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Thomas Cromwell and His Revolution

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Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Thomas Cromwell: a Life*, London: Allen Lane, 2018, pp. xiv, 728, £18.70, ISBN: 978-1-846-14429-5

The overwhelming success of Dame Hilary Mantel's novels *Wolf Hall* (2010) and *Bring Up the Bodies* (2013) has made the unlikely figure of Thomas Cromwell (*c*. 1485-1540) one of the heroes of Tudor England. In the past decade, he has become a phenomenon on the page, in theatres and on television. Fiction and non-fiction, as literary genres, have often been more closely related than some historians would be pleased to admit. When she delivered the Reith Lectures for the BBC in 2017, Mantel said that as an undergraduate, she had first wanted to be a historian rather than a novelist. History lost a great advocate when she turned to fiction for her career. Yet, the public's present surging interest in Cromwell cries out to be accounted for. In his latest volume, *Thomas Cromwell: a Life*, Diarmaid MacCulloch has taken up the challenge of understanding Cromwell on his proper stage: as a real person who laboured and died and who left a legacy worth pondering. He and Mantel have made joint public appearances to discuss Cromwell's life and influence. MacCulloch has developed a warm following of his own for his 2009 BBC television series, 'A History of Christianity'. In this book, MacCulloch invites his readers to find 'the true Thomas Cromwell of history' (p. 1).

Cromwell is dedicated to the memory of MacCulloch's supervisor of studies, the eminent G. R. Elton (Professor Sir Geoffrey Rudolph Elton, né Ehrenberg, 1921-1994, Regius Professor of Modern History, 1983-1988, University of Cambridge). One might say that Elton 'bestrode' his university, as well as the international field of early modern British history, 'like a colossus' (as MacCulloch memorably described Bishop John Fisher, Cambridge's most famous chancellor, in his award-winning biography *Thomas Cranmer: a Life*).[1] Elton made Tudor history essential to the study of Britain, a signal accomplishment, especially because he was not a native Briton. Born in Tübingen as the elder of two sons to Victor and Eva Ehrenberg, respectively a professor of ancient history and a poet, the

[1] Diamaid MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 24.

family became war-time refugees when they escaped from Prague only a step ahead of the Nazis in early 1939. Within a few months of the brothers' arrival at Rydal School in Wales, whose offer of free study places enabled the family to come to Britain, Elton realized that 'I had arrived in the country in which I ought to have been born'.[2]

Elton's interests concerned constitutional and political history with an emphasis on administration. From his 1948 University of London doctoral thesis, which led to his first monograph, *The Tudor Revolution in Government*, the achievements of Thomas Cromwell were the centerpiece of his scholarship.[3] Elton posited that England in the fifteenth-century had had a medieval system of governance, dominated by kings whose motives originated in the royal household. The king administered his realm personally through his servants. But under the Tudors, and especially under the guidance of Cromwell as a new type of 'bureaucrat minister', the older offices of the Exchequer and Chancery rose to new levels of responsibility, as did Parliament. Real policy-making for the nation became practicable for the first time once it became possible to consider the monarch and the state as distinct entities. Therefore, a bureaucratic machinery could be created outside of the royal household that reflected the differing functions of king and kingdom, but that had not happened under Cromwell's predecessor Thomas Wolsey (1471-1530), archbishop of York and cardinal. In *The Tudor Revolution in Government,* Elton thought the cardinal was too preoccupied with diplomacy to make sustained reforms. Elton characterized Wolsey in his service to Henry VIII as a 'medieval' figure who presided over 'the last years of truly medieval government'. In contrast, his successor Cromwell became 'the modern secretary of state' whose plans led to 'a veritable administrative revolution' that transformed the medieval royal household into something new, different, and 'modern'.[4]

