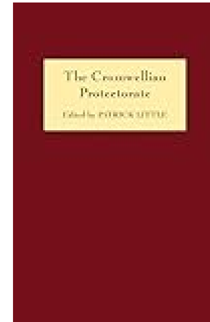

Patrick Little. *The Cromwellian Protectorate.* Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2007. 218 pp. $85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84383-282-9.

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Critiquing Cromwell

Readers interested in the perennial enigma of Oliver Cromwell or the British experiences of the 1650s will find much to appreciate in this book. Unlike Barry Coward's recent work of the same title (2002), this is not a comprehensive survey of the Cromwellian Protectorate, but a selection of papers presented at a symposium commemorating the 450th anniversary of its inauguration. As Coward observes in the introduction to this collection, these papers reflect the recent "resurgence of interest" in the "complexities and diversities" of the 1650s, and cast new light on the protectors, their government, and its impact (p. 2). That light is frequently unflattering. Coward further notes the shift "towards a more critical appraisal of Protector Oliver"; disparagement of the godly supporters of his government also surfaces in some essays (p. 6). A more apt title for the collection might be "Cromwellian Problems," since each chapter concentrates on particular domestic difficulties.

The first six papers focus on problems at the center of government. David Smith re-examines Cromwell's relations with his parliaments, showing how the optimism with which the protector greeted each new assembly eventually yielded to disillusionment, premature dissolution, and ongoing political instability. Though he embodied deeper dilemmas of the revolution, Cromwell was "himself the biggest single reason" for this discord, due to his "refusal to acknowledge the essential incompatibility" between the "interests of the nation" represented in Parliament and "those of a godly minority who embraced a radical religious agenda" (pp. 31, 14). To achieve the latter, the protector sought an elusive "parliament *on God's terms*" (p. 17). Convinced that "a mild tyranny was preferable to anarchy," Cromwell intervened to restrict or abrogate the freedoms of actual parliaments whose conduct mirrored the "wider lack of enthusiasm" for "godly reforms" (pp. 30, 28). Although Smith's argument invokes recent scholarship on godly failure as well as Cromwell's speeches, it suffers from some oversimplification of complex political and religious realities. First, the godly, in or out of Parliament, were not united in support of a common agenda promoting moral reformation

and wide liberty of conscience. Presbyterians and conservative Independents, for example, supported the former yet opposed the latter, while radical tolerationists denied the government authority in religious matters. Rather than identify with any faction, Cromwell endeavored "to walk with an even foot between the several interests of the people of God for healing ... their differences," but such attempts at impartial arbitration earned him "reproaches and anger from some of all sorts."[1]

A second flaw in Smith's case for irreconcilable national and godly interests is underestimation of the seriousness, and partial success, of the protector's efforts to reconcile the political nation represented in Parliament to his regime. Smith contends that Cromwell was mistaken in affirming the consistency of the "interest of Christians and the interest of the nation" because the Prayer Book was still used in some parishes (p. 25). Yet, Cromwell was not irrevocably opposed to the Prayer Book itself, as distinct from intolerant Anglican royalism: he, for example, allowed it to be used in private for his daughters' wedding ceremonies. His praise for the religious clauses of the Humble Petition and Advice, which actually restricted liberty of conscience more than the Instrument of Government, reveals a genuine willingness to compromise with Parliament in the interests of securing a settlement. Following the abandonment of the major-generals and the adoption of the new constitution, there is evidence that the protectorate found increasing acceptance even from some former opponents, especially the Presbyterians, such that some critics in its first Parliament would support Richard Cromwell in 1659. Finally, Smith does insufficient justice to the importance of constitutional issues. Even without Oliver's rhetoric of godly unity in search of national redemption, the protectorate's less than legitimate status, as a regime established by the army, would hardly have endeared it to any Parliament. Concerns about arbitrary methods and excess executive power were widespread, shared even by some supporters of a wide religious liberty, including Henry Vane.

Constitutional problems are addressed by Jason Peacey, the only contributor to focus on Richard Cromwell's protectorate. His paper explores the deficiencies of the Humble Petition and their impact on Oliver's successor. Imperfectly revised following the rejection of kingship, the petition not only placed "important limits" on the new protector's power over such crucial components of government as the council, the military, and parliament, but it also left "important areas of constitutional uncertainty," which support Peacey's judgment that it was "too vague to be a serious written constitution" (p. 35). Particularly damaging to Richard was the loss of constitutional authority to purge "vociferous opponents" elected to the new Parliament, whose debates contain abundant evidence for "constitutional confusion," raising serious questions regarding the legal basis of the government itself (p. 39). Peacey contends that critics were "less concerned with undermining the protectorate than with exposing the weakness of the constitution and its dictatorial implications, in order to place the protectorate on a more secure footing" (p. 40). However sincere their concerns about protectoral tyranny, such a motive seems implausible in the case of committed republicans and royalists, whose speeches rarely advertised their ultimate ambition to remove Richard. Peacey is on stronger ground in showing the regime's unconvincing response to exposure of the petition's inconsistencies: conscious of weakness, government speakers tended to "fall back upon the risks associated with questioning the settlement" (p. 45). While the constitution he had the "misfortune" to inherit "did not make inevitable Richard's fall," it certainly made increased "political tension" after Parliament met more probable, with himself "the most likely victim" (pp. 33, 52).

