

OLIVER CROMWELL: FREEDOM'S FRIEND OR FOE?

Peter Richards



The statue of Oliver Cromwell outside of the Houses of Parliament, London.

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Cromwell: Friend or Foe of Freedom?

In a nationwide poll conducted by the BBC in 2002, Winston Churchill was voted the Greatest Briton of all time. Oliver Cromwell came tenth. Those who advocated voting for Cromwell told us that it was he who made it possible for our freedoms and liberties to be preserved until the present day. This is what has prompted me to examine the historical facts in order to take a view on where I think Cromwell stands in relation to the history of the freedom of the people of England.

This essay is a chronological survey of the period between 1625 and 1660, concentrating on events that have a bearing on the liberty of the people, with particular reference to the influence, either positive or negative, that Cromwell may have had on these events. It finishes with a judgement on the value of his contribution.

The Role of Charles I up to the Civil War

Firstly I will sketch the period from 1625, when Charles I acceded to the throne, until the end of the First English Civil War, in order to look at the nature of the regime that Cromwell opposed and to ask if he is due credit for doing so.

I will start by suggesting that Charles I, Cromwell's primary adversary, was no great friend of freedom. The persecution of Puritans continued during his reign. The court of Star Chamber served the King instead of justice and was much hated by the people because of the severe punishments it dispensed.

Like his father, Charles I believed in the Divine Right of Kings which no doubt contributed to his obstinate and arrogant behaviour.

Charles I's first Parliament in 1625 granted two subsidies but these were insufficient to fund the war with Spain. Charles' problems with Parliament had begun. His answer was to dissolve parliament.

Charles' marriage to the French princess Henrietta Maria was unpopular. This is because the King's wife was a Catholic and people were suspicious of the influence that she might exert upon him.

Charles I's second Parliament in 1626 refused funds without redress to grievances. Parliament wanted to get rid of the Duke of Buckingham but Charles refused to sanction the impeachment of his favourite adviser. Charles' response was to dissolve Parliament once again.

When the King made an attempt to raise money by forced loans, without Parliament's consent, it elicited a spirited refusal from John Hampden MP, who declared "that he could be content to lend as well as others, but feared to draw upon himself that curse in Magna Charta which should be read twice a year against those who infringe it."¹ The outcome of his principled stance was imprisonment.

In 1627 England declared war with France. The failure of Buckingham to relieve besieged Huguenots, with whom the Puritans sympathised, caused further antagonism between King and Parliament.

During the third parliament, in 1628, the King, as a result of parliamentary pressure, reluctantly granted a *Petition of Right*, which denied the right of the King to raise taxes without consent of Parliament. Further subsidies were granted as a result.

The assassination of Buckingham in August 1628 allowed fate to eliminate one of Parliament's grievances.

What followed in 1629 was the dissolution of Parliament and then 11 years of autocratic rule by Charles Stuart. This period became known to history as the 'Eleven Years' Tyranny'. During this period, further attempts by the King to raise forced loans for Ship-Money, in contravention of the *Petition of Right*, met with defiant refusals. John Hampden's refusal led to his trial in the Exchequer Chamber before the twelve judges of England. Although he lost the case he became a public hero, known thereafter as 'The Patriot'.

Thomas Babington Macauley describes some of Charles I's unscrupulous means of raising tax revenue and reports on the Puritans remarkable resilience to persecution: "All the promises of the King were violated without scruple or shame. The *Petition of Right*, to which he had, in consideration of monies duly numbered, given a solemn assent, was set at naught. Taxes were raised by the royal authority. Patents of monopoly were granted. The old usages of feudal times were made prettexts for harassing the people with exactions unknown during many years. The Puritans were persecuted with cruelty worthy of the Holy Office. They were forced to fly from the country. They were imprisoned. They were whipped. Their ears were cut off. Their noses were slit. Their cheeks were branded with red-hot iron. But the cruelty of the oppressor could not tire out the fortitude of the victims. The mutilated defenders of liberty again defied the vengeance of the Star Chamber, came back with undiminished resolution to the place of their glori-

ous infamy, and manfully presented the stumps of their ears to be grubbed out by the hangman's knife. The hardy set grew up and flourished in spite of everything that seemed likely to stunt it, struck its roots deep into barren soil, and spread its branches wide to an inclement sky."²

William Laud was appointed Archbishop of Canterbury in 1633. Although he was not a Catholic, people were suspicious of his fondness for High Church ritual and feared that he had popish aspirations for the Church of England. He used the Court of High Commission, an ecclesiastical court, to punish those who did not conform to his favoured religious practices. He inflamed English Puritans by ordering the railing off of communion tables in churches and he provoked a rebellion in Scotland when he imposed a new Prayer Book on them.

