, was his own worst enemy. His attempt to impose an Anglican-style liturgy on the Church of Scotland in 1637 provoked a riot in St. Giles Cathedral, Edinburgh, and soon had the greater part of the Scottish leadership up in arms and affirming the Scottish National Covenant (1638). The Scottish threat necessitated a new parliament to vote the revenue that Charles desperately needed—the “Short Parliament” of 1640. Many of those returned as members were known in the country for their opposition to the king’s fiscal and anti-Puritan policies. Before voting supply, parliament pressed first for the redress

of its grievances, and the king had good grounds for suspecting a degree of collusion between his opponents in parliament and the Scottish leadership. The “Short Parliament” lasted only three weeks in May. However, the “Bishops War” began: in summer 1640 the Scots invaded northern England.⁴⁶

Charles was now most desperate for revenue, and parliament assembled again in November—the “Long Parliament” of 1640-49 had begun. It

was in the period 1637-42 that the ecclesiastical and constitutional issues became inextricably intertwined. Monarch and parliament drove each other to exasperation. Parliament was in league with the Covenanting Scots. Alarming news of the massacre of Protestants in Ireland, beginning October 23, 1641, further stoked fears that Charles would recruit Irish Catholics to his cause.⁴⁷ Charles, resolving to take charge, endeavoured to arrest five members of the House of Commons on January 4, 1642. He failed. He was obliged to quit his capital, and on August 22, 1642, he raised his standard at Nottingham. The civil wars began.

III

After the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, Cromwell was vilified by royalists and viewed as something of an embarrassment by those in parliament concerned to restrain the power of the crown. Many followed the “great bad man” line of Clarendon. After 1688, there were occasional authors who spoke up for Cromwell, but they were always in a minority.⁴⁸ A mighty sea change came with the publication of the *Letters and Speeches* of Oliver Cromwell in 1845 by Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881).⁴⁹ Although Carlyle’s “elucidations” could be somewhat idiosyncratic, for the first time the reading public had access to the great man’s writings and public utterances. What emerged was a man of moral stature and integrity of purpose. While he remained subject to criticism, it was not so easy to

condemn him with crude misrepresentation.

One of the fruits of Carlyle's work was the vindication of Oliver Cromwell published in 1847 by Jean-Henri Merle d'Aubigné, in which he explicitly acknowledged his indebtedness to Carlyle.⁵⁰ Merle d'Aubigné on Cromwell and Groen on revolution could be read in tandem: Merle d'Aubigné dated his preface in May 1847; Groen dated his in August—only months apart! The two men corresponded with each other.⁵¹

The late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century inclination was to see Cromwell as some kind of proto-liberal. Gardiner, Firth, John Morley (1838-1923), and John Buchan (1875-1940) all wrote in these terms.⁵² However, things changed from the mid-1930s with the appearance of W. C. Abbott's *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*.⁵³ This was more comprehensive than Carlyle but was seriously vitiated by a running commentary that envisaged Cromwell as an authoritarian proto-fascist. For a time, this outlook impacted a new wave of biographical offerings.⁵⁴

This phase passed, and, as we have seen with the historiography of the seventeenth century, the pendulum swung in the Marxian direction. However, by the time Hill published his life of Cromwell, the Marxian interpretation had passed its peak of influence.⁵⁵ Since then, interest in Cromwell has grown apace. The journal *Cromwelliana* is published in England by the Cromwell Association. Among his many biographers, Robert Paul (1918-92) vindicated Cromwell from many calumnies, Antonia Fraser upheld the literary tradition, while Ronald Hutton continues to have his doubts.⁵⁶ John Morrill is convinced that Cromwell's "born again" Christianity was genuine, and has rightly counselled his fellow historians to take his immersion in the Scriptures seriously.⁵⁷ At the time of writing, the first volume of a brand new edition of the works of Oliver Cromwell is eagerly anticipated.⁵⁸

The (first) Civil War ended in May 1646. A defeated Charles fled to Scotland where he negotiated to support the Presbyterian cause. The period from mid-1646 to late 1648 was one of considerable turbulence in Anglo-Scottish affairs. The king was still a potent force. Many in parliament continued to aspire to a settlement in which the crown would continue to play a central role.⁵⁹

Concurrently there arose considerable mistrust between the Army and Parliament. The Army feared that parliament would negotiate an agreement with the king that would put the soldiery in jeopardy. The soldiers were also owed considerable back pay. Parliament was divided between those who wished to see a reformed national church ("Presbyterians") and those ("Independents") who advocated "freedom of conscience" for those Protestants unable to participate in such a national church.⁶⁰ The latter group were seen as encouraging and sheltering sectarianism. The challenge of independency (congregationalism) to Scottish-style Presbyterianism had already surfaced in the debates of the Westminster Assembly, itself convened by the English parliament.⁶¹ The more that discontentment manifested itself in the Army, the more the "Presbyterians" in parliament sought to find an accommodation with the king. Charles, on his part, failed to find agreement with the Scots—he dissimulated, and they became exasperated—and he ended up their prisoner.

