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# The influence of Oliver Cromwell on the religious life of England

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The Influence of Oliver Cromwell  
on the Religious Life of England.

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Subject:

The Influence of Cromwell on the  
Religious life of England.

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Up to the present time it has been the fashion with historians to associate the name of Oliver Cromwell with ambition, craft and tyranny. His memory has been subjected to an abuse not very different from that to which Charles II and his fellow royalists subjected his body. Friends of religious liberty have been loud in his praise, while tyrants both ecclesiastical and political have done all in their power to defame him. No prominent character has had justice in his own age, but future historians separated from the busy scene of the life they depict: by both time and distance can begin to see with a vision undimmed by prejudice or party feeling.

Only within the last few decades have historians begun to recover from

the reaction which set in with the restoration of royalty in the person of Charles II. And as these prejudices and misrepresentations began to subside, Cromwell's character appeared in a new light. Men began to study his life uninfluenced by party or sectarian feeling. Among those dissatisfied with the popular representation of Cromwell, and whose untiring efforts had done most to clear away old time falsehoods, and to set him in the right light before the world Thomas Carlyle deserves chief honor. Convinced that he had not been fairly dealt with by the historians, and that much of this misrepresentation arose from mere ignorance of the facts, Carlyle set about the herculean task of sifting out and setting forth the truth. Having collected his letters & speeches and available records he set about the task of classifying and preparing for publication. Upon these published letters must the historian depend largely for his material.

Oliver Cromwell, afterwards Lord Protector of the Commonwealth of England was born April 25<sup>th</sup> 1599. "The parish records show that he was christened four days later - after the record of the christening some royalist has added 'and for five years the scourge of England'."

Many historians delight to represent him as the son of a butcher or of a brewer but he was a descendant of one of the most ancient families of Britain. His great Uncle was created Earl of Essex by Henry VIII. and afterwards, in one of the playful moods which that monarch was wont to indulge, was beheaded. It is to Thomas Cromwell the great-uncle of Oliver to whom Shakespeare represents Wolsey addressing these words: "Had I but served my God with half the zeal I served my King, he would not in mine age have left me naked to mine enemies!" Thomas Cromwell had in his employ one of his nephews, Richard who for his zeal in

persecuting the Catholics, was enriched with the spoil of many churches and by reason of this he was known in the country by the title - "the Golden Knight." The eldest son of the "Golden Knight" married Elizabeth Stuart - who was a descendant from the royal family of Stuart. Thus was Cromwell united by the ties of blood to the unhappy Charles whom he was afterwards to behead. Many stories of his boyhood are related tho' of no special interest. Some pretend that he was dissolute and wicked, delighting in cruelties, but these stories are probably without foundation. He only began to attend the public school of Huntingdon, but of his record there little is known.

At the age of seventeen he entered Cambridge University - where he remained only for a brief period, being summoned home by the death of his father, to be the support of a widowed mother and a family of six sisters. Two or three years after his return from college he was married to Elizabeth Pincher - his

first and only love. Being happily married he did little else for a number of years than attend domestic duties, caring for his income and tilling his fields. Speaking of the agitation of the times, and of Cromwell's prepossession to religious meditation a writer says, "his family and friends and neighbors all were devotedly attached to the new cause of Puritanism. The family revolutionists in religion and politics mutually encouraged each other in their solitude by the prevailing passion of the times then concentrated in small bodies of adherents. This passion in the ardent but gloomy disposition of Cromwell almost produced a disease of the imagination. He trembled for his eternal salvation, and dreaded lest he might not sacrifice enough for his faith". He was impressed with the idea of an early death, and lived haunted by the constant fear of eternal damnation. One of his contemporaries relates that on a particular occasion he was seized with a

fit of religious melancholy and sent frequently for the physician in the village near by that he might talk with him on his fears and doubts.

He loved solitude and spent much time meditating on religious themes, especially on texts of Scripture. "He felt within himself an inward inspiration of the political and religious meaning of these sacred texts" In common with his Puritan brethren he declared the Book to be divine and infallible, and not to be understood save by the aid of Divine illumination. His Puritanism consisted in absolute and unquestioning obedience to the commands of the Bible. But it reserved for itself the right of interpretation of those commands.