When Parliament was eventually recalled in April 1640, it became known as the Short Parliament because it only lasted three weeks. Charles needed to raise money to quell a Scottish revolt whereas Parliament wanted to express its grievances. Charles, unable to secure the required subsidies, dissolved Parliament in May 1640.

The Scots invaded the north of England and the English army that marched north to meet them was defeated. The King was obliged to agree terms, which included a commitment to pay a large indemnity. In November 1640 Charles recalled Parliament again, and this time he was looking for subsidies to pay the Scottish victors. This Parliament became known as the Long Parliament, because it lasted on and off for many years. The King eventually agreed to a number of concessions. Laud was impeached and sent to the Tower. The *Triennial Act*, which assured the summoning of Parliament every three years, was passed in February 1641. Under considerable pressure from Parliament, the King signed the Earl of Strafford's death warrant, thus betraying his key adviser. Tunnage and poundage (Customs Duties) were abolished. Later in 1641, the Star Chamber and the High Commission courts were abolished. It was also later that year that Parliament debated the *Grand Remonstrance*, a long list of parliamentary grievances. A Catholic uprising in Ireland made Protestants fearful of a Catholic invasion of England. An army had to be raised to suppress the Irish rebellion but Parliament was concerned that the King might use this army against them. A proposal was made to place the army under parliamentary control. There was also a rumour that the Queen was about to be impeached to prevent her unwelcome involvement. Egged on by his wife, Charles decided to take action.

The Start of the Civil War

When Charles attempted to arrest one Peer and five MPs, including John Pym, the leader of the house, and John Hampden, in January 1642, for High Treason, he

was embarrassed to discover that the conspirators had fled from the House of Commons before his arrival. It was this event, it is claimed, that triggered the start of the First English Civil War. In January 1642, the King left London, where he lacked popular support, and in August of the same year he raised his standard at Nottingham, thus declaring war on Parliament.

The main events of the First English Civil War, which lasted from 1642 until 1646, are widely documented and I will not comment beyond saying that early roundhead defeats prompted Cromwell to build a trained cavalry; the Battle of Marston Moor, a decisive victory for Cromwell and his roundheads, was the turning point of the war; and the New Model Army went on to defeat the Cavaliers at a number of battles concluding with Charles I surrendering to the Scots in May 1646. In January 1647 the Scots handed the King over to Parliament.

My view is that the catalogue of problems that Charles I had with Parliament over the years of his reign was largely due to his intransigence and inflexibility to respond willingly to what amounted to reasonable demands. Those who opposed the King were I believe defending the freedoms of the people. But what was Cromwell's role in all of this?

The Rise of Oliver Cromwell

Cromwell was born in Huntingdon in April 1599. He was elected MP for Huntingdon in 1628 but this Parliament was dissolved the following year. In 1640 he was elected MP for Cambridge for the Short Parliament and then again for the Long Parliament but he did not really come to prominence until the First Civil War and beyond when his rise through the military ranks was quite extraordinary.

As J.C. Davis records: "When war came in mid-1642 Cromwell was 43 with a family of seven children and complex management responsibilities in and around Ely. Yet he did not hesitate to commit himself to active service. Of over 55 members of the Long Parliament who fought, he was the most successful and his advancement was rapid. In August 1642 he was captain of a troop of cavalry that he and others had mustered at Huntingdon. By February 1643 he was colonel of a regiment in the Eastern Association. At the beginning of the following year he was Lieutenant-General, second in command to the Earl of Manchester and in charge of the cavalry of the Eastern Association. In 1645 he became Lieutenant-General of the horse in the New Model Army. In March 1649 he was named Commander-in-Chief for the expedition to Ireland. Just over a year later he was appointed Captain General and led the New Model's campaign in Scotland and England. Within eight years he had risen from military novice, whose main asset appeared to be enthusiasm, to sole commander of Eng-

land's armies and architect of their victories in Ireland, Scotland and England. This is a record of achievement, which made his eventual political pre-eminence possible. Moreover, it provided him with the power base which in a very tangible sense, made that pre-eminence almost irresistible."³

Cromwell's military greatness is rarely challenged. Cromwell's noble defence of the parliamentary cause and his inspirational leadership against this Stuart monarch can be said at this point to earn him the label of freedom's friend.

