

The Lord Protector, Oliver Cromwell is singularly absent from Romantic studies. This is surprising in that many of the writers of the period were deeply interested in British history and also because the 1790s, and beyond, was dominated, in political terms, by the French Revolution and the Napoleonic aftermath. The period was certainly one of powerful and singular figures, such as Robespierre, Marat, St Just, Danton, Pitt, and Napoleon himself, and one might expect that the figure of Oliver Cromwell would feature strongly as a contrast to these egocentric and singular figures. Obviously one would think that Cromwell would provide an interesting anticipation or counterpoint to discuss Napoleon's revolutionary dictatorship and empire, but this is seldom the case. Coleridge, in particular, who writes extensively about Napoleon, rarely uses Cromwell as a contrast, tending instead to refer to the imperial politics of Rome for a paradigmatic model of the Corsican's career. One would also think that Coleridge's concerns with genius, and, in particular, his distinction between 'absolute' and 'commanding' genius might find a tractable example in Oliver's career. Simon Bainbridge's *Napoleon and English Romanticism* when mentioning Cromwell in the range of figures with whom Napoleon is compared can only find three actual references, two in Coleridge and one in Wordsworth's 'Convention of Cintra'.^[1] In fact the two most substantial discussions of Cromwell in the period are contained in William Godwin's *History of the Commonwealth* (1824-28) and Sir Walter Scott's, much under-rated late novel *Woodstock* of 1826. Nevertheless there are several interesting comments on Cromwell in, what we may call the Coleridge circle and it is these, which are the subject of this paper.

The reasons why Cromwell is seldom discussed and very rarely considered sympathetically are basically twofold. First, he was not liked by either radicals or conservatives, both of whom blamed him for destroying the hopes of their political parties. Second, it is arguable that until Thomas Carlyle's edition of *Oliver Cromwell's Letters and Speeches with Elucidations* of 1845, which gave his Victorian audience the inner workings and troubled conscience of a Christian hero who would speak to the increasing predominance of nonconformity in Victorian England, there was no real understanding of the spiritual dynamics of revolutionary puritan thought. Typical of this view is Timothy Lang's recent comment:

Even the radicals, whose distrust of the crown and attraction to republicanism might have led them to look more favourably on the

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Puritan past, hurled some of the most bitter invective at the Protector. It was Cromwell, after all, who turned against the Commonwealth in order to satisfy his own ambitions, thus terminating prematurely England's republican experiment. No one, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, was prepared to utter a good word in defense of Cromwell and the Puritans.^[2]

However, in addition to William Godwin's and Walter Scott's pre-empting of Carlyle, one such, which Coleridge would probably be familiar with was that of the Independent minister and dissenting historian Daniel Neal, who published his influential and rarely-discussed, *History of the Puritans* between 1732 and 1738, presenting a more positive portrait of Cromwell for a liberal and

dissenting audience. Neal's *History* was reprinted and enlarged by Joshua Toulmin in 1793. Toulmin was, of course, the minister of Mary Street Unitarian Baptist chapel in Taunton and a friend of the young Unitarian radical S.T. Coleridge. Neal's *History* is remarkable for its evaluation of Cromwell's Protectorate. He eulogises:

Thus did this wonderful man, by surprising management, supported only by the sword, advance himself to the supreme government of the three kingdoms without consent of parliament or people. His birth seemed to promise nothing of this kind; nor does it appear that he had formed the project, till after the battle of Worcester, when he apprehended the parliament had projected his ruin by disbanding the army, and perpetuating their authority among themselves: which of the two usurpations was most eligible, must be left with the reader; but how he brought the officers into his measures, and supported his sovereignty by an army of enthusiasts, Anabaptists, fifth monarchy men, and republicans will be the admiration of all posterity; and though by this adventurous act he drew upon himself the plots and conspiracies of the several factions in the nation, yet his genius and resolution surmounted all difficulties, his short empire being one continued blaze of glory and renown to the British isles, and a terror to the rest of Europe.^[3]