A more concrete protectoral inheritance is the subject of Paul Hunneyball's paper on "Cromwellian Style." This survey of expenditure on official residences and their furnishings contends that Oliver "relished" and "actively sought to enhance" his "new environment" (p. 53). Despite the "massive gaps" in the evidence, surviving accounts for buildings qualify Roy Sherwood's case for the relative modesty of the court, and indicate that "comparative extravagance was the order of the day," with the protector overriding council recommendations to economize until 1657-58, when "the surveyor-general's budget was finally curtailed" (pp. 71, 74, 75). Yet how extravagant was Cromwell? Claims that the outlay from 1654-56 equaled all the most expensive early Stuart building projects combined are weakened by the admission, in a footnote, that figures have not been "adjusted to take account of inflation" rising rapidly till 1650 (p. 55). Unlike his royal predecessors, Cromwell commissioned no new structures and few

furnishings or pictures; instead, he redeployed the reserved goods he inherited. The initial expenditure reflected the urgency of restoring palaces neglected for over one decade to suitably imposing surroundings for the new head of state. Thus, Whitehall regained "something approaching its former splendour" (p. 71). Hampton Court, denuded of many paintings, nevertheless, be-

came a "more than comfortable country retreat" (p. 71).

Against Laura Lunger Knoppers, Hunneyball argues that the protector "actively and literally sought to construct an image for himself" through material surroundings that made visible his authority (p. 74). No puritan iconoclast, Cromwell shared "many of the cultural preferences of the gentry class," appreciating classical, biblical, and even some Roman Catholic art (p. 71). A distinctive Cromwellian style remains elusive, however. Exhaustive search and speculation yield little more than the protector's "preference for designers with a clear commitment to the parliamentarian cause" (p. 80). From horticulture to interior decor, Caroline models reappear, sustaining suspicions of "monarchical ambitions"; in the visual realm, the "dividing line between the second protectorate and full blown monarchy was comparatively narrow" (p. 76).

At the core of both royal and protectoral administration was the council, the focus of the next three essays. Blair Worden investigates the reality behind the "principle of conciliar government" affirmed in both written constitutions (p. 83). Cromwell publicly acknowledged the council's authority and used it to deflect criticisms of his power and unpopular decisions; in private, he retained substantive control of its proceedings, and was recognized as the real "initiator and arbiter of policy" (p. 96). So dependent was the council on Cromwell's "animating force" that his decline in 1657-58 produced "areas in which the government virtually ground to a halt" (p. 96). Except Ashley Cooper and John Lambert, who eventually broke with Cromwell, most councilors lacked "obvious political stature" (p. 87). Unlike former royal advisers, they attracted allegations of "impotence," rather than "excessive influence," though this contrast may also point toward the protectors' greater vulnerability to direct criticism (p. 89). While Cromwell encouraged open debate and tolerated some individual dissent, the council offered "no collective advice that contradicted his known wishes" (p. 98). Worden concludes that the "forms of conciliar restraint were more impressive than the substance": the real center of power lay elsewhere, in the informal connections between senior officers and civilians (p. 100).

A somewhat different picture of power sharing within the central government appears in Peter Gaunt's reconsideration of the protectoral ordinances issued between December 1653 and September 1654. Working faster than most parliaments, protector and councilors showed "energy, application and self-confidence" as they enacted a "broad and quite impressive legislative programme" that addressed not only affairs of state but also individual and local concerns (p. 126). Some ordinances drew on parliamentary reports and bills; others were truly innovatory, "tackling new issues" and solving "thorny problems" that had baffled previous regimes (p. 126). The council played the more prominent part in the legislative process: official records suggest that Cromwell was "often slightly detached," attending only one-third of the meetings, allowing councilors to work "without persistent interference or direction," and approving most ordinances "without alteration or further reference" (pp. 114, 115). While these actions may reveal Cromwell's resolve to step back and grant the council "a substantial role" during these months of "enhanced executive power," Gaunt concedes that he may have been "more closely involved" than the "rather sparse ... official records indicate" (pp. 114-115). Case studies of two ordinances, which aroused Oliver's misgivings and, unusually, received legal review, support this possibility and exemplify the cooperation between the protector and council. These authorities deserve credit for legislation that did much "towards bringing form out of confusion" and fulfilling its mission to "promote 'the peace and welfare of these nations' " (p. 126).