After the First Civil War

I will now look at the period after the end of the First English Civil War, mention the role of the Levellers in relation to discussions with the army and comment on whether Cromwell's subsequent harsh treatment of them is justified with respect to the cause of freedom.

The King was kidnapped by the army on 4 June 1647. The war was over and now it seemed everything was up for discussion. Different groups expressed different views. There were Presbyterians, Independents, Ranters, Seekers, Quakers, Muggletonians, Socinians, Anabaptists, Brownists, and Fifth monarchists, Episcopalians, Levellers and Diggers. The collapse of press censorship since the beginning of the war meant that thousands of pamphlets were printed and circulated expressing new ideas.

The General Council of the Army was created in order to formulate its own proposals. It put forward its own ideas of a settlement with the King known as *The Heads of Proposals*. This document proved unacceptable to the King because it went too far, by giving too much power to Parliament, and unacceptable to the rank and file because it did not go far enough in settling their grievances.

The Levellers: The First Libertarians?

The Levellers, an influential group of political and religious radicals led by John Lilburne, Richard Overton, and William Walywyn, three outstanding pamphleteers, were forming alliances with the military rank and file. They set out a summary of their grievances in *The Case of the Armie Truly Stated*. Their demands included biennial elections, universal manhood suffrage, and a constitution. This document was submitted to the Council of the Army.

A meeting with the Army grandees was arranged for 28 October 1647 at Putney Church, London. In readiness for this meeting a new document, called *An Agreement of the People*, was jointly drafted by civilian and army Levellers. This included further demands such as, the liberty of conscience, equality before the law, and an end of

conscription for war service.

The meetings took place over several days and became known as the Putney Debates. They were chaired by Oliver Cromwell. Also present were John Wildman and Maximilian Petty, two leading civilian Levellers and a number of elected army agitators. Now there was an opportunity for rational discussion.

One of the major topics was the extension of the franchise. Colonel Thomas Rainsborough, a spokesperson for the military Levellers made the now, much quoted, statement: "For really I think that the poorest he that is in England hath a life to live, as the greatest he; and therefore truly, sir, I think it's clear that every man that is to live under a government ought first by his own consent to put himself under that government; and I do think that the poorest man in England is not bound in a strict sense to that government that he hath not had a voice to put himself under."⁴

Major-General Ireton (Cromwell's son-in-law) disagreed, taking the view that the vote should be limited to owners of property. Cromwell too, rejected Rainsborough's plea for wider manhood suffrage, even though it would exclude servants, apprentices and beggars. This programme of reform was far too radical for the Army grandees.

David Hoile and others have given valid reasons for suggesting that the Levellers were the political antecedents of present day libertarians.⁵

Suddenly an event occurred which put all discussions on hold. On 11 November the King escaped custody from Hampton Court and found refuge at Carisbrooke Castle on the Isle of Wight. Charles' escape signalled the start of the Second Civil War.

On December 15, 1647, at Corkbush field near Ware, two regiments mutinied; one was led by Robert Lilburne (John Lilburne's brother) and the other by Thomas Harrison. The soldiers were wearing sea green ribbons identifying them as Leveller supporters. A historian describes what happened: "They appeared on the field with copies of the *Agreement of the People* stuck in their hats, with the addition of the motto "England's Freedom! Soldiers' Rights!" Harrison's regiment was soon brought to submission by a few words of reproof from Fairfax, but Lilburne's was not in so compliant a mood. Cromwell, seeing that persuasion alone would not avail him here, rode along the ranks, sharply ordering the men to tear papers from their hats, and on finding no signs of obedience dashed among the mutineers with his sword drawn. There was something in his stern-set face and resolute action which compelled obedience. The instincts of military discipline revived, and the soldiers, a moment before so defiant, tore the papers from their hats and craved for mercy. The ringleaders were ar-

rested, and three of them condemned to death by an improvised court-martial. The three were, however, allowed to throw dice for their lives, and the loser, whose name was Arnold, was shot in the presence of his comrades. Thus at the cost of a single life discipline was restored, without which the Army would have dissolved into chaos.”⁶

