

KING OLIVER: THE ENGLISH INTERREGNUM

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On January 30th 1649, the Stuart King of England, Charles I, was beheaded as a “tyrant, traitor, murderer, and public enemy” at Westminster in London, and England was proclaimed a Commonwealth. This momentous event ushered in the eleven year Interregnum period during which the ideals of republicanism foundered in corruption and ended in the military dictatorship of the Protectorate. Oliver Cromwell, the parliamentarian hero of the English Civil War and General and creator of the New Model Army, would create a political structure that would allow for increased prosperity and English success abroad but which could not survive without his indomitable personality.

In December 1648, the Long Parliament, called in 1640 by Charles I, was “purged” of all its members still willing to mediate with the King. This event, known as “Pride’s Purge” and perpetrated by the army, left only a “Rump Parliament” to rule England and tarnished England’s tradition of parliamentary authority (Kelesy). It was these men who condemned the King, in part due to practical considerations – to prevent further machinations of a man who embodied danger to their power – but also to reassert this lost authority (Kelesy, para 5).

In January 1649, the Rump Parliament passed an Act of Parliament declaring themselves “the supreme power in this nation” and set about an agenda of political and religious change (Kelesy, para 11). They abolished the House of Lords in February of that year, as well as formally abolishing the monarchy. They then formed the Council of State to act as an executive, to enact the laws passed by the Parliament and to conduct foreign and domestic affairs. However, because the Parliament retained some executive rights and because the lines of authority between the Parliament and Council of State were poorly delineated this was to lead to considerable confusion later,

and ultimately to an impasse on serious issues (“Rump” para 2).

The Rump Parliament consisted of Independents: devout puritans who believed that there should be no central church authority, but rather each congregation should select its own details of protestant worship such that “every Christian congregation had, under Christ, supreme jurisdiction in things spiritual” (Macauley). In the ideal, they saw England as a godly land made up of hard working congregations ruled by a secular parliament and in religious matters, by their own consciences. The repeal in 1650 of statutes enacted under Elizabeth I that required church attendance on the Sabbath and the formation of the “Committee for the Propagation of the Gospel” in 1652, which controlled the appointment of clergy, were both aimed at weakening the vestiges of Anglican power (“Rump”, para 4). However, the conservative puritans did not let congregations decide all religious matters. They were seriously worried about the rise of radical puritans, such as the Levellers and the Diggers, and the Blasphemy Act of 1650 was passed to curb the growth of such groups. They also enacted strict controls of public morality such as the Adultery Act of 1650 which made adultery a capital crime. All these attempts to bring about a puritan nation foundered, however. The zealots and the laws they enacted only served to isolate themselves from popular opinion and many people would show outward submission to the new rule, but remain truly loyal to the ways of the Anglican Church and its ministers (Morrill, “Revolution”).

The Rump Parliament found itself having to deal with dire financial matters. The wars ravaging England for years, the Irish rebellion and the incursions of the Scots had emptied the public purse. They looked for any methods of raising money: confiscation and sale of church land, sale of Crown land, the raising of excise taxes

(“Rump” para 7) and what John Morrill describes as a “crushing burden of taxation” (Morrill, “Revolution”). Further, they hindered any possible reconciliation with the royalists by the imposition of fines on the supporters of the king, as well as confiscation of their land. The members of Parliament also added insult to injury by taking massive bribes to protect royalists from the worst excesses of Parliament (Macauley, para 5). These actions not only destabilised the country, and in particular, the value of land upon which much of England’s economy rested, but also set in place the seeds of corruption which overtook the Parliament and saw its ultimate demise. Despite all these measures, however, the Rump Parliament was never able to stabilise the economy or raise enough cash, and being forced to concentrate upon financial affairs drew its attention from many of its promised social reforms.

If the Rump Parliament was largely ineffectual, the leader of the Council of State and General of the New Model Army, Oliver Cromwell, was proving rather more effective. Freed by the death of the King to finally fight the Irish Rebellion, which had been ongoing since 1641, Cromwell took his New Model Army to Ireland in 1649. At this time, Cromwell was a hero to many people. As Kevin Creed notes, the popular idea of Cromwell was as the “second coming of the Swedish soldier-king, Gustavus Adolphus” and a righteous champion of Protestant ideals (Creed). The people of England felt they especially needed such a defender, given the horror and indignation of the rulers of Europe at the death of Charles, and the perceived threat of a Catholic assault on their land. The Irish rebellion especially was portrayed as a fight against the hated papists and newspapers fanned up public opinion to a “fever pitch of hatred” (Creed). Thus Cromwell’s defeats of the Irish at first Drogheda and then Wexford cemented his position in the public opinion. The effects of this Irish campaign were long ranging for the British Isles and outlasted Cromwell and the Interregnum. “[Cromwell’s] conquest led on to a process of ethnic cleansing and a transfer of land, wealth and power from Catholic communities born in Ireland to British Protestant settlers and absentee landlords” (Morrill, “Oliver’s”). Ireland was

unable to exist independent of Britain until the 20th century and the racial memory of the massacres at Drogheda and Wexford still sour relations between the two countries to this day.

Cromwell returned from Ireland in May 1650 to fight the Scots, who once more threatened the North of England. Unlike the war against the Catholic Irish, Cromwell would have preferred not to fight with the Protestant Scots. However, when they refused to talk, he imposed crushing defeats against superior numbers at first Dunbar and then Worcester and when the young Charles Prince of Wales fled to the continent, ensured the safety of the republic from internal threats. The military forces, under orders from the Council of State, secured an external military victory over the Dutch Republic in the Anglo-Dutch war of 1652. This time, the war was entirely at sea rather than upon land, but the superior English “ships of the line” were able to defeat their mercantile rivals. Not only were the English able to limit the power of pro-monarchists operating in the Dutch territories, but they were able to use the victory to continue the English trade expansion. This would aid in English financial recovery and ultimately allow the construction of the English trading empire.