The king was incapable of negotiating in good faith with his opponents. His understanding of the royal prerogative did not require that he keep his word to his subjects. The exasperated Scots relinquished him to the English parliament. The subsequent capture of the king by the Army in June 1647 clearly indicated a slide towards anarchy.

Cromwell was caught between parliament and army. He remained a member of the House of Commons and a commander in the Army. His reputation was enhanced by repeated military triumphs. He was deeply sympathetic towards what he saw as the just concerns of the Army. Yet within the army there developed a radical wing that really did aim at a social revolution. These sentiments centred on John Lilburne (1614-57) and the "Leveller" movement.⁶²

If the ultra-royalist cause represented a "revolution from above," the Levellers portended a "revolution from below." The full range of the Leveller agenda may be ascertained from the famous "Putney Debates" of October-November 1647.⁶³ Moreover, even more radical movements were developing in the wings, for example the "Diggers" led by figures such as Gerrard Winstanley (1610-60).⁶⁴ Here we may discern a shift from commit-

ment to the sovereignty of God to notions of the sovereignty of the people. Cromwell also opposed those who stood for revolution from below.

The mid-1640s were a time of immense ferment in England. George Thomason (1602-66), the London bookseller, collected some 22,255 books, tracts, and pamphlets published in the period 1640-61. These are now bound in 2,008 volumes as the “Thomason Collection of Civil War Tracts,”

The radicals in the Army rose in revolt, and at a decisive point, on November 15, 1647, at Corkbush Field in Hertfordshire, Cromwell confronted these revolutionaries with drawn sword in hand.⁶⁷ In December 1647, Charles made his “Engagement” with the Scots, who in May 1648 demanded that the Presbyterian discipline be imposed in England and the Army disbanded. The Second Civil War ensued.⁶⁸

Cromwell never set out to be a great military commander. He rose rapidly by application and diligence.

held in the British Library, London.⁶⁵ The words of John Milton (1608-74) convey something of the intensity of those days:

Now once again by all concurrence of signs, and by the general instinct of holy and devout men, as they daily and solemnly express their thoughts, God is decreeing to begin some new and great period in his church, even to the reforming of reformation itself ...[:] the shop of war hath not there more anvils and hammers waking, to fashion out the plates and instruments of armed Justice in defence of beleaguered Truth, then there be pens and heads there, sitting by their studious lamps, musing, searching, resolving new notions and ideas wherewith to present, as with their homage and their fealty, the approaching reformation: others as fast reading, trying all things, assenting to the force of reason and convincement.⁶⁶

Cromwell never set out to be a great military commander. He rose rapidly by application and diligence. In 1644, he became Lieutenant-General in the Army of the Eastern Association. In the same year he successfully led the left wing of the parliamentary army at the battle of Marsden Moor. In 1645, Cromwell was made Lieutenant-General in the “New Model Army” under the overall command of Thomas Fairfax (1612-71).

Charles was transferred to Hampton Court in August 1647. By October it became more apparent that he was again negotiating with the Scots and royalist “Presbyterians” in England. In November he escaped from Hampton Court to Carisbrooke.

Cromwell and the Army were confronted by a revival of English royalism (that had never actually gone away), but this time they had the Scots as their enemies and not their allies. Nevertheless, the Army commanded by Cromwell triumphed across England and Wales. This further effusion of blood so hardened attitudes towards the king that Fairfax placed him under close imprisonment. Cromwell became more amenable to the argument that Charles should be brought to trial and executed. In December 1648, detachments of the army purged parliament of its anti-army members.⁶⁹

Charles—that “man of blood”—was now brought to trial and executed.⁷⁰ However, Cromwell and the Army were still beset with problems. There ensued Cromwell’s campaign in Ireland, which did so much to tarnish his reputation.⁷¹ The Scots provoked the Army mightily by crowning Charles II king in Scotland. The Army entered Scotland and defeated the Scottish forces at Dunbar in 1650, and then marched south to defeat the remaining royalist forces at Worcester in 1651.