In the meantime, the King signed a secret agreement, known as *The Engagement*, with the Scots, in order to gain their support. Cromwell crushed a royalist revolt in Wales. Fairfax dealt with another revolt in Kent. Whilst all this was happening, sporadic civilian riots broke out in favour of the King in London and other parts of the country. A siege in Colchester ended with Fairfax ruthlessly ordering that the surrendering royalist commanders be shot. A royalist Scots army invaded England but was defeated by Cromwell at Preston and by the end of 1648 the Second Civil War was over and the King was once again in custody.

The significance of this period is that Cromwell, by rejecting Leveller demands, missed an opportunity to create a democratic state in England. Cromwell’s role in this can be seen as restraining the progress of freedom. Even though the Levellers held republican views, it is possible that if the extension of the franchise, for which they argued, had been adopted, public opinion could have been responsible for the establishment of a constitutional monarchy. The office of the monarchy still had much popular support in the country and I think that not only could this have happened but also that it would have been a desirable outcome since it would have provided a much needed symbol of long-term stability to a new constitution.

Pride’s Purge and the Execution of Charles I

The army was preparing to bring the prisoner King back to London to be tried by Parliament. Many Presbyterian MPs still wanted to negotiate with the King. On December 6, 1648, Colonel Thomas Pride, with a military guard, stood at the entrance of the House of Commons vetting who should be allowed to enter. 45 MPs were arrested and 186 were barred entry. Many others left in protest or just stayed away. This ensured that only those MPs in favour of putting the King on trial were admitted to the House. This became known as Pride’s Purge. The MPs remaining after the purge became known as the Rump Parliament. These 70 MPs established a High court of Justice, appointing 135 commissioners, including 29 army officers, to act as judges and jury combined. Oliver Cromwell was one of them.

A show trial followed with Charles I being charged with High Treason. The crime of treason had to be redefined to make it illegal for a king of England ‘to levy war against the Parliament and Kingdom of England’. Despite the fact that Charles refused to recognise the legiti-

macy of the court, he was found guilty. Charles’ death warrant was signed by only 59 of the 135 commissioners. Cromwell was one of the 59. The execution was set for January 30, 1649. Christopher Hibbert describes the scene: “The King stood praying for a short time, looking up at the sky, then he lay down his neck on the block. The axe fell and the King’s head was severed by a single stroke. “The blow I saw given,” said a young spectator, “and can truly say with a sad heart, at the instant whereof I remember well, there was such a groan by the thousands then present as I never hear before and desire I may never hear again”.”⁷ This report suggests that the response of the people, who witnessed the execution, was one of shock and horror, rather than delight.

Although Cromwell was not present when Pride’s Purge was taking place, he fully approved of it. When you think that out of 507 elected MPs, only 70 were allowed entry to the House, based on their known views, it can hardly be described as a democratic decision to put Charles I on trial. Even though the commissioners were appointed on the expectation that they would find the King guilty, only 68 out of the 135 attended the trial. Of those only 59 were prepared to sign the King’s death warrant. This trial cannot be described as legal and as Cromwell’s signature is clearly seen on the death warrant, he shares responsibility for this crime. By supporting Pride’s Purge, he is also guilty of resorting to illegal and undemocratic means to restrict Parliament to those who advocated regicide.

Cromwell’s Suppression of the Levellers

After the regicide in January, John Lilburne wrote a pamphlet entitled *England’s New Chains Discovered*, which was published in February 1649. It criticised the despotic nature of the new regime. This was followed by another pamphlet entitled *The Hunting of the Foxes*, written by Richard Overton, which was published soon afterwards. Both men were arrested along with William Walwyn and sent to the Tower. They wrote and published a revised version of *The Agreement of the People* whilst in prison. Thousands of people signed petitions for their release.

