

Oliver Cromwell: King in All But Name

Professor Paulina Kewes in conversation with Dr John West

www.stuarts-online.com

Paulina Kewes: I am in the print room of the Ashmolean Museum with Dr John West. John, who was Oliver Cromwell?

John West: Oliver Cromwell is one of the most significant political figures in seventeenth-century, not just seventeenth-century, all of British history. He was born in 1599. He was from East Anglia. And he rose to prominence particularly in the mid to late 1640s as a the figure in the parliamentary cause during the civil wars. Cromwell was one of the signatories to Charles I's death warrant. He was one of those who argued for the execution of the king in January 1649. He was a regicide. And he believed that killing the king was undoubtedly an act that was supported by God. So Cromwell is important because he's one of the key figures who brings in this new era So this is a period when Britain, a country that had always been ruled by monarchs, suddenly did not have a monarch.

PK: And we're looking at an engraving of Cromwell's effigy, crowned.

JW: That's right, yes. So Oliver Cromwell died on 3 September 1658. And, as befitted a major political leader, a lying in state was organised. But because Cromwell's body had actually begun to decompose and putrefy very quickly, an effigy, a wooden effigy, was created to take the place of Cromwell's body at the lying in state, which also had a wax mask put over its face. halfway through the lying in state, in November 1658, the effigy was stood up and it was gowned in this very rich royal looking clothing, given the ball, the orb, and sceptre, and a crown was put upon its head. So, in death, it seems (at least from this image) that Cromwell has risen to the title of King Oliver I.

PK: And you mentioned it was accoutred with full regalia. I mean, what was the significance of having Cromwell presented in such a regal fashion?

JW: Well, I think the significance is that, throughout his lifetime, the title of king was something that Cromwell had rejected. So, if one sort of looks back to his military career during the civil wars in 1640s and the early 1650s, he is often presented as a kind of as a martial figure. In the early 1650s, in the time of the republic, the regime that came to power after the execution of the king, Cromwell becomes leader of the army and he leads campaigns against royalist rebels in Scotland and in England. So the significance really is that in his death he appeared to have been given this role of king, that he had rejected, and in a way fought against throughout his life.

PK: Presumably, though, royalist enemies of Cromwell had always alleged that he aspired to the Crown? That he was another Richard III or another Bolingbroke?

JW: Yes, not just his royalist enemies but also his former republican allies made that accusation:

that Cromwell yes that he was a usurper.

PK: That he betrayed the cause for which he had stood?

JW: Absolutely. I suppose this really becomes apparent after 1653, which is when Cromwell rises to the position of Lord Protector.

PK: That's a new title. What did Lord Protectorship mean?

JW: Yeah, it is an entirely new form of political authority, really. It basically meant that Cromwell had become chief magistrate, the supreme ruler of England and Scotland. It was a position that was created in a document called the Instrument of Government that was drafted towards the end of 1653: this is a really crucial document in British political history, because it is the first attempt at drawing up a written constitution in Britain. And this title of Lord Protector is offered to Cromwell in that document, in December 1653 when Parliament is dissolved. Yes. So according to the Instrument of Government, Cromwell becomes head of state. But it made very clear that this role was not hereditary. It was an elective role. So he had been chosen, he been elected to the position of Lord Protector.

PK Now of course there had been Protectors before. He was created Lord Protector: his powers were wider. Didn't his enemies claim that that was monarchy in all but name?

JW: They did. Republicans who thought that, by rising to the position of Protector, Cromwell had betrayed the cause for which he fought, as you said, believed that he created for himself a position which was just like a king. It was ruled by one. But in some ways a Protector was not really another word for a monarch. I mean it's interesting, for instance, that one of the first drafts of the Instrument of Government actually did offer the title of king to Cromwell and he refused it. He made sure that that was written out of the final draft. So he clearly did not want to take that title. And it's also true that the Instrument meant that Cromwell had to govern in conjunction with a council of state: this was a ruling body of between 13 and 21 members that could (at least in theory) constrain some of Cromwell's powers.

PK: So you mention that the Instrument of Government stipulated that the Protectorship was not hereditary. And yet the effigy which you described, that we have seen, which places a crown above Cromwell's head, which crowns Cromwell, appears at a time when Cromwell is succeeded by his son: when the new Protector is Oliver Cromwell's son Richard. Does that not make a mockery of the original stipulations of the Instrument of Government?