Neal admires Cromwell's policies of toleration and justice, but it is his foreign policy which excites him most. His Cromwell 'appeared on a sudden like a comet or blazing star, raised up by providence to exalt this nation to a distinguished pitch of glory, and to strike terror into the rest of Europe'. Under Cromwell justice 'was restored to its ancient splendour', manners were reformed, trade flourished and 'the arts of peace were cultivated'. Neal is suspicious of Cromwell's usurpation, suspecting ambition, but he applauds the

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dismissal of the Rump and concludes that he 'had no other choice, but to abandon the state, or to take the administration upon himself; or put it into the hands of some other person who had no better title'. Nor is Neal's portrait of Cromwell simply that of the consummate statesman. His Cromwell is a generous, jocular, intelligent and pious man. Cromwell's faults were those of his enthusiasm and his not deriving his religion from rational principles, in the manner of the eighteenth-century rational dissenter. The negativity which surrounds his reception is easily explained by Neal in the hostility of Royalists, Prebyterians, and Republicans.^[4] In Neal's Independent defence of Cromwell we have a strong anticipation of Carlyle's Christian hero. Neal's influence on the radical dissenters of the 1790s and beyond was not inconsiderable.^[5]

Coleridge's own opinions about the Lord Protector are, throughout his life, ambiguous. In 1794 in *The Fall of Robespierre* he and Southey have the conspirator Jean-Marie Collot-D'Herbois denounce this 'This worse than Cromwell/ The Austere, the self denying Robespierre'^[6], using Cromwell as a type of revolutionary dictator. As the play is dramatic and Collot-D'Herbois himself was one of the more vicious members of the Committee of Public Safety, we can not be sure of what it reveals of Coleridge's or Southey's then opinions of Cromwell (unlikely to be identical in any case). Nevertheless it does seem that the dissenting Coleridge of the 1790s saw Robespierre in terms of the Puritan ruler. In June 1795, in a series of six historical lectures, Coleridge planned to give 'a Comparative View of the English Rebellion under Charles the First and the French Revolution', the fifth of which was to consider 'Oliver Cromwell and Robespierre'.^[7] This lecture was almost certainly not given, though if it had been it would have contained one of the first mature attempts to contrast the two revolutions. Coleridge, it seems, was keen to ground his radical dissent in a serious engagement with Commonwealthsman

ideology.^[8] However, though we have substantial engagements with Milton and Harrington, we have little of Cromwell beyond the title of that tantalizingly absent lecture. As Coleridge moved towards his later conservatism he often returned to the issue of single-person rule hinted at in *The Fall of Robespierre* and the 'Lecture', though now filtered through the experience of Bonapartism. In 'Letters on the Spaniards V' for *The Courier* of 20 December 1809 he argues for the importance of representative institutions as a check on personal ambition:

Under extraordinary circumstances of national terror, Robespierre indeed used the frenzy of the Parisian populace to terrify and enslave the National Assembly: but he was sacrificed to public vengeance

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before he had disclosed any plan of permanent usurpation, and at this hour it remains uncertain whether the Monster died a fanatic or impostor... Cromwell would never have been Protector if the Parliament had been the sole scene of his hypocrisy: he found the mock Parliaments of his own election unmanageable tools. Neither the victories, nor the oaths, nor the bombastic harangues of Bonaparte, nor even the powerful presidential authority of his brother Lucien, would have saved him from the sentence of the legislature, or the hastier daggers that leapt forth to avenge its insulted majesty, had not his dragoons protected him, and the army joined the conspiracy against freedom.^[9]

Coleridge here introduces Cromwell as a third term into a political discourse which is essentially about Bonaparte's career, a phenomenon which had substantial implications for his ideas about genius, both artistic and worldly. For Coleridge, Cromwell could stand for the spirits of both Bonapartism and Jacobinism. In *The Friend* (1811) he remarks how he remembered 'that when the examples of former Jacobins, Julius Caesar, Cromwell, &c. were adduced in France and England' to gloss the First Consul's ambitions, they were dismissed as unthinkable in the enlightened eighteenth century.^[10]

