**A new biography of Cromwell: a matter of character?**

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***The Making of Oliver Cromwell*,** by Ronald Hutton, New Haven & London, Yale University Press, 2021, xxi + 400 pp., £25 (hardback), ISBN 9780300257458

Coming in the wake of five-book length studies of Oliver Cromwell in the past thirty years, plus numerous collections of essays and articles on the man and his times, the publication of Ronald Hutton’s new biography might suggest that Cromwellian studies are in rude health. In reality, this volume is borne out of the author’s sense that scholarly endeavours have ossified: all recent biographies have given ‘essentially the same man’ – a man ‘intensely courageous, devout and high-principled... whose most important relationship was with his God’ (pp. 1-2). Yet, there remains an ‘uneasy feeling among experts’ that ‘Cromwell is still somehow eluding them, and that nobody has as yet quite managed to get to grips with him’ (p. 3). Hutton’s solution is to shun the approach of previous biographers who, seduced by the abundance of letters and speeches left by their subject, tend to take Cromwell ‘literally, at his own word’ (p. 4). Instead, Hutton probes the ‘chasm’ between Cromwell’s ‘own representations of himself’ and that of the ‘majority of his contemporaries’ who ‘found him to be ruthless, devious and self-promoting’ (p. 3). This is achieved by focusing on Oliver’s first forty-seven years, with particular attention on the six-year period from the opening of the Long Parliament through to the end of the first Civil War. While this tight chronological span inevitably, and in some respects regrettably, fails to take a broader view on Cromwell’s actions across his lifetime, it allows Hutton to probe the evidence in considerable detail. The process ‘reveals a man who was more pragmatic and more devious than the one represented by his own speeches and writings’ (pp. 4-5).

Hutton’s conclusion is hardly news to Cromwell scholars, however. The flexible nature of Oliver’s political outlook, epitomized in his avowal not to be ‘wedded or glued’ to constitutional forms during the Putney debates, is acknowledged by most recent biographers. Cromwell’s devious side has also been noted, even by those chided for allegedly hanging on his words. Blair Worden, whose focus has admittedly largely been on the 1650s rather than Cromwell’s earlier career, acknowledges that Oliver was a man whose actions did not always match his words, who was ‘practised at not knowing’ about events and matters to which he was clearly cognisant.[[1]](#footnote-1) More recently, this reviewer has commented on how it was ‘not unknown for Cromwell to say one thing and mean another’.[[2]](#footnote-2) The treacherous nature of Cromwell’s utterances therefore comes as no revelation, particularly for those familiar with the politics of the Protectorate era. Consequently, Hutton’s Cromwell is less the ‘pioneering’ account it purports to be (flyleaf), with its distinction essentially one of emphasis rather than evidence. Where an earlier biographer sees in Cromwell an ‘adept master of the art of politics’, Hutton finds a man dabbling in the dark arts of self-promotion and dishonesty.[[3]](#footnote-3) One historian’s practiced politician becomes another historian’s cunning Machiavellian. Given that so much hangs on the author’s interpretation it is regrettable that they chose not to flag disagreements with other scholars, on the grounds that general readers are ‘unlikely to be interested’ in such matters (p. x). As lyrical and eloquent as the frequent descriptions of the flora, fauna and vistas that Cromwell possibly encountered on his travels are, students and scholars will likely feel the space would have been more profitably utilised in explaining the author’s reading of the evidence.

Of course, this book is written for a range of audiences, not just students and academics, and it largely succeeds as a very readable and accessible account for the general reader seeking to learn more about Cromwell’s military career and the key campaigns of the first civil war. Hutton is in his element when it comes to his vivid and detailed descriptions of engagements in the war, drawing on personal experience of battlefield re-enactment to provide memorable passages on the noisome smell of massed soldiers drawn up before battle and the unfortunate laxative quality of gunpowder smoke. Large portions of this biography, particularly those detailing the events of Cromwell’s various campaigns, will prove relatively uncontentious, building upon the existing scholarship while often surpassing it in its detailed coverage of the surviving source material. Where this biography provides a more profound challenge for scholars, however, is in its treatment of its subject’s character.

