



*Cromwell:  
The Protector*

**David Horspool**

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**Review by: Aidan Norrie**



*Cromwell: The Protector*. By David Horspool. London: Allen Lane, 2017. ISBN 978-0-141-97938-0. viii + 132 pp. £12.99.

That Oliver Cromwell features in the Penguin Monarchs series is both surprising and unsurprising. In 2001, the BBC launched a public competition to name the ‘Top 10 Great Britons’: Cromwell came in at number ten—the only monarch to beat him was Elizabeth I, who came in at number seven. So despite his heavily contested memory and legacy, ‘Old Ironsides’ remains a polarising figure.

The cover of the biography literalises Cromwell as the black sheep of England’s monarchy: while all the other books in the series are white, Cromwell’s is black, alerting readers to the incongruity of its subject, and its inclusion in the series. Horspool is aware of the task required of him, and the introduction concludes with the observation: “The questions might then arise as to what he [Cromwell] is doing in a series called Penguin Monarchs, even in square brackets” (6). Horspool then confesses that the book “is in part an answer to that question, and in part an extended attempt to ignore it” (6). While this is hardly an ideal intellectual justification for the biography, he somewhat rescues himself by staking a claim to significance: including Cromwell “may throw some light on the nature of kingship, the English and British interpretation of the role, and its historical development” (6).

That Cromwell was ‘king in all but name’ has long been established, with the concept reaching varying levels of orthodoxy among scholars, thanks in part to Roy Sherwood’s *The Court of Oliver Cromwell* (1989) and *Oliver Cromwell: King in all but Name* (1997). On the other hand, Oliver Cromwell’s inclusion, and the exclusion of Richard Cromwell, is a glaring oversight of both the book and the series in general. Horspool barely mentions Richard’s succession, which is to the detriment of our collective understanding of royal authority in early modern England. Indeed, Horspool notes that Oliver should be included in the series “because to miss him out is to pretend that the decade between” the reign of Charles I and Charles II “is an empty one” that “represents an attempt to govern Britain collectively, without a supreme head of state” (6). Such a claim must surely also extend to Richard’s inclusion.

The five chapters of the book each focus on a period of Cromwell’s life. Given that we know so little of his early life, it is unsurprising that the chapter on his childhood and youth is the shortest, and even it is largely focused on Cromwell in the years leading up to his election as one of the MPs for Cambridge in 1640. Horspool mentions the (possibly apocryphal) story of the playdate the young Cromwell and a young Prince Charles had when James VI & I was staying with Sir Oliver Cromwell, the younger Oliver’s uncle. The

two boys ‘fought,’ and the slightly older Cromwell is said to have won. While perhaps a little too convenient, Horspool may be on to something when he points out that this event “can’t have harmed Oliver’s self-belief that Charles I was not some distant, godlike figurehead, but a flesh-and-blood contemporary whom he had seen when they were both children” (10).

In chapter two, Horspool does a good job of emphasising Cromwell’s minor role in both the Short and Long parliaments. Indeed, “it was as a soldier, not a politician, that he made his name” (19). The chapter, however, moves around quickly, mentioning names, places, and events in such rapid succession that anyone new to the material would quickly be lost. While brevity is a requirement of the Penguin Monarchs, fewer reminders of the fact that Cromwell “made a small impression” in parliament may have allowed for better context to be provided (25). Certainly, the role of John Pym could have been expanded, as his role, and Cromwell’s relationship with him, would have offered better context.

Chapter three is unambiguous in its focus: “Oliver Cromwell’s military deeds raised him to national attention” (31). Cromwell’s first, and relatively successful, military endeavour was to prevent Cambridge’s silver plate being sent to Charles in York to help fund his military endeavours. Cromwell is then quickly promoted to colonel, and then lieutenant-general, with only limited explanation of the events that got him there. The Battle of Marston Moor provides an interesting insight into Cromwell, and the wash-up in the aftermath of the Second Battle of Newbury is treated well, with Cromwell’s denouncement of the Earl of Manchester, and the subsequent passage of the Self-Denying Ordinance (with Cromwell’s exemption) lightly handled. Horspool pauses to remind us that “barely two years after he had first taken up arms, the country gentleman from Huntingdon ... was deemed indispensable to Parliament’s cause, while traditional leaders from the aristocracy ... had apparently become redundant” (50). The chapter concludes with the establishment of the New Model Army, the parliamentary victory at Naseby, and Charles’s surrender to the Scots.

Chapter four deals with the time between Charles’s surrender and Cromwell’s appointment as Lord Protector. Horspool prefaces the chapter by noting that Cromwell’s “loyalty to Parliament and his loyalty to the army became, if not mutually exclusive, at least incompatible” (56). This tension is used to tell the story of the regicide and Cromwell’s assumption of the protectorship, especially as a way of preventing the events between 1646 and 1653 being seen as some kind of *fait accompli*. Unfortunately, this chapter does often read like a history of the New Model Army, or indeed of the debates between Charles and parliament. For a book supposedly justifying

Cromwell's inclusion in the Penguin Monarchs, it is frustrating that this is the longest chapter.

Unsurprisingly, the book's final chapter—while disappointingly short—focuses on Cromwell's time as Lord Protector. While not a monarchy, the protectorate allowed “Oliver to be portrayed as the equivalent of a monarch: a man, if not anointed, then certainly chosen by God” (97). The process leading to Cromwell declining the crown is handled well, with Horspool making the point that “if Oliver Cromwell had wanted to be King Oliver, he could have been” (106). It is clear, however, that Cromwell's short ‘reign’ has little to do with his memory today: instead, it is “the career that had brought him there [that] is the reason he is remembered” (107). For all of his assumption of royal trappings, Oliver failed to properly set out the succession; indeed, there is no written evidence that he nominated his eldest-surviving son, Richard, to succeed as Lord Protector. Horspool points out that only Elizabeth I is comparable in her resolve to not name her heir, which begs the interesting question: would James have met Richard's fate, had he not already been King of Scotland? This is a tantalising thought, given that Sir Oliver, and probably the toddler Oliver, first met James when he stayed at Sir Oliver's estate of Hinchinbrooke on his procession to London in 1603.

As Horspool cleverly notes, “a ‘monarch’ is not necessarily a king or queen, but a sole ruler. As Lord Protector, that is what Oliver Cromwell undoubtedly became” (7). Semantics aside, this quip does show why Cromwell deserves a place in the Penguin Monarchs series. Horspool does sometimes fall into the trap of thinking too much of Cromwell as a ‘great man’ of history, and the work is certainly more military history than it is a social or cultural history, which has the effect of making the book not as accessible to new readers as some of the others in the series are. Nevertheless, this is an interesting and readable account of one of England's, and indeed Britain's, most decisive figures.

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