Until he reached the age of twenty-eight his life had been spent in the quiet discharge of home duties, not caring for publicity. But in 1627 he began his career in Parliament a career which began amid the storms that were to culminate in consigning a King to the scaffold and in elevat-

ing a Country gentleman to the highest place  
in England.

To understand the true state of affairs at  
the time of Cromwells election to Parliament: we  
must recur for a moment to the religious revo-  
lution under Henry VIII. That ever chang-  
able monarch, baffled in his attempt to ob-  
tain from ~~the~~ pope a sanction to his divorce,  
and smothering under the refusal of the pope  
thrust of his allegiance to Rome, and establish-  
ed Rome in miniature in England, of  
which he was the pope. Thus England at one  
stroke became a forlorn to Rome. Freedom  
of religious conviction seemed the goal to  
which she was tending. But it was soon  
manifest that while independent of the  
Roman pontiff, she had nevertheless, in  
the person of the king a pope not less arbitra-  
ry and exacting. Revolutionary spirit  
once set free is difficult to quell or res-  
train within proper bounds. "And as  
England still retained the ancient cer-

emancipation, there were not wanting those who were ready to go to the opposite extreme and utterly abolish all semblance of Romanism. The most-widely extended of these were the Puritans. or as some one has said "the janissaries of the Reformation". "Once entered into the region of liberal and individual creeds they saw no reason why they should retain what they called superstitious idolatries, abominations, symbols and infatuations of the Church of Rome." Such was the state of religious ~~opinion~~ <sup>feeling</sup> in the time of Henry. Though its form changed and fluctuated yet the same spirit remained from Henry down through his successors to the reign of Charles I.

Not long after the young King ascended the throne of his father the struggle began between the throne and Parliament. In the reign of Henry Parliament had proved itself to be a very convenient tool in his hands for the carrying out of his plans. But Charles soon found

that- Parliament was a very crucial element to deal with and one which required for its management quite as much tact as he could command. These struggles between King and Parliament were augmented by religious more than by political factions, and it was not long before the whole of the United Kingdom was thrown into a ferment that was to terminate in the death of Charles and the elevation of Cromwell to the Protectorate.

During the long struggle between Charles and Parliament altho Cromwell was a member he took no part. Purely political questions had little attraction for him, but when the questions took on a religious turn Cromwell's voice was heard. His correspondence during this period betrays no other ambition than that for his creed. Puritanic zeal alone seemed to be his motive to action. He writes to one of his friends, "Truly no creature has more reason to desire

of the present age and of ages to come. Without Cromwell, humanly speaking, liberty would have been lost - not only to England but to Europe. The defeat of liberty - would have been the defeat of God." So says D' Aubigne.

Although the cause of Puritanism fell with its great exponent in the English Commonwealth yet its influence was not unfeelt: Charles II came in with his gay courtiers, and under him a visible yet natural reaction set in. England seemed in her rebound to be hopelessly lost: but the influence of the pure sturdy patriot, sincere consecrated, tho' at times fanatical, religious zealot - has been working like the leaven in their measure of meal in the heart of English religious life changing its tone softening its harshness, smoothing its asperities teaching it a larger charity; and developing a spirit of tolerance. Though the Commonwealth was a thing of Cromwell's own creation and failed to survive its creator, yet the

himself to the cause of God than I have. I have received so many chosen graces that I feel I can never make sufficient returns for all these gifts that the Lord may be pleased to accept me for the sake of his dear Son Jesus Christ; that he may give me grace to walk in the light, for it is light indeed. Alas! you know what my life has been. I loved darkness rather than light: I hated light. I was chief of sinners. Nevertheless God had mercy on me. Praise him for me. Pray for me that he who has commenced such a change in my soul may finish it for Christ's sake." Almost all his correspondence between the age of twenty and forty bore this same earnest, mystical and even melancholy stamp. His own disposition aided by his habit of brooding over our religious subjects leads me to attribute fanaticism to him.