As Hutton notes, all recent writers have made ‘Cromwell’s own mighty, complex and conflicted personality the driving motor of events’ (p. 2). Hutton’s work follows a similar trajectory but offers a fundamentally different reading of Cromwell’s personality. Rather than simply detecting in Cromwell flashes of ruthlessness, deceit or self-promotion, Hutton claims these were enduring character traits integral to Cromwell’s rise to power. The way Hutton seeks to establish these habits are not altogether convincing, however. A case in point is the book’s opening chapter, covering Cromwell’s first forty years, which confronts that same paucity of evidence that has confounded all previous biographers of the ‘prehistoric’ Cromwell. Just as Hutton suggests earlier biographers have read the evidential scraps according to ‘their own tastes’ (p. 8), he appears to give credence to elements that fit his reading of Oliver’s temperament in later years: Cromwell as a youth ‘would have been impulsive, and given to fits of savage temper... because that is what he was like all his life’ (p. 20). The circularity of the argument is apparent in Hutton’s handling of Cromwell’s alleged role in an attempt to have his maternal uncle declared insane to access his inheritance. This, we are told, is in keeping with Cromwell’s ‘impulsive and precipitate’ character. Yet the evidence is largely hostile, leading Hutton to admit that while it ‘points very strongly’ to Cromwell being involved, and possibly even the ‘driving force’, ‘neither suspicion can quite be proved’ (p. 28). Nevertheless, by the book’s conclusion circumspection is abandoned for an unequivocal statement that Cromwell’s ‘botched attempt’ to get his uncle declared a lunatic was a ‘dramatic illustration’ of the ruthless ‘trait in his nature’ that then continued into later life. (p. 334). Essentially, the story is given credence because it matches, or rather substantiates, Hutton’s reading of Cromwell’s nature in the 1640s.

The same pattern is apparent in perhaps the biography’s most explosive claim: that Cromwell was ‘deliberate in his dishonesty’ (flyleaf and p. 338), a trait that ended the military careers of many of his superiors. An early example was Cromwell’s ‘bitter attack’ in the Commons in early 1644 on the competence of the lacklustre Lincolnshire commander Lord Willoughby of Parham. His tirade apparently included a claim about Willoughby surrendering Gainsborough in the previous summer despite Oliver being nearby with a relief force. According to Hutton, this was ‘an outright lie’ (pp. 154-55). Yet, it was also just one of several claims Cromwell levelled against Willoughby’s hapless leadership, the rest of which are not particularized or tested for their veracity. Rather, the fact that Oliver embellished one line of his attack is enough to establish his trait of lying. When the Willoughby incident is recalled later in the book as context for Cromwell’s leading role in the attack on the earl of Manchester, the scale of his mendacity is amplified: he was the perfect man to bring down Manchester because he had already delivered ‘a set of falsehoods’ against Willoughby (p. 221); he had led a ‘campaign of defamation’ in which he told ‘blatant untruths’ (p. 335). One apparent lie by Cromwell becomes a deliberate pack of them. Perhaps a man capable of telling one lie would have no trouble telling many more, but the evidence must rest on firmer ground than character alone.