Elton followed *The Tudor Revolution in Government* with a score of major monographs, and his collected essays, republished by Cambridge University Press as *Studies in Tudor and Stuart Politics and Government* ran to four volumes.[5] In an article he first published in 1954, Elton also established Cromwell as 'The Man Behind the Henrician Reformation'. He argued that Cromwell, and no other royal servant, freed the king from his marriage to Katherine of Aragon. Cromwell, as the king's vicegerent, devised sweeping changes to the English Church.[6] Cromwell became Elton's prototype of an

[2] Quoted in William Palmer, *Engagement with the Past: the lives and works of the World War II generation of historians* (Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 2001), 8.
[3] G. R Elton, *The Tudor Revolution in Government: Administrative Changes in the Reign of Henry VIII* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953).
[4] Elton, *Tudor Revolution in Government*, 37, 414-5.
[5] G. R Elton, *Studies in Tudor and Stuart Politics and Government* 4 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974-92).

English statesman in anticipation of a modern state. In his important 1951 essay on Cromwell's 'Decline and Fall', Elton went so far as to describe him as Henry's 'prime minister'.[7]

Elton's writings were the fruit of the innumerable hours that he spent, starting with his release from the British Army in 1946, in the old Public Record Office in Chancery Lane, where he read thousands of the documents that were seized when Cromwell was arrested in 1540. MacCulloch reminds us that as Master of the Rolls, Cromwell had a fine house in Chancery Lane (pp. 271-2), and it is perhaps worthwhile to consider that Elton conducted his research close to the same site where Cromwell spent the most triumphant years of his life. The vast corpus of manuscripts itself is a tribute to both Cromwell's and Elton's energy and their enormous scales of endeavor. Elton's ability to surmount the evidence through the dint of tireless application impressed his generation of historians. Patrick Collinson (1929-2011), his successor in the Regius Chair, who introduced me to Sir Geoffrey at a conference in Cambridge in 1988, confessed that Elton's dedication to his work made him feel a little guilty whenever he took a day off.

For Cromwell, no other collection of manuscripts of comparable size or breadth of affairs that is associated with a single person has come down to us. Perhaps only Wolsey conducted a greater array of business, but his papers were not captured at his fall in 1529. The sheer size of Cromwell's undertaking is reflected in cameo by Muriel St Clare Byrne's edition of *The Lisle Letters* (1981), the papers relating to Henry's uncle Arthur Plantagenet, whose correspondence Cromwell confiscated in May 1540 in his desperate, failing effort to save himself from destruction.[8] The six volumes of the published *Lisle Letters* represents only a small portion of the vast hoard of paperwork that Cromwell accumulated or created. Much of what he sent out, in the form of orders or other instructions, has been lost. What remains is from what MacCulloch calls Cromwell's 'in-tray' (p. 1). Elton used to lament that Cromwell's system of organizing his archives was irretrievably lost when the nineteenth-century editors of the *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of the Reign of Henry VIII* broke his bundles apart to calendar the documents chronologically.[9] Although that is undoubtedly true, by indexing the manuscripts, the efforts of the *Letters and Papers* editors have ensured that ever since, scholars have been able retrieve the papers Cromwell assembled. First

[6] Elton, 'The Man Behind the Henrician Reformation', in *Studies*, 1, 173-88.
[7] Elton, 'Thomas Cromwell's decline and fall', in *Studies,* 1 189-230 at 227.
[8] Muriel St Clare Byrne ed. *The Lisle Letters,* 6 vols (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).
[9] *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of the Reign of Henry VIII*, 21 vols, in 33 parts (London: H. M. Stationary Office, 1862-1910).

available in the Long Room and Round Room of the old Public Record Office (now the Maughan Library of King's College, London), the original manuscripts were moved toward the end of the twentieth century to the new building of The National Archives, Kew. Now they are available to any desktop anywhere in the world by subscription in their digitized form in *State Papers Online, 1509-1714.*[10]