During the troublesome days of 1640. the hitherto silent member began to take

part in the discussions. From day to day it became more and more apparent that the rupture between the King and Parliament could never be healed. If the King was proud and haughty, Parliament was obstinate, and war became inevitable. All parties prepared for the worst. Recognizing Cromwell's ability as a leader, the militia regiments of Cambridge and Huntingdon selected him as their commander. "The duplicity of Charles had made his old enemies irreconcilable and had driven back into the ranks of the disaffected a crowd who were in the very act of coming over to his side". Seeing the result of his own action Charles made haste to prepare for emergency. His Queen was carried to the continent, and he hurriedly entered York with the most loyal of his adherents, and there awaited the result. Nor had he long to wait. Soon the Earl of Essex at the head of the Army of Parliament made his appearance. The King hitherto weak and vacillating, now that he was pre-empted

into civil war showed himself a true soldier. With the few faithful adherents he met Essex, and the battle resulted in Charles' favor tho without any decided victory. Cromwell had only a subordinate position in this battle. He arose from station to another until England lay at his feet. With a genius not only to see weak points, but what is more worthy of admiration - a genius that could strength in weakness. Parliament was not his ideal of an English Parliament; so with characteristic energy he proceeded at once to make it so. He summoned & dissolved Parliaments at his own pleasure. They were composed chiefly of men of his own stamp, except they were not so much men of broad political knowledge and skill as of purity and devotion. In his own words they were "persons from God, and of approved fidelity and honesty."

With such instruments to do his bidding  
what might not an iron willed Cromwell  
do?

The Army like Parliament was reformed  
and built after a new model of  
Cromwell's own creation. If he showed  
his genius for organization in the Parlia-  
ment it was even more manifest  
in the Army. Already he had fashioned  
his own regiment according to his own  
idea. Now that the Army was his he  
at once organized it according to the same  
principle. "The Army which now became  
supreme in the state was very different  
from that which has since been seen among  
us," says McCaulley. "A force thus composed  
might without injury to its efficiency be  
indulged in some liberties which if  
allowed to any other troops, would prove  
subversive to all discipline. ... it would  
not be safe in our time to tolerate in  
any regiment religious meetings at which

a corporal raised in Scripture should lead the devotions of his less gifted major, or admonish his backsliding colonel. But such was the gravity and the self command of the warriors whom Cromwell had trained, that in their camp, a political organization and a religious organization could exist without destroying a military organization.

"In war this strange force was irresistible. The stubborn courage characteristic of the English people Cromwell at once regulated and stimulated. Other leaders have maintained orders as strict; other leaders have inspired their followers with zeal as ardent. But in his camp alone was the most rigid discipline found in company with the fiercest enthusiasm." From the time when the army was remodelled to the time when it was disbanded it never found either in the British Isles or on this continent an enemy that could withstand its onset. - They came to lengths to regard

the day of battle as a day of certain triumph. The chief thing that distinguished the army of Cromwell from other armies was the austere morality and fear of God that pervaded its ranks. It is acknowledged by the most zealous Royalist - that in that singular camp, no oath was heard, no drunkenness or gambling was seen, that during the long commission of the soldiery, the property of the peaceful citizens, and the honor of woman were held sacred." Such was the general character of the instrument which in the hands of Cromwell ruled the Commonwealth. They breathed the same atmosphere as did the leader and struck in his spirit. His army was a faith of which he was the pastor. He was at the same time Commander, Priest, Preacher, spiritual <sup>and</sup> adviser.

Friends and foes alike agree that by infusing into them his spirit of religious zeal and devotion he raised his soldiers above mere butchery and plunder.

They sang Psalms on their march, and went into battle singing sacred songs. Nor in the enthusiasm of victory did he forget to ascribe all the glory to God. After one of his signal victories he writes, "Sir, this is none other than the hand of God, and to him alone belongs the glory, wherein none are to share with him."

The limits of this paper will not permit us to recount his victorious march against Charles, nor his subjection of the Irish Rebellion, nor Naseby, Dunbar, and their significance in English History. All these must be passed over in silence.