However, Coleridge's opinions became more sympathetic towards Cromwell. His own ideas about personal rule had changed somewhat from his earlier days and in his *On the Constitution of the Church and State* of 1829, he argued strongly for the executive role of kingship in which the king 'in whom the executive power is vested' functions as 'the beam of the constitutional scales' or balance of interests between the forces of progression (the mercantile interests) and the forces of permanence (the landed interest). It seems that Coleridge possibly had in mind the example of the religious toleration of Cromwell's single-person rule in the 1650s in mind here. In 1811 he comments on Richard Baxter's 'severe sarcasm' that he saw 'times of greater Liberty (though under a usurper)' than in the time of the Restoration. In his substantial and later marginalia to *Reliquiae Baxterianae*, dating from 1819-25, Coleridge makes his clearest though private criticism of the 'incurable despot' Charles I and explicitly defends Cromwell and against the king. Though doubtful of the legality of the regicide, Coleridge exonerates Cromwell from any responsibility. Coleridge also attributed Cromwell's 'despair & consequent unfaithfulness concerning a Parliamentary Common-wealth' to the 'persecuting spirit' of the Presbyterians (like Baxter) and Churchmen of the time. In his late annotations to Lucy Hutchinson's *Memoirs of Colonel Hutchinson*, Coleridge though critical of Cromwell's usurpation argued that had the protector been offered the throne 'under a solemn national Contract' England 'might have been a republican Kingdom—a glorious Commonwealth with the King as the

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symbol of its majesty, and Key-stone of its Unity’.

If Coleridge was deeply knowledgeable of the political and religious history of the Civil War and Interregnum, so too was his friend the arch-Tory Anglican Robert Southey. Although an inveterate enemy of sectarianism, was nevertheless fascinated by the lives and activities of the dissenters of the 1640s and 50s. No longer the Godwinian radical who in 1797 could praise the ‘ardent mind’ and ‘goodliest plans of happiness on earth’ of the republican and regicide Henry Marten, nevertheless he could still find good copy in the activities of James Nayler, George Fox, Mary Fisher, and the Quakers, Ranters and Seekers.^[11] Southey was concerned to defend the inclusiveness of the national Anglican church against what he perceived to be the fragmentation and divisiveness of the spirit of sectarianism in the face of the growing strength of nonconformity. In his review of three recent publications on the history of dissent (including Edward Parsons’ two-volume abridgement of Neal’s *History* of 1812), for the *Quarterly Review* in 1813, he condemned its adherents for their intolerance of others. Mischievously, he sought to confront the respectable contemporary dissenters with the extravagancies and excesses of their schismatic forefathers, returning their dissent to its origins. Arguing that ‘sectarianism... contains in itself the seeds of schism in infinite series’ and claiming that Puritanism has always been a religion of intolerance, he instances the Presbyterian Thomas Edwards’s *Gangraena* (1645) as symptomatic of its true, persecuting spirit. It is in the extravagancies of the sects of the 1650s that Southey detects a warning for his own age when, confronted by the breakdown of established forms of belief, people ‘found themselves astray like sheep when the fold has been broken down’. The spirit of dissent itself is ‘evil’. It breaks down the national consensus as those it inflicts ally themselves with enemies of the nation, such as the American and French Revolutionaries. It is this ‘moral expatriation’ which is dangerous and threatens anarchy and confusion in the body politic.^[12]

Southey’s neglected ‘Life of Cromwell’ for the *Quarterly Review* of July 1821 continues with this theme. Reviewing a series of recent works about Cromwell, Southey puts together the life of a dissembling Puritan hypocrite. His ‘Life’ is notable for its fulsome sympathy for the ‘unambitious and conscientious spirit’ of Charles I, unusual even in inveterate Cromwell-haters of the period. Southey, a latter-day version of the revisionist historian Kevin Sharpe, follows Clarendon’s *History* in applauding the success of Charles’s personal rule.^[13] For Southey, Cromwell was not a naturally wicked man and, in private life, he showed many good qualities. He is certainly preferable to the severe republicans of the Long Parliament and the ‘thorough fanatic’ Henry

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Vane (Godwin’s hero). What damns him is the ‘fanatical constitution’ that Southey detected in all dissenters. The English Revolution, like the French was the result of the activities of schismatics and unbelievers who had ‘determined to overthrow the existing government in church and state’. It was in Cromwell’s power to restore monarchy and peace after the first Civil War.