During the same year, when the army was being mobilised to fight in Ireland, mutinies broke out. Soldiers were unhappy at the failure to implement Leveller reforms. Soldiers’ pay arrears were also an issue. In May 1649, Colonel Scrope’s regiment had mutinied in Salisbury and 1200 men were making their way to Banbury where another mutiny had taken place. When they were cut off at Burford near Oxford by Cromwell’s troops, 340 were herded into Burford Church, where they were held for 4 days. Two ringleaders and two others, selected at random, were to be shot. Cornet Thompson was the first to be executed and he deserves to be remembered as one of the first martyrs of democracy. Corporal Perkins and John Church were the next to die.

Cornet Denne was luckier, as he was given a last minute reprieve. By acting promptly and ruthlessly Cromwell was able to stamp out rebellion within the army. Other mutinies were dealt with, with equal severity. All hope of a Leveller programme of reform had been dashed, because of Cromwell's restraining hand.

Although Walwyn and Overton were released and Lilburne was tried and acquitted, the Leveller cause had effectively been crushed. The Levellers had been pioneers in the promotion of ideas about liberty and they were cruelly trampled on by Cromwell, who I believe, in his efforts to retain power, damaged his reputation with respect to the cause of freedom.

After the Execution: Changes to the Constitution and the Law, and the Consequences for Freedom.

In 1649 Cromwell was appointed Chairman of a Council of State, the monarchy was abolished, the House of Lords was abolished and England was declared a Commonwealth.

Cromwell had to deal with rebellions in Ireland, which were ruthlessly crushed, as demonstrated by the massacres at Drogheda and Wexford, where thousands of men were put to the sword.

By 1650 the Rump Parliament was ready to pass a string of oppressive laws, as a result of which, strict observance of the Sabbath was made compulsory, profane swearing and cursing became illegal, adultery was punishable by death and holding atheistical, blasphemous or execrable opinions was forbidden. These puritanical laws, which were passed by religious zealots of the Rump Parliament, met with Cromwell's full approval, as he too wanted a Godly society. All these laws were detrimental to freedom with exception of the *Toleration Act*, passed in September 1650, which abolished the requirement of people to attend church by law. Cromwell's enthusiasm for these laws, apart from the one mentioned above, makes him an enemy of freedom.

It was during the same year in which the above-mentioned legislation was being passed that Cromwell had problems with Scotland. The Scots were unhappy about the execution of Charles I, as he had been their King too and they had not been consulted. They rallied behind Charles' eldest son, whom they had declared King Charles II and were set to invade England. Cromwell marched his army north and routed the Scots at Dunbar.

A year later Charles tried again, by leading a Scottish army across the border, only to be decisively defeated by Cromwell outside Worcester. Charles fled the battle scene and went into hiding until he was able to escape to France. The attempted restoration of the Stuart monarchy by Charles II, with the help of the Scots had failed.

Cromwell as Dictator

The next event worthy of comment is Cromwell's dissolution of the Rump Parliament. Fed up with the poor performance of this Parliament, Cromwell took it upon himself to bring it to an end.

Thomas Carlyle gives a vivid account of this dramatic incident. When you read this passage, Cromwell's powerful personality becomes evident: "'Come come!' exclaims my Lord General in a very high key, 'we have had enough of this,' - and in fact my Lord General now blazing all up into clear conflagration, exclaims, 'I will put an end to your prating,' and steps forth into the floor of the House and clapping on his hat and occasionally stamping the floor with his feet begins a discourse which no man can report! He says - Heavens! he is heard saying, 'It is not fit that you should sit here any longer! You have sat here too long here for any good you have been doing lately. You shall give this place to better men! - Call them in!'" adds he briefly, to Harrison, in word of command: and some twenty or thirty grim musketeers enter, with bullets in their snaphances; grimly prompt for orders; and stand in some attitude of Carry-arms there. Veteran men: men of might and men of war, their faces are as faces of lions, and their feet are swift as the roes upon the mountains; - not beautiful to honourable gentlemen at this moment! "You call yourselves a Parliament," continues my Lord General in clear blaze of conflagration: "You are no Parliament; I say you are no Parliament!"... "Corrupt unjust persons; scandalous to the profession of the Gospel: how can you be a Parliament for God's People? Depart, I say; and let us have done with you. In the name of God, - go!"⁸

This was quite simply a military *coup d'etat*. What had been established was none other than a military dictatorship with Cromwell at its head. For this Cromwell deserves no credit of distinction in the advancement of freedom.

