Chapter Forty

A FAILED PROTECTORATE

OLIVER CROMWELL was fifty-four when he assumed the role of Lord Protector. Born in 1599, the son of a Huntingdonshire gentleman, he had been attracted early on to Puritanism. The fortunes of the family were low, his father being forced to sell part of the family estates the year before his son was first elected to Parliament in 1628. There was nothing which set Cromwell particularly apart from any other deeply committed Puritan gentleman of the period. Obsessive preoccupation with personal sinfulness was part of the ethos, although in Cromwell's case it seemed to suggest many of the classic symptoms of the manic depressive. During the Long Parliament he took part in supporting all the measures designed to undo the policies of Archbishop Laud, but, again, he was in no way outstanding. Indeed it was only when war finally broke out and he joined the parliamentary forces as a captain under the Earl of Essex that he began to be commented upon as in any sense remarkable. He then became someone who was 'very much hearkened to'. Sir Philip Warwick in his memoirs describes him as 'very ordinarily apparelled . . . his stature was of good size, his countenance swollen and reddish, his voice sharp and untuneable, and his eloquence full of fervour.'

Cromwell quickly revealed himself to be a brilliant soldier and tactician, and when the New Model Army was formed he was chosen as its lieutenant-general under Sir Thomas Fairfax. Cromwell was a man of immense complexity, whose motives and aims are argued about even today. At one moment he seems to be the ruthless seeker after power who would stop at nothing, at another he assumes the role of the high-minded idealist defending persecuted minorities. His strong religious commitment could inspire him to make swift decisions as though caught in a flash of divine inspiration, but equally it could throw him into agonies of spiritual torment from which he would emerge only after weeks to pronounce one way or the other. He fully shared the millenary impulses of the broad spectrum of Puritan thought, believing that in each and every event God's providence could be discerned. In his make-up the

zealous Puritan formed what was to prove to be an uneasy alliance with the landed gentleman. As time progressed the strain of having to reconcile the two began to show. Puritanism in the form he embraced, that of the Independents, took him in the direction of a political radicalism which called for everything from an extension of the franchise to a reform of the law. Birth and background as a member of the gentry classes dictated a defence of the status quo, an inbred conservatism and caution in the face of change and, most of all, a deeply held belief that property was the basis of society.

That duality was never quite resolved in Cromwell but it was to edge nearer towards the role of the gentleman as against that of the Puritan after a major series of debates had been held at Putney in the autumn of 1647 between the conservative elements in the army, the 'grandees' as they were called, and those who espoused the creed of the Levellers. In these debates Cromwell came down on the side of the 'grandees' who stood against any form of democracy other than one based on a property qualification to vote. Indeed, under the short-lived republic, Cromwell was to take part in hunting down the remaining army Levellers, shooting them at Burford in Oxfordshire in 1649.

The Instrument of Government drawn up by the army whereby Oliver Cromwell became Lord Protector was England's first written constitution. It laid down that there was to be no taxation or legislation without the consent of Parliament, that there was to be joint control of the militia and, in certain things, Cromwell could only act in concert with a Council of State. Whatever gloss could be put on this there could be no denying that it represented the first step back towards a monarchy, and the Protector accordingly created what amounted to a court. In an effort to win loyalty in the country, the Engagement, whereby men had been forced to recognise the abolition of the king and the House of Lords, was done away with. It was a gesture which had only a limited effect, for nothing was to conceal the perpetual unease which existed between the Protector and all of his Parliaments. In one sense the members had turned to him because he shared their loyalty to the landed interest, in another he embodied the institution they hated most, the army. Cromwell's greatest drawback was his power base, for it impeded any attempt to build up civilian support for his regime.

If he parted company with Parliament over the army, he did so equally in matters of religion, for to him toleration was a fundamental tenet. 'I had rather,' he said, 'that Mahometanism were permitted amongst us than that one of God's children should be persecuted.' The trouble was the proliferation of all kinds of sects brought not only varieties of religious experience and worship but also, in cases like the Quakers,

THE
Declaration and Standard
Of the *Levellers* of *England*;
Delivered in a Speech to his Excellency the Lord Gen. *Fairfax*, on *Friday* last at White-Hall, by Mr. *Everard*, a late Member of the Army, and his Propheſie in reference thereunto; ſhewing what will befall the Nobility and Gentry of this Nation, by their ſubmitting to Community; With their invication and promiſe unto the people, and their proceedings in *Windſor* Park, *Oatlands* Park, and ſeverall other places; alſo, the Examination and confeſſion of the ſaid Mr. *Everard* before his Excelleney, the manner of his deportment with his Hat on, and his ſeverall ſpeeches and expreſſions, when he was commanded to put it off. Together with a Liſt of the ſeverall Regiments of Horſe and Foot that have caſt Lots to go for *Ireland*.

Imprinted at *London*, for G. Lawrenſon, April 23. 1649.

