



**David Farr.** *Henry Ireton and the English Revolution.* Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2006. ix + 277 pp. \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84383-235-5.



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## The Brains behind the English Revolution

Henry Ireton was the brain trust, the “alpha and omega” of the New Model Army, as John Lilburne labeled him. He was also the engine driving forward the revolutionary events in England between 1647 and 1649. Even before marrying Oliver Cromwell’s daughter Bridget in 1646 he had become Cromwell’s closest friend and confidant. Given his central role in the English Revolution, surprisingly little has been written about him. R. W. Ramsey’s 1949 biography is unsatisfactory, while the chapter in Maurice Ashley’s *Cromwell’s Generals* (1954) is not much better. J. L. Dean’s useful Cambridge M. Litt. of 1990 remains unpublished. Now, thanks to David Farr, we have a clear, scholarly account of this most important godly puritan.

From the beginning Farr makes it clear that religion was “the driving force behind [Ireton’s] allegiance in 1642 and at the heart of his revolutionary actions after 1647” (p. 16). His upbringing and education were godly, both his parents having run-ins with the established church over the standard issues of the time—the sign of the cross in baptism, keeping one’s hat on during divine worship, the churching of women, kneeling for

communion, and breaking stained-glass windows. Despite his status as the first-born son of a gentleman who attended Oxford and the Inns of Court, Ireton was a man of humble means. In Nottinghamshire under the custom of “Borough English” it was the last-born son who inherited his father’s estate. All the more remarkable therefore, that when most other revolutionaries were gobbling up the confiscated lands of church and crown, Ireton declined the offer of property worth £2000 a year, on the grounds that the state had better use for the money.

Farr concentrates heavily on Ireton’s religion and politics. We learn little about his military career in the first years of the civil war, and Farr passes lightly over his role at Naseby, where he was wounded in the face and thigh before being captured. Nevertheless, Farr asserts that “Ireton was a valued officer in the New Model Army” (p. 50). Marchamont Nedham, always an acute observer of political affairs, called Ireton “the penman general of the army,” and there is no reason to doubt this characterization. Every major document issued by the army between 1647 and 1649, including the *Solemn Engagement* (June 5, 1647), *The Heads of the Proposals* (July 17, 1647),

and the *Remonstrance of the Army* (November 20, 1648)—which was instrumental in bringing Charles I to trial and condemnation—were authored by Ireton. The best chapter of the book is perhaps the one on Putney where Farr makes expert use of recent work by John Morrill, Phil Baker, Michael Mendle, Rachel Foxley, M. A. Norris, and others to elucidate the clash between Ireton, the defender of a property-based franchise, and the Levellers, who promoted the rights of—in Colonel Thomas Rainborowe’s words—“the poorest hee that is in England.”[1] In explaining how Ireton and Oliver Cromwell succeeded in weaning the soldiers and junior officers from their affection for Leveller principles, Farr rightly emphasizes the authority they enjoyed as a consequence of their “genuine popularity among their men” (p. 116).

As Farr indicates, Charles’s flight from Hampton Court in November 1647 radicalized Ireton’s thinking, and helped convert him to the view that the king was a “man of blood.” When the time came, he was not, like Cromwell, “a reluctant regicide.” Indeed, “Cromwell’s eventual decision to embrace regicide had much to do with the prompting he received from his more strident and politically radical son-in-law” (p. 119). Farr thus rejects the argument of Sean Kelsey and others that Ireton, like most of the other army grandees, only decided at the last minute that Charles should die.[2] Those who continue to think this should attend to Farr’s close analysis of the army’s *Remonstrance* of November 20, 1648. Repeatedly, as Farr demonstrates, the officers indicted the king of “the highest Treason” and called for “capittall punishment upon [him]” (pp. 146, 148). In all his political thinking Ireton was chiefly influenced by the Bible; he was no classical republican, rather, as Farr justly observes, he was a “Bible republican” (p. 154).

Ireland was Ireton’s great blind spot, as it was for many other educated Englishmen of the time. The Irish, because of their insurrection of 1641, and their obstinate adherence to the popish religion, were a people “mark’d out to destruction (by the Lord)” (p. 240). That is why, between his appointment in 1650 and his death in November 1651, he actively promoted the policy of Cromwell

and the Rump parliament of expelling the native Irish from their land and replacing them with “godly” English colonists, preferably soldiers. This policy of plantation, which had been commenced under the Tudors and zealously advanced by James I, would store up much trouble in later centuries. Ireton is thus, as Farr convincingly shows, very much a man of his time. Deeply religious—he began and ended all meetings and conferences with prayer, and fasted often—and an honorable soldier who strictly observed the rules of war, he was as much responsible as anyone for bringing Charles I to the scaffold and pressing forward with England’s disastrous policy of “planting” Ireland.

There are only a few flaws in this fine book, and they are minor. The writing is sometimes less than felicitous. William Hunt’s memorable phrase, “A Puritan who minds his own business is a contradiction in terms,” is misquoted (p. 40). A word is dropped from Ireton’s military motto (p. 180). While Farr furnishes a detailed, workmanlike account of Ireton’s military campaigns in Ireland there are no maps to assist the reader in visualizing what happened at Athlone, Kilkenny, and Limerick. These cavils apart, Farr has supplied us with a sound account of the New Model Army’s “alpha and omega” that will stand us in good stead for a long time to come.

#### Notes

[1]. Michael Mendle, ed., *The Putney Debates of 1647: The Army, the Levellers and the English State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Rachel Foxley, “John Lilburne and the Citizenship of ‘Free-born Englishmen,’” *Historical Journal*, 47 (2004): 849-874; M. A. Norris, “Edward Sexby, John Reynolds, and Edmund Hillenden: Agitators, ‘Sectarian Grandees’ and the Relations of the New Model Army with London in the Spring of 1647,” *Historical Research*, 76 (2003): 30-53; and John Morrill and Phil Baker, “Oliver Cromwell and the Sons of Zeruiah,” in *The Regicide and the Execution of Charles I*, ed. Jason Peacey (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001).

[2]. Sean Kelsey, “The Trial of Charles I,” *English Historical Review*, 118 (2003): 583-616.

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