Cromwell’s actions in Ireland and his invasion of Scotland had some key features in common. One was *fear*. In the case of Ireland, it was fear that a resurgent Irish Catholicism would threaten the survival of Protestantism in England. In the case of Scotland, it was that the Scots would intrigue to place Charles II on the throne of England. Another was a *resistance to any threat of imposed uniformity*. Not only did Cromwell, the Army, and the Independents repudiate all Roman Catholicism; they also rejected the imposition of an exclusive

Presbyterian polity on Englishmen. The objection was not to Presbyterianism as such, but to its *exclusive imposition*. The Army explained its action in Scotland in the following terms:

As for the Presbyterian, or any other form of church-government, they are not by the Covenant to be imposed by force; yet we do and are ready to embrace so much as doth, or shall be made [to] appear to us to be according to the Word of God. Are we to be dealt with as enemies, because we come not to your way? Is all religion wrapped up in that or any one form? Doth that name, or thing, give the difference between those that are the members of Christ and those that are not? We think not so. We say faith working by love is the true character of the Christian; and, God is our witness, in whomsoever we see anything of Christ to be, there we reckon our duty to love, waiting for a more plentiful effusion of the spirit of God to make all those Christians, who, by the malice of the world, are diversified, and by their own carnal-mindedness, do diversify themselves by several names of reproach, to be of one heart and one mind, worshipping God with one consent. We are desirous that those who are for the Presbyterian government, should have all freedom to enjoy it; and are persuaded that if it be so much of God, as some affirm, if God be trusted with his own means, which is his Word powerfully and effectually preached, without a too-busy meddling with, or engaging, the authorities of the world, it is able to accomplish his good pleasure upon the minds of men, to produce and establish his purposes in the world, concerning the government of his church.⁷²

How utterly unlike the manifestoes issued by Napoleon as his revolutionary armies marched across Europe!

The “rump” parliament did not distinguish itself.⁷³ It allowed England to drift into war with the Netherlands. Power now lay with the Army, and the quest was for a constitutional and ecclesiastical settlement in which everyone could rest secure. Parliament failed, and an exasperated Cromwell dismissed the “rump” parliament on April 20, 1653. His words resounded down the centuries:

“You have sat too long here for any good that you have been doing. . . . Depart, I say; and let us have done with you. In the name of God,—go!”⁷⁴

The replacement body was nicknamed the “barebones parliament.” On December 16, 1653, Cromwell was installed as “Protector of the Commonwealth.” The words he reportedly used to parliament eloquently express his exasperation at the impasse the nation had reached:

Is there not yet upon the spirits of men a strange itch? Nothing will satisfy them unless they can press their finger upon their brethren’s consciences, to pinch them there. To do this was no part of the Contest we had with the Common Adversary. For “indeed” Religion was not the thing at first contested for “at all;” but God brought it to that issue at last; and gave it unto us by way of redundancy; and at last it proved to be that which was most dear to us. And wherein consisted this more than in obtaining that liberty from the tyranny of the Bishops to all species of Protestants to worship God according to their own light and consciences? For want of which many of our brethren forsook their native countries to seek their bread from strangers, and to live in howling wildernesses (Our poor brethren of New England!); and for which also many that remained here were imprisoned, and otherwise abused and made the scorn of the Nation. Those that were sound in the faith, how proper was it for them to labour for liberty, for a just liberty, that men might not be trampled upon for their consciences! Had not they “themselves” laboured, but lately, under the weight of persecution? And was it fit for them to sit heavy upon others? Is it ingenuous to ask for liberty, and not to give it? What greater hypocrisy than for those who were oppressed by the Bishops to become the greatest oppressors themselves, so soon as their yoke was removed? I could wish that they who call for liberty now also had not too much of that spirit, if the power were in their hands!⁷⁵

Cromwell was unable to secure a lasting settlement. The Army was now widely distrusted, while men were more ready to claim liberty of conscience for themselves than to grant it to others.

Nevertheless, Cromwell ended the Anglo-Dutch war into which parliament had drifted, and he upheld the protestant cause across Europe.⁷⁶ He seriously contemplated a much closer relationship between England and the Netherlands.