Similarly, Hutton’s claim that Cromwell, in his attack on the earl of Manchester, told ‘a string of lies and distorted truths’ (p. 222), begs the question of how the latter might be distinguished from the former. While a lie implies explicit duplicity, a distorted truth, which suggests at least some degree of veracity, need not mean conscious manipulation of the facts. Undoubtedly, in his quarrel with Manchester, Cromwell put emphasis on those decisions and (in)actions that chimed with his overall claim of his commanding officer’s torpidity while underplaying or omitting others, but this could be read as a matter of partiality rather than downright dishonesty. Certainly, the evidence that Cromwell told deliberate lies seems less clear cut than Hutton claims. For instance, several of Cromwell’s charges against Manchester’s leadership are deemed untrue because they are not born out by papers received during the events in question by the Committee of Both Kingdoms (p. 222). Yet, this correspondence – much of it written by Manchester himself – is hardly unimpeachable or impartial evidence of decisions or actions taken at the time. A cautionary tale is the notorious episode over John Lilburne’s acceptance of the surrender of the Royalist garrison at Tickhill Castle near Doncaster in late July 1644, which as Hutton notes produced an ‘explosive’ reaction from Manchester because he had ordered Lilburne explicitly not to summon the garrison (p. 195). The fact that Manchester was ‘very unwilling to the summoning of Tickhill Castle’ subsequently formed one of the charges made by Cromwell against Manchester in the Commons.[[4]](#footnote-4) Manchester’s correspondence to the Committee of Both Kingdoms at the time, however, reveals no hint of this disagreement, with the earl taking personal credit for the castle’s summons and surrender.[[5]](#footnote-5) It is only thanks to the detailed, if not wholly impartial, testimony of Lilburne that we have evidence that Manchester was apparently concealing (or distorting) the truth. While Hutton does not mention Cromwell’s charge about Tickhill, and therefore presumably does not see it as part of his barrage of untruths, it was integral to the broader charge, which Hutton suggests was an outright lie, that Manchester was reluctant to march against Royalist Newark. Yet, Cromwell’s point here was not simply that Manchester refused point blank to go to Newark, but that he had put obstacles in the way, such as stalling for time when taking garrisons like Tickhill.[[6]](#footnote-6) Even if Manchester did express to the Committee of Both Kingdoms a desire to go to Newark, the Tickhill debacle demonstrates that his words did not always match his actions or intentions. If, as Hutton suggests, we must not take Cromwell at his own word, we should be wary of taking Manchester at his as well.

Leaving aside these evidential points, however, Hutton’s basic conclusion that Manchester was ‘largely in the right in objective terms’ (p. 225) when defending his military record against Cromwell smacks of a revisionist approach that prioritises reality over perception. Yet, as much post-revisionist scholarship reminds us, this was a war driven by perceptions and misrepresentations, not all of which were conscious or manipulated. That Cromwell and Manchester held opposing views of one another’s conduct need not mean one was objectively true while the other was lying. The force of Cromwell’s case against Manchester, like Hutton’s reading of Cromwell, was that it underscored character traits that the earl was already widely perceived to have, particularly his timidity to pursue the war effort to a decisive conclusion. As Hutton notes in the conclusion, Oliver’s ‘catalogue of lies and misrepresentations’ against his commander, now described curiously as ‘supporting his charges’ rather than being integral to them, ‘overlaid the basic truth that Manchester was a slow and cautious general’ (p. 335). For his part, Manchester’s counterclaims against Cromwell were galvanised by a character assassination that stressed his opponent’s wish for religious subversion and social inversion. In this respect both Cromwell and Manchester spoke the truth, to the extent that they said what they and their supporters believed was credible based on their own estimations of their opponent’s character.

Besides Cromwell’s ruthlessness and dishonesty, claims about his ‘relentless pursuit of self-promotion’ (p. 330) also feel overblown. As Hutton admits, it ‘seems impossible to tell whether he briefed’ authors himself, or ‘had a friend or follower who did the job for him’ (p. 330). Perhaps neither was true: as Hutton notes ‘no one particular paper or journalist, or set of them, consistently led the praise of Oliver’ (p. 125, fn 107). Rather, Cromwell’s proclivity for self-promotion gives order to otherwise disparate materials; materials that promoted Cromwell but were not necessarily promoted by Cromwell. Once again it boils down to habit and character. Because Cromwell was a self-publicist, he was likely behind those accounts eulogizing his efforts; because some accounts eulogized Cromwell’s efforts, he was a self-publicist. Cromwell even gained credit for actions he had no direct role in. The arrest of the royalist high sheriff of Hertfordshire in January 1643 by Cromwell’s troopers, when he was apparently not present, was ‘later taken as one of his accomplishments’ and became ‘part of his portfolio of successes’ (pp. 92-3, 330). Yet it is not explained when or by whom this later portfolio was compiled, or if Cromwell had any hand in it. Perhaps it was just another symptom of that problem familiar to all historians of newsprint in a war where the voracious appetite for information outstripped the capabilities of early modern communications. Not all misreports are evidence of propaganda or manipulation. There is certainly not enough proof here to suggest that Cromwell’s ‘considerable and consistent acclaim’ in the presses ‘bordered on the mendacious’ (p. 151) – much less that Cromwell was behind any apparent deceit.