In the aftermath of the execution of the king extreme sects looked for the fruition of their beliefs. One such group, the Diggers, an offshoot of the Levellers, occupied land near Walton-on-Thames and began a colony in which all goods would be held in common. One of their traits, recorded here, was their refusal to doff their hats to their superiors.

attitudes which challenged the existing social order. Although Cromwell never attempted to take the path of the Barebones Parliament and attack tithes and lay patronage of livings, his tolerance of each and every sect, however bizarre, left members of Parliament aghast. Officially the Presbyterian *Book of Discipline* replaced the *Book of Common Prayer* but the form worship took in each parish church was in fact determined by the minister and the congregation, and no longer by the government. To this had to be added a whole variety of sects which cut across all parish boundaries attracting whom they would, and forming their own networks. In the face of the

mounting chaos the clergy drew together in an attempt to halt the slide into anarchy. No wonder that by the middle of the 1650s doubt and disillusion were setting in. In 1656 members of the Worcestershire Association reported:

> 'We find by sad experience, that the people understand not our public teaching, though we study to speak as plain as we can, and that after many years of preaching . . . too many can scarce tell anything that have been said.'

The Puritan movement was fast running out of steam.

But to the Protector the army and religious toleration were untouchables. So, when his first Parliament in the autumn of 1654 began to attack both, he dissolved it. Thereafter the rift was permanent. The Instrument of Government had, in fact, only provided for the rule of the Protector until such time as Parliament endorsed it, which it had refused to do. Throughout 1655 the Protector ruled without any authority and this began to be questioned in the courts. Royalist uprisings that year then led Cromwell to make his most disastrous mistake, the division of the country into eleven regions each ruled by a major-general. Local unrest was not his only motive, for the conjunction of sixes, an apocalyptic number, in 1656 and the imminence of 1666, another year whose figures signalled the fulfilment of yet more prophecies in the Book of Revelation, called for haste in preparing the country for the rule of the godly. Under the aegis of the major-generals there was a massive onslaught against immorality: Sunday sports were forbidden, alehouses shut, cock fighting and horse racing banned. In one part of Lancashire alone, Blackburn Hundred, two hundred alehouses were closed.

But it was not only these kill-joy policies which upset people. Perhaps even more important was the resentment of direct rule from Westminster, army rule at that, by outsiders often regarded as being of a lower class. Local interest was outraged. The decision to tax Royalists was also unfortunate, for it opened up old wounds which a wiser government would have sought to heal. It is hardly surprising therefore that the Parliament which met in September 1656 reflected how much the major-generals were loathed, along with the army and the burden of taxation. Cromwell was forced to give in, first on an issue of religious toleration, allowing the savage punishment of one, John Nayler, who had proclaimed himself the new Messiah and re-enacted Christ's entry into Jerusalem in Bristol. The major-generals were removed, but the tax on Royalists remained. Parliament then turned its attention to the constitution, throwing out the Instrument of Government and putting together its own, embodied in a document called the Humble Petition and Advice. This took the drift back to 1640 even further. In its initial form Cromwell was offered the crown, which he refused, but a second upper chamber was created nominated by the Lord Protector and consisting of aristocrats and army officers. Although he had declined to be made king it was implict that the Protectorship would be hereditary. In January 1658 this new Parliament assembled. Once again it fell out with the Protector and once again he dissolved it.

While the constitution was going through these successive changes, none of which worked, government somehow had to go on. The problems of Scotland and Ireland had to be dealt with, as well as England's place in the wider perspective of European politics. Through the constitutional changes both Scotland and Ireland lost their Parliaments, being given instead thirty seats each at Westminster. It was not popular. Nor was Cromwell's encouragement of Independency in Scotland as against the kirk, which provoked rebellion. In Ireland, his early brutal legacy was firmly built upon. Forty thousand Catholic landowners were forced to emigrate to the rocky west. Henceforward anyone who was Catholic was automatically denied the right to train or practise any urban trade or profession, or to hold office. Irish Catholics were deliberately reduced to the level of an underclass.

In the case of Europe, Cromwell's mind was filled with nostalgia for the age of the Armada, visualising a Protestant alliance which would defeat the Catholic Habsburgs and hammer at the gates of the papal Antichrist in Rome itself. Alas, the reality turned out to be far different. In April 1654, peace was made with the Dutch. Under Robert Blake, the English fleet secured the dominion of the narrow seas and, as a consequence, the rulers of Europe came to respect the Protector. He renewed the old Elizabethan policy of war against Spain with a catastrophic expedition against the Spanish Caribbean Empire, redeemed only by the capture of Jamaica. But it was an expensive policy and the protectorate lurched from one financial crisis to the next.

The sands of time had already run out. On 3 September 1658, the anniversary of his two greatest victories,

A miniature of Oliver Cromwell by Samuel Cooper. This was painted from life in the 1650s and was a pattern kept by the artist in his studio from which to make further copies. Cromwell insisted that in his portraits he be recorded 'warts and all'.