Not driven primarily by ambition, he declined an offer of the crown. The bitter irony of his life was that in contending against royal absolutism, he found himself exercising military and political

No one could express himself more forcibly than he [Cromwell] did against the principles of the radicals and levellers, who ... indulge[d] in senseless theories of equality and socialism.⁷⁸

The spirit of revolution was at work in the mid-seventeenth century, but Cromwell was its opponent, not its advocate or champion. The mature view of Vera Wedgwood was correct. Cromwell “was no

Burke’s estimation of Cromwell was fundamentally sound. Cromwell stood *for* historically established rights *against* the revolutionary innovations of the Stuart monarchy *and* the programs of the Levellers and other radicals.

power way beyond the wildest dreams of any absolutist-minded Stuart monarch. With many key issues still unresolved, he died on September 3, 1658. No settlement was achieved. There was no clear succession. Great matters remained unresolved.

IV

Burke’s estimation of Cromwell was fundamentally sound. Cromwell stood *for* historically established rights *against* the revolutionary innovations of the Stuart monarchy *and* the programs of the Levellers and other radicals. And what of Groen’s reservations about the Protestants of the seventeenth century? These concerns were addressed by Merle d’Aubigné, who clearly discerned that it was the royal policy that was revolutionary:

... it was a real revolution which Charles I undertook to effect, and the English people, by opposing it, opposed a revolt against the oldest institutions of the country. The cavaliers [royalists] were the revolutionists: the roundheads [parliamentarians and the army] the conservatives.⁷⁷

At the same time, Groen’s concerns were not misplaced. The changes demanded by the Levellers went beyond law reform to a wide program ultimately based on the presumed sovereignty of the people. These Cromwell would never countenance. This Merle d’Aubigné emphatically confirmed:

natural revolutionary” and “he valiantly disregarded what was revolutionary in his situation.”⁷⁹

As to any supposed likeness of Cromwell and Napoleon, Merle d’Aubigné was emphatic in his rebuttal:

He [Cromwell] has been compared to Bonaparte.... But while Napoleon bore to other nations French tyranny and indifference, Cromwell would have given them religious liberty and the Gospel.⁸⁰

The monarchy was restored in 1660: Charles II became king of England and Scotland. In 1685, his brother James II succeeded him. The policies of James II drove England into yet another great crisis. It was William III, Stadtholder of the Netherlands (“William of Orange” in British history), who came to the rescue—but that is another story.

Endnotes

1. Keith C. Sewell, “Why Edmund Burke is Important.” *Pro Rege* 54/2 (June 2022), 36-48.
2. Marie Elisabeth Kluit, *Het Protestantse Réveil in Nederland en daarbuiten, 1817-1854* (Amsterdam: H.J. Paris, 1970), 202.
3. Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer, *Unbelief and Revolution* translated by Harry Van Dyke, (Bellingham WA: Lexham Press, 2018), hereafter *UR*, 64.
4. Groen van Prinsterer, *UR*, 72-75.

5. "Reflections on the Revolution in France," (London, November 1790) in *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, (hereafter *WSEB*) edited by Paul Langford, et al. (Oxford University Press, 1989), Volume VIII, 53-293 at 266.
6. Burke, "Reflections" (1790). *WSEB* Volume VIII, 99.
7. William Waller, *A Panegyric to My Lord Protector by a Gentleman that Loves Peace, Union and Prosperity of the English Nation* (London: Thomas Newcomb, 1655), lines 33-36.
8. Burke, "Reflections" (1790). *WSEB* Volume VIII, 99.
9. Edward Hyde, Earl of Clarendon, *The History of the Rebellion and Civil Wars in England, Begun in the Year 1641* (Oxford: Theatre, 1702-7), 3 volumes each in two parts. Most scholars now use the edition edited by William Dunn Macray (Oxford University Press, 1888), 6 volumes. *The History* was only published posthumously, with both editions based on the original manuscript in the Bodleian Library, Oxford. See also R.W. Harris, *Clarendon and the English Revolution*, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1983), 393-419.
10. The statement is at the conclusion of Book XV in the 1707 edition (as known to Burke), in Volume III, 653, and in the 1888 Macray edition in Volume VI, 97.
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15. Wallace Notestein, "The Winning of the Initiative by the House of Commons," in *Proceedings of the British Academy*," 11 (1924), 125-175, and *The House of Commons, 1604-1610* (Yale University Press, 1971).
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22. See for example, Kurt Samuelson, *Religion and Economic Action: The Protestant Ethic, the Rise of Capitalism, and the Abuses of Scholarship* (New York: Basic Books, 1961), 15-49 and 79-80.

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