I will now examine the period of rule under Cromwell known as the Protectorate, followed by that of his son Richard as Lord Protector. I will pay particular attention to the effect of the Protectorate on the lives of the people of England and finally I will look at the circumstances that led to the Restoration of the monarchy.

Lord General Cromwell proceeded to rule with the assistance of a nominated assembly, which became known as the 'Barebones Parliament' because of one of its leading characters Praise-God Barebone, a London leather seller. This Parliament of Saints was persuaded to stand down after only 6 months because Cromwell was unhappy with its performance.

Cromwell then ruled with the authority of a new constitution known as the *Instrument of Government*, which named him Lord Protector. This gave him extensive

powers and enabled him to rule without Parliament. As a result many laws were passed in his name. This went beyond anything Charles I had attempted to do.

A Parliament was convened from September 1654 until January 1655, but then dissolved again by Cromwell. Taxation continued without Parliament's consent, which provokes further comparison with Charles I's behaviour.

Cromwell divided England and Wales into 11 regions and then designated a major-general to rule each region. Cromwell's policy of 'the reformation of manners' was adopted and this entailed the enforcement of puritanical laws. This the major-generals did with zeal. Work and play on Sunday were forbidden. Even going for a walk on a Sunday (except to go to church) was illegal. Boys who played football on Sunday could be whipped and women and girls were not allowed to wear make-up or colourful clothes.

Cromwell mounted a full-scale assault on traditional English culture. He deprived the public of the right to take part in seasonal festivals such as May Day, Easter, and Bonfire Night celebrations, and Christmas feasting. Attempts were made to prevent traditional social activities, like drinking in alehouses, gambling, and theatre going. Popular sports such as wrestling and horseracing were outlawed. Transgressions were met with severe punishments. Needless to say the major-generals were unpopular. Cromwell's mission was to create a Godly society by eliminating wickedness. This rule of the major-generals under Cromwell lasted from 1655 until 1657.

A Parliament was called which pressed for a new agreement known as the *Humble Petition and Advice*. Cromwell refused its recommendations to accept the Crown, but did accept the proposal that he should name his successor. He continued to rule as Lord Protector but this time without the major-generals.

The End of Cromwell and the Restoration

On September 3, 1658 Cromwell died and his eldest surviving son Richard was named as Lord Protector. Richard was not a strong leader and by the spring of 1659 'Tumbledown Dick' as he became known was forced to dissolve the Third Protectorate Parliament due to the discontent amongst the military. Richard abdicated and left the country. The Rump Parliament was recalled, the Protectorate abolished and the Commonwealth restored. By February the following year MPs excluded by Pride's Purge were being readmitted to Parliament, which signalled that changes were afoot. The public was clamouring for the restoration of the monarchy. This is how Claire Tomalin describes the mood in the country: "There is no doubt that the overwhelming majority of the nation wanted to see Charles II on the throne. They

had had enough of fighting, they never approved the execution of the king, they resented puritan suppression of Christmas and Mayday festivals, dancing, the theatre and children's games on Sunday."⁹

In accordance of the wishes of the people of England, Charles II was invited to return from exile and take the crown, thus restoring the monarchy.

But it was not until the Glorious revolution of 1688/89 when the Catholic James II was driven from the throne and replaced by William of Orange and Mary that the conflict between Crown and Parliament was finally over. The *Declaration of Right*, which specified the conditions on which the crown was offered, was later embodied in an act of Parliament known as the *Bill of Rights* (1689), and this limited the monarchy to a constitutional role and protected the freedoms of the people of England.

If we look back over the period of the Protectorate, we can only say that it was a failure because the tyranny, which was endured, was even more terrible than the one it had replaced. Cromwell deserves castigation for his role in this because his regime was more oppressive than that of Charles I. Cromwell also failed to establish a constitution of any lasting value.

Cromwell and Liberty: An Assessment

Cromwell's courage and sincerity cannot be denied. His military leadership can only be described as extraordinary and his determination to fight against the Stuart tyranny should I think be applauded.