JW: It certainly would seem that way. Through the 1650s, I suppose the accusation that Cromwell, Oliver Cromwell, had become king in all but name began to gain more traction. Certainly around the period 1657 (that's a really crucial year), this is the point at which Cromwell is again offered the crown, offered the opportunity to become king of England. So, at this point in time, a group of MPs in Parliament try to drop a new form of written constitution which is called the 'humble petition and advice'. And this document offers Cromwell the title of king. But really this offer, it's a legal matter as much as anything. The thing was that the Instrument of Government in 1653 had never actually been ratified by Parliament. So there is a fear that the title of Protector technically doesn't exist in law, whereas the title of king does. So, if Cromwell were to take the title of king as opposed to the title of Protector, then he would be taking on a political authority that was recognised in law and that could command obedience from the country. Over the three or so months from February to May 1657, Cromwell is offered the title of king and he does appear to agonise over it; he really dwells on the possibility of taking the crown before rejecting that offer again in May 1657. But yet one of the stipulations

of the 'humble petition and advice' is that Cromwell can now choose his successor. And he doesn't announce his successor immediately. In fact, the question of who his successor is going to be is somewhat obscure. But it does turn out to be his son, Richard. So by the time Cromwell dies in September 1658 and his son Richard almost immediately takes over the role of Lord Protector, that does appear to be a new form of hereditary authority that has been created. And indeed some poets in 1658 actually described Richard, the Lord Protector, as King Richard IV, the first king of the Oliverian line.

PK: Was it in fact clear at all whether Richard succeeded as the son of the Lord Protector or as his nominee?

JW: No, and there's actually some controversy over that. Much in the way that when Elizabeth first died in 1603 there was a lot of wrangling amongst people about whether or not she uttered the words on her deathbed: 'I nominate James I', so when Cromwell died in September 1658, there are some people who claim that he never actually said that he wanted Richard to take the position of the Protector once he died. Whereas other people claim that that was the case. So there was a lot of confusion, actually.

PK: The effigy of Cromwell was a very striking posthumous image of the Protector. What about those that circulated in his lifetime? And how did those propagated by his supporters differ from those propagated by his enemies?

JW: I think to his supporters Cromwell was this kind of extraordinary figure of providential military action, really. You can think about some of the poetry that was written about Cromwell in his lifetime. He is this very military figure. He's a scourge of his enemies, of royalists, but also for some radicals as well. But to his enemies, I think Cromwell is lampooned a great deal in his lifetime. His humble origins are mocked; he's often mocked as merely the son of a brewer. And, strangely, a lot of anti-Cromwell imagery and literature comes to focus on Cromwell's appearance. Cromwell is famous for saying he wanted a portrait to be painted warts and all. Well some of his enemies really focused on his appearance, particularly his nose; there are many lampoons and libellous verses written which seem to portray Cromwell as a grotesque figure

PK: Is he also presented as bloodthirsty? I mean obviously he has the king's blood on his hands?

JW: I suppose yeah he is also portrayed as a schemer as a kind of Machiavelli, a figure who has schemed his way to the top and, despite all of these protestations and claims that he doesn't want these titles and that he is as simply doing God's bidding, he's also presented by his enemies as somebody who has essentially schemed his way to the top: somebody who is a tyrant. Yes he has the king's blood on his hands and is prepared to do anything to achieve absolute power for himself.

PK: We talked about the way his enemies and supporters represented Cromwell. Do we encounter any striking images of Cromwell after the Restoration? Presumably there is a very powerful anti-Cromwellian reaction? How does it manifest itself?

JW: Absolutely. Cromwell is widely satirised after the Restoration of the monarchy. In print, in particular.

PK: What about Cromwell's body? Do we know what happened with it and the other individuals responsible for the execution of Charles I?

JW: Yes we do. It was dug up, basically.

PK: The putrefied body, which had presumably decomposed even further in the interim.

JW: Yeah, very much so. So on the 30 January 1661.

PK: So the anniversary of the regicide.

JW: Absolutely, the anniversary of the execution of Charles I. His body was dug up disinterred from Westminster Abbey, along with the bodies of two others who were responsible for the execution of Charles I, known as regicides. And they were taken to Tyburn, which is the site where common criminals were executed in London, and it was firstly hung and then it was taken down and it was beheaded. So there's a kind of posthumous execution that took place. The head of Cromwell was then placed on a spike outside Whitehall, where (this really is the most astonishing part of the story) where it remained for about thirty years. Can you imagine yourself as an inhabitant of London, walking past Whitehall everyday, and there is Cromwell's head looking down on you. It's this constant reminder of the 1650s, of the period when England did not have a monarchy. But it's also a reminder of kind of the retribution that came upon those people once the monarchy was returned. After 30 years the head actually blew down in a storm, and there are all sorts of really interesting tales about into whose hands this head of Cromwell fell. These days it's buried at Sidney Sussex College in Cambridge.

PK: Which was Cromwell's *alma mater*, which was where he studied.

PK: In a sense, the fact that the formally crowned effigy transmogrifies into the beheaded head. It's not just a sign of punishment. It is also a symbolic deposition of Cromwell.

JW: Yes, of course. And I suppose the significance of the date again: 30 January. It's almost a kind of...

PK: Rewriting of history?

JW: Yes, absolutely. Almost as if these were the people who should've been put to death. So we are putting history right at this point in time.

Bodleian items featured (by shelfmark): Radl. E. 40(1); Wood 522; G. Pamph. 2222 (10); G. Pamph. 1118 (1).