

Barry Coward. *Cromwell*. London and New York: Longman, 1991. Pp. vii, 204. Paper, \$17.95.

Another book on Cromwell? Barry Coward argues that the massive literature on this enigmatic figure, much of it partisan, is precisely what makes a reevaluation of his character, motives, aims, abilities, and legacy necessary. Moreover, recent revisionist accounts of Charles I's reign and of the religious tensions of the seventeenth century place Cromwell's ideas and endeavors in a new light. Coward follows the chronological approach to Cromwell recommended one hundred years ago by S. R. Gardiner, finding Cromwell's words and actions more (but by no means completely) explicable when viewed in the context of wider events. However, Coward is careful to emphasize that his study is not a biography but rather, as part of Longman's "Profiles in Power" series, "it is a study of Cromwell as a political figure and of the historical problems associated with his exercise of power."

Coward focuses on the controversial points in Cromwell's career. What was his role in the trial and execution of the king? Why was his relationship with the Long, Rump, Barebones, and Protectorate Parliaments so problematic? Why did he refuse the crown? Ultimately, was he hero or villain, success or failure? Sifting through the myths and legends manufactured by admirers and detractors alike, Coward passes judgment on these and other historical arguments and backs up his views with evidence gleaned from Cromwell's speeches and writings, and other contemporary sources.

Coward does an admirable job of finding continuity in a life famous for its inconsistency and ambiguity. Well before he rose to prominence during the Civil War, Cromwell became convinced that he was one of the Elect, and his quest for a godly reformation was a consistent element in every stage of his career. Coward attributes much of Cromwell's erratic behavior to his attempts to reconcile this quest, with its accompanying political and social change, with the need to assure conservatives that he sought security of property and constitutional respectability. Cromwell resorted to military force only when he became convinced that it was necessary for satisfying the dictates of providence. He even would have been willing to support the monarchy had the king allowed annual parliaments and freedom of conscience. Much of the anger and disillusion that characterized his Protectorate came out of Cromwell's realization that parliamentary liberty would not automatically bring a godly reformation.

The book rescues Cromwell from the stereotype of military dictator. Coward's Cromwell is not the severe, forbidding figure of legend but rather a man willing to heed advice and make compromises. Caught between a mutually hostile parliament and army, he turned to authoritarianism out of frustration when he found people just did not know what was good for them. Although Cromwell failed in all of his aims, and ultimately his ideas and style of government provoked violent reaction, he *had* managed to bring stability and security in the wake of civil war and regicide. Coward believes that along with Cromwell's introduction of republicanism to England, his most important achievement "was, ironically, one that Cromwell would undoubtedly have not wanted: the establishment of Protestant nonconformity as a permanent feature of life in Britain from that day to this."

As Reader in History at Birbeck College, University of London, Coward must be accustomed to British undergraduates who generally are familiar with the events, personnel, and religious factions of the English Civil War. On this side of the Atlantic his work would be instructive reading for an upper-level or graduate course stressing historiography, since Coward involves the reader in his thought process as he weighs evidence and arguments and reaches conclusions. Additionally, he provides a bibliographical essay that renders the book a useful source for a student research paper or a teacher's presentation on seventeenth-century England

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