Opposing this positive assessment is Patrick Little's critique of the "dislocation of conciliar government" across the protectoral union (p. 142). The peripheral councils suffered from dependence: the council at Whitehall was slow to establish them or appoint new councilors, and it retained considerable power for its Irish and Scottish subcommittees. Both councils experienced delays in reaccreditation in 1657 and growing internal divisions in 1655-56, as Lord Broghill and Henry Cromwell developed a "united front" working for reforms locally and at Westminster (p. 140). The local effects of "periodic dislocation" differed. Scotland saw "efficient–even vigorous" conciliar rule alternating with times of "total collapse," such as the mass exodus of councilor-MPs in 1656. The Irish council met more regularly, but "its workings gradually silted up" due to "political splits" (p. 141). Chaos was averted in each case by the military commanders' readiness to assume "personal control" (p. 141).

Little concludes that the "elaborate government hierarchy [was] unworkable" (p. 142). Beneath the habitual "inefficiency and incompetence" of early modern regimes lay political "failures at the very top" (pp. 141, 142). The English council suffered from "short-sighted factionalism," with some members holding "deep, ideological op-

position" to reforms (pp. 142, 141). Oliver "encouraged" these "damaging divisions," resisted greater delegation to local authorities, and insisted that competing interests were reconcilable (pp. 142-143). Such criticisms echo the frustrations of ambitious reformers in Edinburgh and Dublin, especially Henry Cromwell, who resented his restricted freedom of action and the ongoing influence in Irish affairs of ex-Lord Deputy Charles Fleetwood. Yet, there was no single self-evident solution to the massive problems of incorporating Scotland and Ireland into one commonwealth with England. Oliver's openness to differing views, his attempts to achieve balance rather than privilege any particular interest, and even his preference to delay rather than make precipitate decisions are all defensible. The greater dangers associated with giving exclusive backing to one faction pursuing controversial innovations had been spectacularly demonstrated by the collapse of royal government across three kingdoms in 1637-41. The protectorate, for all its imperfections, at least avoided serious trouble from the periphery.

The remaining essays represent a variety of local approaches. Most innovative is Stephen Roberts's survey of seventeen towns in the "cultural province" drained by the Severn River and its tributaries (p. 168). This "contribution to Cis-Atlantic history" challenges narratives emphasizing discontinuity, instability, and decay. Overall "urban conditions during the protectorate were more suggestive of plenty, of opportunities and of economic activity than ... at any time since 1640" (p. 172). The resurgent economy centered on Bristol, whose Atlantic trade was growing fast, encouraged by rising demand for imported tobacco and sugar, and producing stimulated social mobility throughout the region. In the departure of "poorer groups of the labouring workforce" to a "grim and uncertain future" as indentured servants in the West Indies, Roberts sees an "obvious local manifestation of the Cromwellian imperial vision," though central involvement is evidenced only by the increasing use of transportation as punishment (p. 177). More crucial was the agency of the corporations themselves. From Gloucester's development of a public library to the Bristol city fathers' deliberate decision to refer Naylor's case to Parliament, towns pursued political agendas in London with "more confidence than was visible in earlier decades" (p. 179). Religious pluralism could "bring conflict and distress" to communities that lacked the "civic unity" of "godly orthodox towns" (p. 183). Yet, the general trend, except under the major-generals, was toward greater stability and "more settled government" (p. 186). The growth of civic pride and corporate self-regulation united the propertied and constituted enduring "gains" that paid dividends under the later Stuarts (p. 187). Roberts concludes that the "protectorate offered towns–perhaps unwittingly–a breathing space between the political upheavals of commonwealth and Restoration" (p. 187). Cromwell's regime thus features as, at best, an inadvertent facilitator of urban prosperity.

A less favorable view of the protectorate appears in Lloyd Bowen's argument that "significant sections of the Welsh population," not just the Fifth Monarchist minority, remained unreconciled (p. 145). Welsh alienation owed much to the controversial commission for propagating the gospel of 1650-53. Despite its lapse, "powerful continuities" of both personnel and policy at the grassroots level not only obscured the distinction between the new regime and its predecessor, but also perpetuated damaging allegations of social obscurity, "religious radicalism and financial impropriety" against officials and clergy (pp. 150, 159). Cromwell's public sympathy for propagation offended moderates but failed to fill the many vacant pulpits. Administrators on the spot deplored the "inadequate spiritual provision" and the "absence of any effective remedial initiatives" from the top (p. 154).