In the movements of the revolutionary sphere his star was rising, but it was not yet lord of the ascendant; and, in raising himself to his present situation, he had, like the unlucky magician in romance, conjured up stronger spirits than he was yet master enough of the black art to control.^[14]

Once having attained power by sinister means, Cromwell was unable to govern ‘equitably and mercifully’ as he would have wished. ‘In spite of himself’ he ‘was compelled to govern tyrannically’. Ultimately for Southey, Cromwell was ‘this most fortunate and least flagitious of

usurpers' who left an 'imperishable name so stained with reproach... it were better for him to be forgotten than to be so remembered'.^[15]

Coleridge's later sympathetic comments on Cromwell's actions and his admiration for his policy of religious toleration contrast with Southey's more characteristic Tory views. Coleridge was always more sympathetic to the workings of the Puritan spiritual dynamic, whatever its enthusiasm, than was Southey, a life long critic of all kinds of enthusiasm. In his *Table Talk* of 24 July 1830 Coleridge criticized Southey for his references to the Puritans of the seventeenth century as 'the bestial herd &c'. In response he charges that 'whatever may have been the faults of the Puritans under Cromwell—to call them immoral as compared with the Cavaliers after the Restoration is really too much'. From the lost, or unwritten, 'Lecture' on Cromwell and Robespierre to the Baxter marginalia, Coleridge shows a fugitive interest in the career and ideas of the Lord Protector which gained in sympathy with the years. Coleridge's late defence of Cromwell, prior to that of Thomas Carlyle, is certainly uncommon for a Tory Anglican and it once more reminds us of the unusual and idiosyncratic nature of his later politics. *The Constitution of the Church and State* with its eschewal of Burkeian traditions, its avowal of religious toleration, and its favoring of the ideas of ideals states which underly actual government possibly has more in common with Commonwealth and Cromwellian constitutional experimentation than we have so far admitted.

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[1] In the first Simon Bainbridge, *Napoleon and English Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997-2000).

[2] Timothy Lang, *The Victorians and the Stuart Heritage: Interpretations of a Discordant Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). p. 3

[3] Daniel Neal, *The History of the Puritans; or, protestant Nonconformists from the Reformation in 1517 to the Revolution in 1688...* Reprinted from Dr. Toulmin's edition. 5 vols (London: William Baynes), IV, p. 71.

[4] Neal, *History*, IV, pp.157-8; II, pp. 61-63; IV, pp. 182-88.

[5] See, James E. Bradley, *Religion, Revolution, and English Radicalism: Nonconformity in Eighteenth-Century Politics and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

[6] S. T. Coleridge and Robert Southey, *The Fall of Robespierre: An Historic Drama* (Cambridge: Benjamin Flower, 1794), p. 28.

[7] S. T. Coleridge, *Lectures 1795 On Politics and Religion*, ed. Lewis Patton and Peter Mann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), pp. 255-6

[8] I have already discussed this in my 'Sages', pp. 220-24

[9] S. T. Coleridge *Essays on His Own Times*, ed. David V. Erdman, 3 vols (Princeton: U P 1978), II, p. 66

[10] S. T. Coleridge, *The Friend*, ed. Barabara E. Rooke. 2 vols (Princeton U P 1969), I, p. 181.

[11] Robert Southey, *Poems* (Bristol: Cottle, 1796), pp. 59-60.

[12] Robert Southey, 'History of Dissenters', *Quarterly Review*, 10 (October, 1813), pp. 126, 97, 98-101, 104, 107, 110-11, 130, 135, 138-9.

[13] The question of the authenticity of the work had been recently discussed by Christopher Wordsworth's *Who Wrote Eikon Basilike? Considered and Answered* (London, 1824).

[14] Robert Southey, 'Life of Cromwell', *Quarterly Review*, 25 (July, 1821), pp. 287, 288, 286, 298, 294, 324.

[15] Southey, 'Life', p. 347.