The fact that he championed the idea of 'liberty of conscience' the contemporary expression for religious freedom, reinforces the view that he was to some extent freedom's friend. Winston Churchill gives him due credit for this: "Liberty of conscience as conceived by Cromwell did not extend to the public profession of Roman Catholicism, Prelacy or Quakerism. He banned open celebration of the Mass and threw hundreds of Quakers into prison. But such limitations to freedom of worship were caused less by religious prejudice than by fear of civil disturbance. Religious toleration challenged all the beliefs of Cromwell's day and found its best friend in the Lord Protector himself. Believing the Jews to be a useful element in the civil community, he opened again to them the gates of England, which Edward 1 had closed nearly four hundred years before. There was in practice comparatively little persecution on purely religious grounds, and even Roman Catholics were not seriously molested. Cromwell's dramatic intervention on behalf of a blaspheming Quaker and Unitarian whom Parliament would have put to death as well as tortured proves that he was himself the source of many mitigations. A man who in that bitter age could write, "we look for no compulsion but that of light and reason", and who could dream of a union and a right understand-

ing embracing Jews and Gentiles, cannot be wholly barred from his place in the forward march of liberal ideas.”¹⁰

Cromwell’s harsh treatment of the Levellers must be seen as a setback for the advancement of the democratic process and freedom in general. For this, he has to be judged as freedom’s foe.

To give an overall assessment of Cromwell, I refer to the words of Lord Acton, who believed that “Liberty is not a means to a higher political end. It is itself the highest political end.”¹¹ “Those to whom the great Nonconformist is an object of admiration, have certain conspicuous flaws to contemplate. Cromwell, by his approval of Pride’s Purge, was an accomplice after the fact. Colonel Pride expelled the majority, in order that the minority might be able to take the life of the king. It was an act of illegality and violence, a flagrant breach of the law, committed with homicidal intent. In ordinary circumstances such a thing would bear a very ugly name. Nor was it an act of far-sighted policy, for the outraged Presbyterians restored Charles II without making terms. Then, the Protector professed to see the hand of God, a special intervention, when he succeeded, and things went well. It was not the arm of the flesh that had done these things. They were remarkable Providences, and the like. There is not a more perilous or immoral habit of mind than the sanctifying of success. Thirdly, he was the constant enemy of free institutions. Scarcely any Englishman has so bad a record in modern history. Having allowed all this, we cannot easily say too much of his capacity in all things where practical success is concerned, and not foresight or institutions. In that respect, and within those limits, he was never surpassed by any man of our race, here or in America.”¹²

I concur with this because I believe Acton has correctly identified Cromwell’s key faults without denying his practical success.

On balance I think Cromwell did more to damage the liberty of the people of England than he did to restore it. The outcome of the Civil War was that one tyrannical regime was replaced by another, which was even more oppressive than the first.

Religion was used as a justification for both tyrannies. Charles I believed he had a Divine Right to rule and thus raise taxes without Parliament’s consent. He believed he was right to persecute Puritans, who did not follow the true faith of the Church of England, of which he was head by Divine Right. His support for the resented imposition of Laudianism was also due to his religious viewpoint. Cromwell’s oppressive regime, particularly under the major-generals, was fuelled by religious fervour and a desire to impose Cromwell’s interpretation of Biblical values upon the people, in order to build a Godly Commonwealth.

Cromwell challenged, fought against and destroyed an established monarchical tyranny, in defence of Parliament but failed to build a sustainable new constitution. The best that can be said of Cromwell’s legacy is that he paved the way for others to follow in this task, which they certainly did, culminating in the Glorious Revolution of 1688/89 and the creation of that ingenious English invention, the constitutional monarchy.

Notes

1. Lord Macaulay, *Literary and Historical Essays*, Oxford University Press, Humphrey Milford, London, 1934, Part II, p 110.
2. Ibid, Part II, pp.115-116.
3. J.C.Davis, *Oliver Cromwell*, Arnold, London, 2001, p.88.
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5. David Hoile, *The Levellers: Libertarian Radicalism and the English Civil War*, Libertarian Heritage No.5, Libertarian Alliance, London, 1992.
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