Such neglect, however genuine, is not an adequate explanation for the protectorate's alleged unpopularity. The atmosphere of simmering "resentment and hostility" that Bowen describes reflects the snobbery and sour grapes of his main sources: ejected clergy denied reinstatement, royalist poets, and Welsh bards who mourned the "loss of familiar rhythms of the Anglican services" (pp. 163, 162). These individuals, who regarded all non-Stuart regimes as illegitimate, would hardly have been won over by the replacement of itinerants with learned puritan preachers, had such been available. Yet, Bowen blames protectoral "inability ... adequately to mollify the acrimony and resentment" left by propagation (p. 164). Concentration on irreconcilables produces an unbalanced portrait of Cromwellian Wales. The conclusion refers in passing to the "multitude of local accommodations and reconciliations," the continuity enjoyed in some parishes, the optimism of some supporters, and the enduring "cells of puritan piety," but does not integrate these more promising signs with the overall argument (p. 163). Further investigation is needed. Comparing Wales, for example, with other strongly royalist areas might reveal the relative importance of the propagation commission in generating antipathy.

Effective propagation of godly reform in England as well as Wales required the ejection of immoral, incapable, or ideologically unreliable ministers. The county committees assigned this task by ordinance in 1654 are appraised in Christopher Durston's contribution. Against David Underdown's affirmation of the high status of those nominated, Durston contends that most active commissioners came from the minor gentry or below, and were recommended by local puritan cliques for their "conspicuously godly outlook" (p. 191). Despite these credentials, their achievement was "severely limited": only two or three percent of the clergy were dismissed, while over half the English counties lost less than five incumbents (pp. 194-195). For ministers, like corporations, the protectorate evidently represented an interlude of comparative calm between the great purges of the Long Parliament and the Restoration. Although most survivors conformed outwardly, the ejectors' record was a "serious disappointment" to the godly and the government (p. 199). Explanations for their apparent failure range from procedural complexity to successful appeals to insufficient activists–unspecified but "significant numbers" of nominees failed to appear (p. 203). Like Bowen in Wales, Durston finds "widespread distaste" for ejection among "large numbers of English men and women," and cites a few examples of "considerable sympathy" for ex-ministers among former parishioners (pp. 201-202). Doubts were voiced by such Cromwellian clergymen as John Owen and Ralph Josselin, whose godliness was irrefutable–indicating, again, the unwisdom of depicting the godly as a monolithic interest. Josselin's unease at ministerial subjugation to the "lay power" undermines an attempt to refute Jeffrey Collins's claim that the system represented a "triumph for Erastianism": clerical assistants, however enthusiastic, were always outnumbered by the lay ejectors (pp. 203, 205, 190). Ejection also foundered on the central government's "failure to provide sufficient resources and backing": the response to the major-generals' appeal to appoint new commissioners was "belated and half-hearted" (pp. 201, 204). The comparative inaction of so many committees casts doubt on Durston's conclusion that their conduct "increased the odium with which Cromwell's regime and the unrepresentative godly minorities that sustained it ... were regarded." Still less substantiated is the assertion that ejection "fuelled the desire for a return to the more comprehensive traditions and spirituality" of an Elizabethan church that few could remember by the 1650s: the triumph of vindictive Anglicanism after 1660 would produce a much narrower church (p. 205).

Despite their different approaches, most authors concur in rejecting revisionist (and, indeed, contemporary republican) views of the protectorate as a "conservative, reactionary regime" (p. 2). Valuable though this corrective perspective is–the Restoration of 1660 was far from inevitable, as I have argued at length elsewhere (*1659: The Crisis of the Commonwealth* [2004])–the result is sometimes a tendency to overstate protectoral radicalism. If, as Coward asserts, "most of those who governed" aimed primarily at "radical changes" rather than restoring "monarchical government or something very much like it," then how are we to explain not just Cromwell's increasing acceptance of the "conventional outward trappings of power and authority," but also the offer of the crown in 1657 by leading supporters including some ex-royalists (p. 3)? Did the damaging allegations that the protectorate had betrayed the Good Old Cause have no basis beyond the republicans' imagination? That Cromwellian and Stuart goals differed in significant respects is indisputable, but does not, in itself, disprove the quasi-monarchical nature of the regime; some Tudor goals were also different from the Stuarts', but this did not make their regime less monarchical! It is arguable that Cromwell, in some areas, such as foreign policy, saw his government as reviving rather than radically revising Elizabethan goals. The extent of protectoral conservatism is one of many issues raised here that invite further inquiry. Such questions, to which the Cromwellian Protectorate affords considerable scope for research, are among this collection's most interesting features.

Note

[1]. Oliver Cromwell to Timothy Wilkes, January 1655, in *The Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, ed. W. C. Abbott (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1937-1947), 3:572.

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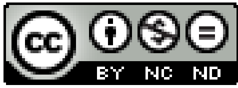

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