The various Parliaments summoned had by their fevilities, and ignorance of state craft, had wearied wearied the Master, as well as disgusted all England and when at length Cromwell was made Protector of England it was hailed as a deliverance from ignorant legislators. Tho he was hated by the royalists as a tyrant, and an

Usurper yet ~~both~~ friend and foe recognized his ability and sterling worth. Cromwell thus entered upon an administration more powerful than was ever entrusted to any Englishman. Every where terror was inspired by his paying legions. War to the foreign powers that dared to take advantage of the supposed weakness of the Commonwealth. Even the pope was made to tremble in the Vatican. For "that voice which seldom threatened in vain" was uplifted against papal interference. In the declaration that "unless favour were shown to the people of God, the English guns should be heard in the Castle of Saint Angelo".

A nature like Cromwell's active energetic intense and fortitude naturally makes fear. He was no exception. There were those that hated the Protector and were willing to risk as they thought, the land of a tyrant. Haunted by this fear of assassination, he began to wear armour. Dejection and melancholy caused

frontly by the incessant turmoil and danger in which he lived, and partly by the death of a favorite daughter, began to undermine his iron constitution. Yielding to its influence he took his bed, not to rise again. After a sickness of a few weeks, the great-soul of Oliver Cromwell took its departure, amidst the roar of a terrific storm. The day of his death, with its howling winds, lifting the roofs from houses, twisting mighty oaks from their base, was not an unfit <sup>emblem</sup> ~~closing~~ of his own stormy life.

Two dark spots disfigure an otherwise noble haire-character. These are the exacts with which he suppressed the Irish rebellion, and the other his part in the execution of King Charles I. In the first, he may be justified on the ground of military necessity. In the second he was led on by intense religious zeal. Like Paul he did it, in all good conscience, and even to his dying day never for a moment repented of his action. The great object at which he aimed

was religious purity and freedom. The King seemed an obstacle in his path which must be gotten rid of at all hazards. Convinced once that his duty lay along a certain line of action Cromwell was not the man to flinch, or be dismayed at any difficulty. If by the death of Charles religious liberty could be used and forever established then Charles must die. This action was to him the solemn and imperative duty to his country and to his God.

Though cordially hated by the royalists and by Episcopalians, yet all agree in ascribing to him honor for his vigorous policy.

Even the "Cavaliers" could scarcely refrain from wishing that one who had done so much to raise the fame of the nation had been legitimate King - after a century during which England had scarcely more weight in European politics than Venice or Saxony, she at once became the most formidable power in the world. dictated terms of peace to the United Provinces, annulled the common injuries of Christians -

etc

down on fronts in Barbary, vanquished the Spaniards by land and sea. seized one of the finest West India Islands, and acquired on the Flemish coast a fortress which costed the national pride for the loss of Calais. England had not seen such days since Elizabeth. <sup>But</sup> Arundel admired her fleets respected, Commerce sweeping every sea. - in that whichever way Cromwell turned his hand prosperity and fame followed. Viewed from the standpoint of Commercial prosperity, of respect in foreign lands, or for national glory certainly Cromwell's rule will stand favorable comparison with that of any monarch since the Elizabethan era.

Cromwell was preeminently the friend of religious liberty. He hated oppression. "Even the Quaker" says Green, rejected of all other Christian bodies as an anarchist, and blasphemer found sympathy and protection in Cromwell. The Jews had been excluded from England since the reign of Edward I; and a prayer which they now presented for leave to return, was refus-

ed by a commission of merchants and divines, to whom the Protector referred it. But the refusal was quietly forced over and the connivance of Cromwell in the settlement of a few Hebrews in Oxford and London was so clearly understood that no one ventured to interfere with them." All found freedom in his rule - Catholics alone excepted. Religious liberty was his ruling passion. He fought the pope because he saw in him the embodiment of religious intolerance. As Napoleon desired to unite all Europe in one mighty empire. So Cromwell the Napoleon of the Church sought to unite all Protestantism under one head. He has been accused of ambition. It was his zeal for the church that led him to take up arms. "Not the feather in his cap occupied his mind, he was fighting a great battle against Papacy and royalty of the middle ages - the greatest that history has described since the establishment of the Christian Church and the story of the reformation." The result was the deliverance

The spirit of fire, which the great leader in-  
fused into his soldiery and through them into  
the very life of the nation itself ~~has~~ in motion  
an influence which has made England a  
better nation, and he "being dead yet speak-  
eth" thro England of Today.