For Hutton, Cromwell was ‘self-seeking, unscrupulous, manipulative, vindictive and bloodthirsty: definitely not somebody to be taken simply at his word’ (p. 338). Yet, if this string of supposedly habitual negative characteristics seems to stretch the evidence, it is also worth probing Hutton’s warning about the nature and utility of Cromwell’s words, an issue all the timelier given the imminent publication of a new edition of Cromwell’s letters and speeches by John Morrill. Of course, Hutton does not shun Cromwell’s words in this biography but cautions the reader to view them with care. Rather than bearing testimony to Oliver’s principles or sincerity, they are taken as further evidence of his ‘suppleness, and also his inherent deviousness’ (p. 338). Cromwell habitually misled when reporting on engagements, overestimating enemy numbers, downplaying the role of fellow commanders, and stressing God’s special blessings upon his party. Some of these characterisations seem to overlook context, however. Should it surprise us, for instance, that Cromwell’s earlier letters in the wars focus more on the exploits of him and the men under his immediate command, before higher command prompted him to adopt a more global view of the field of battle? More problematic is the fact that, as with other traits highlighted in this biography, those facets of Cromwell’s letter-writing are less consistent or unique than claimed. A key example is his letter to the Commons immediately after the Battle of Naseby which, despite making no reference to the relative size of the two sides, is said to give the ‘strong implication’ that the royalists outnumbered the New Model Army (p. 267). The letter is contrasted with Fairfax’s report of the same battle to show how there was ‘much less of God’ in the latter (pp. 267-8). Yet, the distinction is far from clear-cut: Fairfax repeatedly attributes the victory to the ‘abundant Goodness of God’, with Oliver commenting in his own letter how Fairfax ‘attributes all to God’. That Fairfax ‘devoted space’ to praising the actions of his officers is supposed to contrast with Cromwell, who habitually failed to name his fellow officers. Yet, the fact that Cromwell made room in his letter to give especial praise to Sir Thomas’s part in the victory is overlooked. By contrast, Fairfax, while singling out several officers, conspicuously failed to mention Cromwell’s part in the day’s action.[[7]](#footnote-7) Perhaps the fact that aspects of Cromwell’s reportage are much less distinctive than claimed explains an unfortunate slip which attributes a famous passage from Oliver’s letter to Sir Thomas (p. 268).

Besides allowing deeper engagement with the primary source material, Hutton’s rationale for focusing largely on just a few years of Cromwell’s life is out of concerns for coherence. The ‘conflict of evidence’ when dealing with Cromwell can be such that the ‘outcome, in a full-length life, would be a chaos of possibilities bereft of both narrative power and psychological insight’ (p. 5). Yet, if coherence and good storytelling make a decent biography, acknowledging and probing the discrepancies in the evidence (a quality which Hutton, after all, suggests is lacking in previous biographers turned hagiographers of Cromwell) would make for better history. Even in Hutton’s brief timeframe, aspects of Cromwell’s actions do not match those traits ascribed to him. His apparent ‘clemency’ towards his enemies in the autumn of 1645, in spite of his vindictiveness and ruthlessness, were ‘not a personal initiative’ but part of a policy by the army which ‘he was following’ (p. 293). Assuming Hutton continues the biography beyond this volume many other of Cromwell’s actions need explaining that seem equally out of ‘character’. For instance, it seems odd that in 1657 a man who bore grudges and delighted in vindictively crushing his enemies should offer his once arch-rival, the earl of Manchester, a seat in his new parliamentary upper chamber.[[8]](#footnote-8) Perhaps magnanimity was something Cromwell learned with age; or perhaps those other traits were never as ingrained as Hutton suggests.