Cromwell’s success and the concomitant failures of the Rump Parliament became more and more pronounced in the early years of the 1650s. Cromwell wanted to stabilise the country and yet could not work with an increasingly corrupt and ineffectual body of men who had not been subject to re-election in over eleven years. Cromwell had never been a radical democrat. Unlike the Levellers, who wanted suffrage for all adult males, he was a conservative who believed that only men of property, and thus a stake in the country, should be allowed a vote. His views reflected his close ally, Henry Ireton, who argued in 1647 “I think that no person has a right to an interest [...] in choosing those that shall determine what laws we shall be ruled by here, no person has a right to this that has not a permanent fixed interest in this Kingdom” (Clarke). However, even this form of republicanism had to be set aside. In April 1653, Cromwell, supported by his army,

dissolved the Rump Parliament, telling its members that they were “corrupt and unjust men and scandalous to the profession of the Gospel” (“Cromwell”). At first, he enthusiastically tried to undertake “godly rule” with a nominated body known as the Barebones Parliament. But they were little better than the Rump Parliament and on 16th December 1653, Cromwell accepted the Instrument of Government which declared “That the supreme legislative authority of the Commonwealth of England, Scotland, and Ireland, and the dominions thereunto belonging, shall be and reside in one person, and the people assembled in Parliament; the style of which person shall be the Lord Protector of the Commonwealth of England, Scotland, and Ireland” (“Instrument”, 1). Oliver Cromwell was to be that Lord Protector.

Cromwell began work immediately to correct the perceived mistakes and political indecision of the Commonwealth era. By the Instrument, Cromwell wielded broad domestic power as well as controlling the armed forces and foreign policy while sharing some power with an elected parliament. However, while Parliament was called in 1654, it remained in session for less than five months before Cromwell dissolved it for doing little more than argue about the legality of the constitution (Raymond, para 13). Dividing England and Wales into twelve regions, each ruled by a Major General, he tried to bring stability to the nation. Although a puritan, he had lived through years of religious turmoil and was keen to bring about a toleration of religious difference unseen before in England. Morrill notes “he granted greater religious liberty than any one ruler in early modern Europe and ensured – as no-one else did before the 1870s - that religious liberty was accompanied by civil equality” (Morrill, “Oliver”). In September 1655, he began negotiations that led to the readmittance of Jews into England and while moral laws – including bans on stage plays, cock-fighting and horse-racing – were expected to be enforced by the Major Generals, those who did were not join the puritan church were not otherwise persecuted.

Cromwell, probably due to his educated background and his puritan beliefs, was also a strong

believer in education. He founded a college in Durham (later to become the University of Durham) and was a chancellor of Oxford University. He also attempted to expand grammar schooling throughout the country. He also worked to reform the English legal system and abolish capital punishment for all but the most serious offences, declaring that “to see men lose their lives for petty matters . . . is a thing that God will reckon for” (“Cromwell”). He did not ignore the economy either and a visitor to London during this time described “the munificent business at the Royal Exchange, and the easy availability of ‘the gums of Arabia, the silks of Asia, the spices of Africa, the riches and rareties of America the gold of Both the Indies” (Raymond).

During this time, Cromwell also pursued assertive foreign policies. He negotiated the Treaty of Westminster to bring the Anglo-Dutch War to a successful end, which freed him to seize Jamaica and Dunkirk from the Spanish. During the Protectorate, admiring the Swedish King Charles X, he also negotiated favorable trade agreements with the Baltic states. Despite being a strong protestant and using that in negotiations with other protestant nations, his primary focus was England’s foreign interests, and he was not averse to allying with Catholic France when he believed it suited his purpose.

Cromwell’s military dictatorship did not last. The Major Generals were deeply unpopular, and after Cromwell was forced to recall Parliament in September 1656 to pay for his foreign wars, he was forced to abandon the system for a new constitution, the “Humble Petition and Advice”. While this parliament offered him the title of King again, he continued to refuse and was reinstated as Lord Protector. But this was not enough to recover his lost popularity. A Venetian, Francesco Giavarina reporting on the ceremony describes the crowd: “. . . it all went off rather sadly [...] clear evidence of the dissatisfaction of the people, for although they turned out in countless numbers to see the ceremony, they would not open their mouths to utter what did not come from their hearts and which they could not express with complete sincerity” (Raymond, para 16). Cromwell continued to attempt to fulfil his program,

but with little aid from Parliament. After dissolving Parliament once more in 1658, Oliver Cromwell, described by the poet Andrew Marvell as "...the Angel of our Commonweal" ailed and died that September.

Oliver Cromwell was succeeded by his son Richard under the terms of the Humble Petition and Advice, but Richard proved to be ill-equipped for this new role in life. He did not have the support of the Army which had propped up his own father's rule, he did not have the strong support of Parliament, but most importantly he did not have the strong will of his father. He was described as having a "meek temperament" and "mild manner": not qualities associated with leadership in such troubled times (Roots). The army and the parliament both realised that they needed stronger leadership that all the people could

agree upon, and that the experiment with republicanism, tainted by military dictatorship, had essentially failed. Various sides tussled briefly, but within two years, the Prince of Wales had landed on English soil and the monarchy restored, the experiment was over.

The eleven year Interregnum period started out as a brave attempt to replace a dictatorial monarchy with a republic based on popular representation. However, internal dissent and corruption held back meaningful reform and led the way to a military dictatorship led by General Oliver Cromwell. He pursued an assertive foreign policy and innovative policies of education, religious and legal reform but ultimately, the repression of these later years made him unpopular and the political structure he had built unsustainable without his personal authority.

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