



# 10-Minute Talks: The making of Oliver Cromwell

By Professor Ronald Hutton FBA

*Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658) is, in terms of sheer achievement, the greatest English commoner of all time and yet remains a deeply controversial figure. He represented himself, apparently compellingly, as an honest, pious, modest, and selfless servant of God and his nation, and yet most of his contemporaries found him ruthless, devious, and self-promoting. In this talk, Ronald Hutton sums up the findings of his latest book, The Making of Oliver Cromwell, which examines his actions and words in full context up until the end of the English Civil War in 1651, and proposes an answer to this apparent paradox.*

This talk is available to watch on [YouTube](#)



Image: Statue of Oliver Cromwell in front of Palace of Westminster (Parliament), London, UK. © Stuart Monk via Shutterstock

*The following transcript was developed using speech recognition software and human transcribers. Although all care has been taken to check, proofread and correct the transcript, it may contain errors.*

Professor Ronald Hutton FBA [00:00:06] I am going to talk to you about Oliver Cromwell on whom I'm just publishing a book called *The Making of Oliver Cromwell*. He's undoubtedly in sheer achievement the greatest commoner in English history, simply because he's the only one to have risen to become the supreme power in the land.

A lot of people think that he's great in a broader sense too. The millennial poll of the BBC ended up placing him third in the nation's great figures after Shakespeare and Churchill, but ahead of any monarch. And he's a great subject for historians. Since 1990, a full-length biography has been published every three to five years, plus dozens of studies of different aspects of his career.

He's written about so much because he left so many recorded words, more than any other ruler of Britain before Queen Victoria. So it's very easy just to use his own words, his self-representation, as the scaffolding on which to hang the story of his life. Trouble is that most of his contemporaries found him ruthless, devious and self-promoting, none of which comes across in his own self-representation.

My book tries to reconcile the two views. I chose a limited period in which to consider him from his birth to the end of the great Civil War between Cavaliers and Roundheads in 1646, by which time he was established as a national figure. This was a short enough period for me to feel able to study not just his words, but everything else that happened around him, and was said about him as well. And here are my findings.

I found his success could be attributed to a number of factors. One is that he was undoubtedly a superb leader, efficient, charismatic and inspiring. This showed to the best advantage in the Civil War.

As a soldier, he instilled a thirst and fierce discipline into his men, which they showed both on and off the battlefield. And he also encouraged them in a sense of common participation in the cause of God and what God wanted the world to be. On top of that, he ensured they were properly paid and supplied, and he constantly showed his pride in them and his affection for them.

He didn't just possess virtues as a soldier but as a parliamentarian. Plainly, he was an effective and persuasive speaker in an unusual and distinctive style – harsh, emotional, aggressive and bereft of elegance, polish and erudition. He also worked well with allies in the House of Commons and commanded the sympathy of a large number of its members, usually, the majority.

[00:03:37] Moreover, he's characterised by a fervent, born-again religiosity. Extreme – even by the standards of the conventionally religious age – and absolutely genuine. It became implanted when he was in his 30s, in the core of his being and identity, by a profound, personal, born-again religious conversion. And in terms of apparent worldly outcomes, it worked.

One consequence of his new persona as a radical evangelical Protestant – a Puritan, if you like – is his endearing sympathy with fellow Puritans who were either actually persecuted by, or in danger of persecution by the prevailing ecclesiastical powers.

This stance ensured him a set of able and committed allies in the House of Commons, people of similar views, who often exerted a prevailing influence in the Commons, and also in the Lords, where they operated as an active and often influential minority. It also enabled

him to build up a military clientele of radical Protestants who gave him devoted allegiance, filled up his own regiment, and became ever more prominent in the armies, which proved most successful in the service of Parliament in the Civil War.

In other words, regard for unorthodox opinions on the part of godly Puritans gave him a distinctive power base which he could not otherwise have obtained. And so a genuine instinct for his favourite kind of religion and political self-interest made a good match. But here, less attractive, and less often remarked, aspects of his personality come into play.

One is his relentless pursuit of self-promotion. As soon as he was elected to the Long Parliament, which was to fight the king in the Civil War, he drew attention to himself by making a notable speech on the second day of the Parliament sitting in favour of a persecuted Puritan. It succeeded. It got everybody's regard and attention.

His military career initially involved greater problems in attracting notice and glory as his actions were for a long time minor, local, and fought off a great distance from the capital – London. Oliver solved this problem, as other regional commanders had before him, by securing the attention of supportive journalists who trumpeted his achievements in the newspapers of London.

Whenever notices of those early actions of his appeared, his own part in them was magnified over those of his fellow commanders who did not have the same hotline to the contemporary equivalent to the tabloids in the capital.

In his own accounts of military actions, he adopted a standard tactic of according all glory to God and extolling the achievements of his side in the plural form – “we” and “us” – without mentioning names of his immediate subordinates, which served at once to give an appearance of piety and modesty, and completely to eclipse his fellow commanders.

[00:07:43] Moreover, Oliver was a master not just of inflating his own parts in actions, but of representing them to emphasise their most positive aspects. Like most Civil War propagandists on both sides, for example, he also routinely gave the impression that in every action not only was his side triumphant but his enemies outnumbered it, so making the ensuing successes, the more superlative.

The rising Cromwell undoubtedly believed that the glory of God was best served by winning the maximum glory for himself. This characteristic was accompanied by another, a tendency to demonise opponents and see the universe as a battlefield between good and evil powers in which he was invariably ranged on the side of good which meant that of God.

From the start, he was anxious not just to assist and protect Puritan victims of actual and apparent persecution, but to obtain savage revenge against their enemies. When war erupted, he was able to employ physical violence directly against those enemies, and he revelled in killing them. This attitude to warfare was scripted by Old Testament accounts of genocide against heathen tribes. But these matched naturally with a savage streak in his own nature.

The same tendency to polarise the world and see ideological differences in terms of cosmological conflicts was applied even to his own wartime party and to his own allies. He turns savagely against people who are in his way. There was a precedent for this in his botched attempt when he was a young man to get his uncle declared a lunatic so he could obtain immediate access to the old man's estate.

Once the Civil War was underway, he dispatched a trio of upper class dimwits, whom he found to be liabilities, culminating in his sensational attack upon his former commander in his first great army command, the Earl of Manchester. In each case, he launched a campaign of defamation against the men concerned in which he told blatant untruths. He also bore grudges.

One small example of this, but a telling one, is his treatment of a smooth lawyer who had outmanoeuvred and humiliated him as a young man in his hometown. The petty and sustained malice with which Cromwell persecuted this man in wartime is revealing, as is, the manner in which he hounded defeated enemies to their deaths.

So to sum up, I found the Cromwell in the record studied in the round courageous, devout, resolute, principled, intelligent, eloquent, able, adaptable and dedicated. But I also found him self-seeking unscrupulous, dishonest, manipulative, vindictive and bloodthirsty. Definitely not somebody to be taken simply at his word. There was no internal contradiction in this bundle of qualities, for they're all woven together in a single, seamless whole, at the centre of which lay an acquired sense of a special relationship with God, which informed and justified everything.

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