MacCulloch writes that Elton thought Cromwell was 'not biographable' (p. 3). Elton was unwilling to do much more in the way of producing a full-fledged account of Cromwell's life than he accomplished in his 1951 study of Cromwell's 'Decline and Fall'. Collinson once told me: 'Geoffrey Elton doesn't have the organ to understand religion.' But Cromwell has been the subject of biographies since the sixteenth century, in the account of his life provided by John Foxe the martyrologist. Other studies include R. B. Merriman's two-volume *Life and Letters of Thomas Cromwell* (1902, reprinted in 2006); A. G. Dickens's *Thomas Cromwell and the English Reformation* (1959); Howard Leithead's entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004, revised 2009); and Michael Everett's *The Rise of Thomas Cromwell: Power and Politics in the reign of Henry VIII* (2015).[11]

Among the many achievements and pleasures of MacCulloch's book is to become acquainted for the first time with Cromwell's only son Gregory, whose two miniature portraits by Hans Holbein were first introduced by MacCulloch in an article written with Teri Fitzgerald that appeared in 2016 in *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*.[12] Until now, Gregory Cromwell has not figured prominently in accounts of his father's life, and MacCulloch's sensational discovery that in 1537 Gregory married Queen Jane Seymour's handsome sister, the widowed Elizabeth, Lady Ughtred (pp. 422ff.), has raised important new questions about the reasons Cromwell lost the king's favour only three years later. As he climbed into ever-higher offices and honours, did he at last overreach himself? Was Cromwell making a play, through Gregory's marriage, for even greater control, and the potential for the Cromwells to continue to influence policy into the reign of Jane's son Edward? How serious were the persistent rumours (p. 352) that the long-widowed Cromwell thought of wedding the

[10] State Papers Online, 1509-1714 [https://www.gale.com/intl/primary-sources/state-papers-online Accessed 20 Jan 2019].

[11] R. B. Merriman, *Life and Letters of Thomas Cromwell* 2 vols (Oxford: Clarenden Press 1902); A. G. Dickens, *Thomas Cromwell and the English Reformation* (London: English Universities Press, 1959); Howard Leithead, 'Thomas Cromwell', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online edn, 23 September 2004 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/6769. Accessed 20 January 2019]; Michael Everett, *The Rise of Thomas Cromwell: Power and Politics in the reign of Henry VIII* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

[12] Teri Fitzgerald and Diarmaid MacCulloch, 'Two Portrait Miniatures by Hans Holbein the Younger', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 67 (2016), 587–601.

king's daughter Mary, whom he protected following her demotion once her father succeeded in abandoning his marriage to Katherine? MacCulloch argues that after Jane's death in childbed, Cromwell wanted to safeguard the Seymours' interests and his alliance with them, and therefore he persuaded the king, in choosing his next wife, to make a dynastic match abroad (p. 443). MacCulloch also suggests that when the king insisted in June 1540 that he must be relieved of his marriage to Anne of Cleves, Cromwell refused to support him (523). This final crisis rapidly brought about his fall.

Another impressive discovery is the survival of the carved base that once supported the wooden statue of the Welsh warrior-saint Dderfel Gardarn (Plate 43), which was burned with Friar John Forest at Smithfield in May 1538. MacCulloch calls it 'a bleak and direct link to a Tudor atrocity' (p. 459).

In a book of this length - over 550 pages of close text - however, there are bound to be disappointments. Some of the fascinating implications that MacCulloch gradually builds concerning Gregory are not followed up when he confronts the final crisis that overwhelmed Cromwell in 1540. His readers might also have benefited from a clearer, more chronological approach throughout.

MacCulloch's description that the resourceful Lady Ughtred 'always inspires admiration' (p. 538), is lacking in his account of the definitive relationship between Cromwell and Anne Boleyn. MacCulloch makes the valuable point that Cromwell and the queen never shared the same opinions in matters of religion, and they should not be understood as allies before their fatal falling out in 1536. Cromwell's evangelicalism first developed, as MacCulloch demonstrates, during his early travels on the continent and particularly in Italy. On a journey to Rome, he read Erasmus's edition of the Greek and Latin New Testament (p. 34), *the Novum Instrumentum* of 1516. Later, as he had the opportunity to make overtures to Martin Luther and Philip Melanchthon in the mid- and late-1530s, Cromwell's evangelicalism was influenced by Wittenberg as well as by Martin Bucer's Strasbourg and Heinrich Bullinger's Zürich. Cromwell wanted England to be allied with German-speaking Europe: with the Holy Roman Empire of Charles V, or with the Lutheran League of Schmalkalden.