More broadly, however, one might ask whether the whole endeavour of writing biographies of Cromwell is flawed. Perhaps we should accept that Cromwell simply defies the genre. True, Hutton’s biography is a seductive challenge to previous efforts that stress Cromwell’s positive qualities while downplaying (if not quite ignoring) the negative. Yet, by focusing on those unsavoury elements of Cromwell’s character, in a manner that can sometimes feel like taking Oliver at his enemies’ word, Hutton comes no nearer to getting ‘to grips’ with his subject, and in one crucial area seems more elusive than his predecessors. As Hutton notes in his characterization of previous biographers, the stress has been on a man ‘whose most important relationship was with his God’ (p. 2). It is this aspect of his character which offered historians a means to explain why Cromwell was, as Hugh Trevor-Roper once put it, ‘deliberately consistent in nothing’: Cromwell’s intense belief in divine providence was both cause and symptom of this inconsistency.[[9]](#footnote-9) As Blair Worden has made clear, providential thinking, which infused the world view of Cromwell and his contemporaries, devalued political planning and left the future open ended and uncertain.[[10]](#footnote-10) It is on these grounds that previous biographers portrayed Cromwell as at once pragmatic and principled. Ultimately political decisions waited upon the divine will. Yet, this also means that trying to pin Cromwell down to a consistent narrative or rigid psychological profile is ill-suited to the man and his era. After all, throughout those distracted times, narratives were constantly being re-written as new providential data became available, allowing the past to be constantly re-evaluated and shaped in light of the latest manifestations of divine approval or discontent. Cromwell’s letters and speeches are eloquent testimony to that process. Ultimately, scholars may have to accept the fact that they can never truly understand Cromwell because, much of the time, Cromwell never fully understood his (or His) purpose.

Hutton’s Cromwell, by contrast, is driven by instinct rather than principle, rendering his religious beliefs and preferences particularly opaque. At first glance, the difference with previous biographers seems slight: it was Cromwell’s ‘acquired sense of a special relationship with God, which informed and justified all’ (p. 338). Yet, despite echoing earlier biographers in professing that Cromwell’s religiosity was ‘absolutely genuine’ (p. 329) Hutton frequently frames religious preferences in terms of political calculation. Cromwell’s fervent religiosity ‘opened the way to a better political career’ (p. 328); his backing of independency in the Eastern Association army ‘promised to give him a new network of clients’; Presbyterianism ‘had less to offer politically’ and ‘would have given him less prominence and value as a patron and ally’ (p. 137). His regard for ‘heterodox opinions’ gave him ‘a distinctive power base which he could not otherwise have obtained: and so genuine instinct and political self-interest made a good match’ (pp. 329-3). For Hutton, religion was the ‘making’ of Cromwell but it is far from clear whether that was by accident or design. Perhaps this is Hutton’s point, but it seems the matter is left open to interpretation, meaning the real Cromwell is as elusive as ever. Ultimately, we are left with a biography that feels every bit as slippery as its subject.

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1. Worden, ‘Oliver Cromwell and the Protectorate’, 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Fitzgibbons, ‘Hereditary Succession and the Cromwellian Protectorate’, 1117. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Coward, *Cromwell*, 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Quarrel between Manchester and Cromwell,* 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Ibid.*, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Ibid.,* 80-1. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Both letters are reproduced in *Journal of the House of Lords*, *Volume 7,* 433-34 (16 June 1645). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Fitzgibbons, *Cromwell’s House of Lords*, 95-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Trevor-Roper, ‘Oliver Cromwell and his Parliaments’, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Worden, *God’s Instruments*, chapters 1 and 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)