

Thomas Carlyle and Oliver Cromwell

*The Raleigh Lecture on History was delivered by Professor Blair Worden FBA, Professor of Early Modern History at the University of Sussex, on 27 October 1999 at the British Academy. One hundred years ago (almost to the day when the lecture was given), the statue of Oliver Cromwell that stands outside the Palace of Westminster was unveiled. To the commemorators his modern standing had one principal cause: the publication in 1845 of Thomas Carlyle's book *Oliver Cromwell's Letters and Speeches*. In the following extract, Professor Worden considers the relationship between the two men.*

In October 1918 Sir Charles Wakefield, formerly Lord Mayor of London and later Lord Wakefield, offered the Academy a sum to commemorate the tercentenary of Sir Walter Raleigh. From this fund, the annual history lecture was founded. Since 1974 the subject has been drawn on a regular rotating basis from the medieval, early modern and modern periods.

Carlyle was not at ease with the protectorate. His account of it seems to have been hurriedly drawn together. For him the earlier Cromwell, the warrior-hero and agent of divine destruction, had transcended politics. As protector, charged not with destruction but with reconstruction, Oliver was obliged, as a merely mortal ruler would have been, to haggle with parliament. Carlyle acknowledges that Cromwell's godly policies were pursued 'with only partial, never with entire success.' The fault lay with the nation, which had not 'rallied' to him – a damning failure, 'the most significant feature in the history of an epoch' being 'the manner it has of welcoming a great man.' The nation's rejoicing on Charles II's return proved its unworthiness. Carlyle had earlier supposed, what classical and Renaissance political theory had taught, that a community will be drawn, as by a magnet, to the leadership of great souls. He found instead that it resists it. In Carlyle's narrative the protector becomes a worn-down figure, a subject for pathos and pity, bearing on his solitary shoulders a cause that will not survive him. Like other heroes of Carlyle, he becomes more

significant for what he was, for the ideals and qualities he represented, than for what he did.

Not only had the nation failed Cromwell. So had Puritanism. At first Carlyle, or at least a side of him, saw Cromwell merely as the most heroic representative of that heroic movement, which itself was the representative – because it represented the best – of England. Yet Puritanism's 'mad suicide' after Cromwell's death showed that it, like the Long Parliament which it had controlled, was unequal to its divine task. Having held up 'the Puritanic age' for emulation, Carlyle acknowledged that it had had its shortcomings.

They were those of the society from which Puritanism emerged. Carlyle was never at home with the early-modern period. He knew about, and (mostly) warmed to, medieval feudalism. He knew too that the French Revolution had brought feudalism's final and inevitable destruction, and that democracy, to which he could not warm, was inevitably replacing it. It was the non-feudal and non-democratic aspects of society, from the fourteenth century to the eighteenth, that perplexed him. He knew from Scottish sociology about the stages of social development. He approved of the energy, industry and ingenuity with which communities advance their social organisation and economic resources. He accepted, what in recent decades had become an orthodoxy, that the English civil war had been in some way related to the rise of a commercial class. He recognised that the 'fighting' of the high middle ages had 'given place to trading, ploughing, weaving and merchant adventuring', and that that change, too, was irreversible. Yet Carlyle, who rebuked historical nostalgia, succumbed to it. Hard as he tried to bring alive the texture of the society that had produced Puritanism, its starched ruffs and fringed breeches and pointed beards, his heart lay with the frugal spontaneity of an earlier age. He yearned for the time when kings were 'raised aloft on bucklers with clangour of sounding shields'. He



Oliver Cromwell by Samuel Cooper.
By Courtesy of the National
Portrait Gallery, London

wanted to think of the Puritan leaders as a continuation of the feudal ideal, as an 'earnest religious aristocracy', the last of England's ruling classes to combine rank with intellect. Yet intellect itself had assumed early-modern forms which Carlyle found easier to admire than love. The age had been sicklied-o'er with the pale cast of thought, trusting too much to words, possessed by the self-consciousness of which the most heroic times are free.