In contrast, Anne's evangelicalism was French in its origins and her diplomatic value was in allowing Henry to make an alliance with King Francis I. More than a decade ago, the late Eric Ives (1931-2012) highlighted her leading role as a sponsor of religious change in England in his important study, *The Life and Death of Anne Boleyn*.[13]

[13] E. W Ives, *The Life and Death of Anne Boleyn, 'the most happy'* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

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His book was preceded in 1984 by the groundbreaking article 'Anne Boleyn and Reform' in *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* by Maria Dowling (1955-2011)[14]. They established Anne as a daring politician and an influential patron of evangelicals.

MacCulloch wants to argue that Anne's existence was so divisive that English evangelicalism could not coalesce while she was Henry's wife (p. 116), and he treats her as a mere foil for Cromwell, who 'thought her a worthy adversary' (p. 342) as he engineered her richly-deserved fate as payback for toppling Wolsey in 1529. However, this perspective underplays the reality that the contentious doctrinal lines that were being drawn between the various continental reformers from 1517 were so deep that they could not be unified with her or without her. Just as MacCulloch has accepted large portions of Elton's great thesis that Cromwell engineered a revolution in Tudor government, like Mantel he has accepted Elton's dismissive opinion of Anne's early role in the Reformation. Dowling's article subtly challenged Elton's central thesis in his 1951 'Decline and Fall' article that Cromwell alone had brought about change to the English Church as the king's chief servant when she demonstrated that Anne's influence over Henry was initially, and briefly, even greater. The Reformation she might have inspired, had she been allowed to live, would have been different than the one Cromwell helped to create, and it was a lost opportunity for England.

In their disagreements that culminated in 1536, Anne and Cromwell nearly destroyed each other. Perhaps they did destroy each other, and Cromwell's execution was merely postponed. In 2002, Rory McEntegart's *Henry VIII, the League of Schmalkalden, and the English Reformation* established that by eliminating Anne Boleyn and her brother the duke of Rochford, Cromwell destroyed some of the support that he ultimately needed to succeed.[15] In his final article, 'Anne Boleyn on Trial Again' for *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* (2011), Ives repeated his claim that Anne wanted Henry to know that Cromwell would despoil the Church to enrich himself.[16] That her misgivings were amply justified is apparent in MacCulloch's account of how much Church property Cromwell acquired for himself and for Gregory. MacCulloch speaks of Cromwell's idealism, but he also mentions his 'rapacity' (p. 548).

That Cromwell was both victor and victim was anticipated by Elton in the final chapter of what arguably was his 1972 masterpiece, *Policy*

[14] Maria Dowling, 'Anne Boleyn and Reform', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 35 (1984), 30–46.
[15] Rory McEntegart, *Henry VIII, the League of Schmalkalden, and the English Reformation* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2002), p. 103.
[16] E. W Ives, 'Anne Boleyn On Trial Again', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 62 (2011), 763–77.

and Police: the Enforcement of the Reformation in the Age of Thomas Cromwell.[17] Its nine seamless chapters were the basis of the Ford Lectures he delivered at the University of Oxford in 1972. From the start of his researches in the 1940s, he recounted that he had wanted to answer the question whether the regime of Thomas Cromwell had practiced a 'reign of terror'.[18] By examining the quite narrow category of those accused of treason between 1532 and 1540, Elton concluded that only 63 people were executed for words against the king's supremacy, and another 331 'probably' escaped punishment. He strove to put Cromwell's 'police activities' into a 'correct' or indeed a 'better' light than usually fell upon them, although he used the word 'savagery' several times in his chapter.[19] Apart from a few 'exceptional cases' (and for Elton, the case of Sir Thomas More was always the most exceptional) 'there was neither ruthless persecution nor any savage lashing out at alleged opponents' because of the protection provided by common law.[20] But Cromwell was 'an autocrat as well as a bureaucrat in office', and the very trend of the repressions and suppressions that Elton documented through *Policy and Police* cannot convince his readers that Cromwell's greatest influence was always beneficial.[21]