If only Cromwell had been born in the middle ages! Carlyle's imagination links him to William the Conqueror, who sorted out the 'potbellied' natives; and, behind him, to the Norse kings commemorated in Icelandic sagas. Yet even the medieval age cannot contain Carlyle's hero. He is a 'primeval' figure, his exploits decked with mythological and anthropological imagery, his place among the 'sanhedrim of the gods' announced by proto-Wagnerian outbreaks of thunder, lightning, fire. Carlyle, who set out to heroise Puritan society, instead created a hero beyond society.

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How did Carlyle's book, a work at once so hostile and eccentric to its age, come to be embraced by it? At least a part of the answer must lie in the central perception of his enterprise: that Cromwell's letters and speeches are extraordinary documents; and that unlike the customary pronouncements of rulers, which are couched in language intended to conceal the character within, they convey an authentic image of the inner man. The *Letters and Speeches* spoke to an age eager to explore that subterranean emotional landscape of past minds which the 'philosophic' historians of the eighteenth century were now reproached for having missed. Cromwell, unknowable from the jumbled and scattered versions in which his words had earlier been printed, now stood, enthused one reviewer, 'in bodily and mental presence before us. We live, speak, correspond with him'.

There was praise too for the artful vividness of the work. ... While planning the *Letters and Speeches* Carlyle made a note to himself that the battle of Dunbar was 'one of [Cromwell's] great scenes.' In the book it is immortally so.

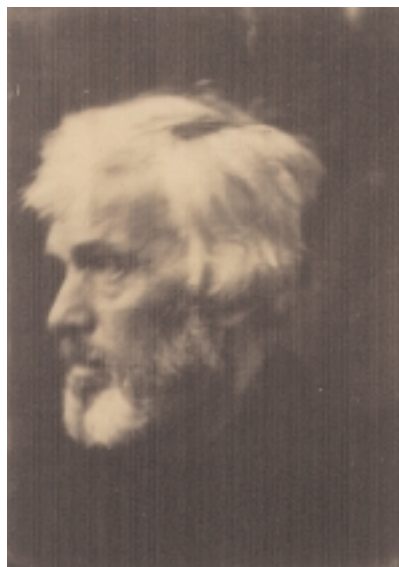
Though the beguilements of Carlyle's artistry should never be underestimated, the magnetic properties of the *Letters and Speeches* had another source too: the intensity of the bond between

author and hero. Repeatedly Carlyle's own memories and self-assessment determine the emphases of his narrative. There is the formation of impregnable, steady values during Cromwell's long period of modest obscurity before his entry on the world's bustling stage. There is Oliver's devotion to his godly mother; his hypochondria (for Carlyle always a sign of grace); his rescue from agonies of despair through religious conversion. When Carlyle reaches Cromwell's maturity he links the solitary burden of his hero's decision-making with his own humbler but no less solitary responsibilities of biographical resurrection. Sometimes we can hardly tell, from Carlyle's personal pronouns, which of the two men is speaking.

Perhaps Carlyle himself scarcely knew. Men who described the public lectures he gave in 1838–40 reported the manner of his delivery – the struggle of an uncouth, clumsy speaker to give voice to earnestness and sincerity – in terms which strikingly anticipate Carlyle's own accounts of Cromwell's delivery. In the *Letters and Speeches* 'my friend Oliver' joins Carlyle against the hollow proprieties of classical structure and diction. The literary indecorum of the book, its offences against grammar and syntax, its unevenness of pitch and proportion, its jump-starts and moments of spontaneous combustion, its very warts as it were, are vindicated by the features of Cromwell's character and speeches which they mirror.

Professor Worden has been awarded a three-year British Academy Research Professorship to write a new biography of Oliver Cromwell.

The Carlyle Letters project, an Academy Research Project based at the University of Edinburgh, is publishing *The Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle*



Thomas Carlyle by Julia Margaret Cameron (reverse image). By Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery, London