Can we make sense of this disparity, between what Elton observed as a brilliant historian, and the larger message he wished to leave as his legacy? The answer may lie in his gratitude to Britain for saving his life and the lives of the family he loved. With its Parliament, its laws, and its sense of fair play, Britain withstood and defeated the Nazis and their threat to the entire world. The British Constitution was an essential bulwark against chaos and mass murder. That was the legacy that Geoffrey Elton taught the world, even if he had to bend Thomas Cromwell out of shape to do so.

This is the very context that our present-day fixation on personality can miss. In 'Some Origins of a Tudor Revolution', which appeared in *The English Historical Review* in 2011, Ian Harris examined Sir Geoffrey's correspondence and other papers.[22] He concluded that substantial portions of his great theme concerning the transformation in Tudor government had already been worked out by previous generations of historians. They included the nineteenth-century medievalists William Stubbs (1825-1901), T. F. Tout (1855-1929), and James Anthony Froude (1818-94). In essence, Elton assumed their

[17] G. R Elton, *Policy and Police: the Enforcement of the Reformation in the Age of Thomas Cromwell* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972).
[18] *Ibid*., vii.
[19] *Ibid*., 393.
[20] *Ibid*., 399.
[21] Elton, *Tudor Revolution in Government*, 416.
[22] Ian Harris, 'Some Origins of a Tudor Revolution', *English Historical Review*, 126 (2011), 1355–85.

'interpretative structure'.[23] They had already established the elements of modernity that had been worked out under the Tudors. Elton benefited from their 'received notions'.[24] Under the direction of his supervisor of studies, Sir John Neale (1890-1975), as he turned his thesis into his first book, Elton applied the critical word 'revolution' that crowned Cromwell as the key figure who effected the transformation.[25]

Mantel and MacCulloch have often paid tribute to the debt they owe Elton, but they have not always highlighted the policies that genuinely made Cromwell a great man. Perhaps his most important innovation, as Elton conjectured in his essay on 'An Early Tudor Poor Law', was in drafting a bill to relieve poverty in England.[26] The proposed law was intended as an effective national system of poor relief, and it was designed to replace the medieval Church's piecemeal efforts that were centered on the very religious houses that Cromwell and Henry's government closed. Under the new law, poor people were to be assisted voluntarily through their parishes. As MacCulloch notes briefly in passing (pp. 322-3), the law was not fully implemented in Cromwell's lifetime. Still, his draft was a model for the law that was passed at the end of Elizabeth's reign. It continued in effect (with later modifications) nearly to the beginning of Victoria's. By investing increased responsibility in the parishes, policy-making was moved from the royal household and the court to England's towns, villages and its parishes. In a seminal article that first appeared in 1987, Collinson described the complex interplay of shared authority that defined England's early modern system of government as a 'monarchical republic'.[27] This is part of Cromwell's legacy, and it is worthy of greater attention. If he deserves some of the credit that MacCulloch accords him, even to contributing at a distance to the founding of the United States in the eighteenth century (p. 552), it would be due to the ultimate transfer of elements of power to smaller and more local authorities.

To focus on what really mattered, Elton may have been correct when he thought Cromwell was 'not biographable'.

[23] *Ibid.*, 1364.
[24] *Ibid.*, 1365.
[25] *Ibid.*, 1374.
[26] G. R. Elton, 'An Early Tudor Poor Law', *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., 6 (1953), 55-67, and *Studies*, 2 137-54.
[27] Patrick Collinson, 'The Monarchical Republic of Queen Elizabeth I', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 69 (1987), 394–424; reprinted in Patrick Collinson, *Elizabethan Essays* (London: Hambledon Press, 1994). 31-57.