The Dutch waged a satirical war on Cromwell, here shown with horns springing out of his head.

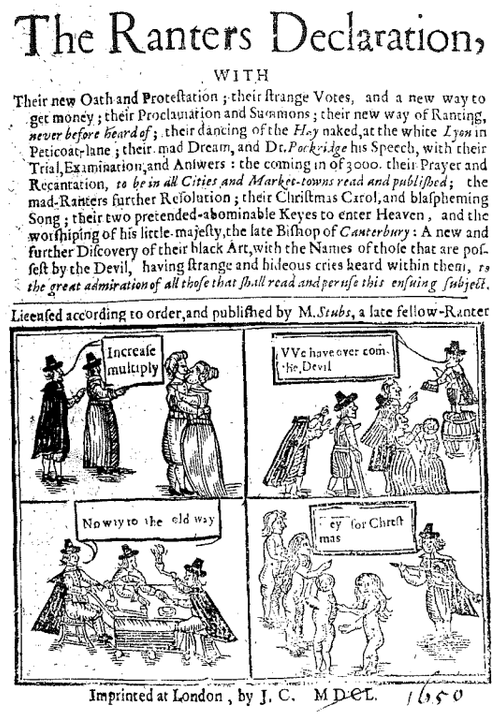
Dunbar and Worcester, Cromwell died. Nothing could obscure the fact that his rule had been a failure. It had little support across the country and there was bitter hatred for the army and for the huge burden of taxation. Nonetheless it was to take another year before opinion finally swung decisively in favour of the return of the Stuarts.

The succession ostensibly went smoothly with Cromwell's son, Richard, becoming Lord Protector. He lacked, however, both his father's energy and his feeling for power. Worse, he did not have any hold on the army. The result was a series of almost nonsensical events. In January 1659 Parliament met and gradually moved to strip the army of its powers. The army, seeing this about to happen, forced Richard Cromwell to dissolve Parliament. Following that the army decided to reconvene the Rump which they themselves had ironically ejected in 1653. When that met, it too proved no more satisfactory to the military. Infuriated by their sterile debates, the army threw out the Rump for a second time in October and set up its own interim government.

What the army in London had not foreseen was that its brethren in Scotland, Ireland and Yorkshire would stand by the Rump. As a result the army was forced to disband its interim government and on 24 December the Rump reassembled yet again. Meanwhile General George Monck, who headed the army in Scotland, marched south. After three weeks he realised that a total impasse had been reached. The Rump was unpopular and the army was split. Amidst the mounting chaos, he concluded that the only alternative left was to put the clock back the whole way. On 21 February 1660 the members of Parliament purged by the army in 1648 were allowed to take their seats once more. They had been excluded for their moderate Royalist sympathies, and their return, or rather that of those still alive, meant that the republicans would certainly be outvoted. On 16 March the Long Parliament, which had first met in 1641 thereby earning its title, declared itself dissolved. Almost two decades of political and constitutional turmoil had come to an end.

In the aftermath, those who had lived through it must have asked themselves what, if anything, had been gained? One of the main causes of the war had been taxation by way of the royal prerogative, reflecting the central problem as to how government was to be paid for. Nothing in respect of this had changed at all. Taxation had been crippling, far in excess of anything experienced during the Personal Rule of Charles I. Both the republic and the protectorate, however, had continued to live in precisely the same way as the first two Stuarts, struggling from hand to mouth, and with a mountain of unpaid debt.

And what of religion? Where once there had been at least the semblance of uniformity, now there was fragmentation. During those heady years men and women


The Ranters Declaration,

WITH

Their new Oath and Proteſtation; their ſtrange Votes, and a new way to get money; their Proclamation and Summons; their new way of Ranting, *never before heard of*; their dancing of the *Hay* naked, at the white *Lyon* in Peticoat-lane; their mad Dream, and Dr. *Pocksidge* his Speech, with their Trial, Examination, and Answers: the coming in of 3000. their Prayer and Recantation, *to be in all Cities and Market-towns read and publiſhed*; the mad-Ranters further Reſolution; their Chriſtmas Carol, and blaſpheming Song; their two pretended-abominable Keyes to enter Heaven, and the worſhiping of his little-majeſty, the late Biſhop of *Canterbury*: A new and further Diſcovery of their black Art, with the Names of thoſe that are poſſeſt by the Devil, having ſtrange and hideous cries heard within them, *to the great admiration of all thoſe that ſhall read and peruſe this enſuing ſubject*.

Licenſed according to order, and publiſhed by M. *Stubs*, a late fellow-Ranter

Imprinted at London, by J. C. M DCL. 1650

The Ranter's Declaration, 1650, a leaflet attacking this sect which was spreading widely. Here they are shown mocking the celebration of Christmas.

had really believed they were living through the cataclysmic confrontations described in the Book of Revelation, ones peopled by fantastic monsters and abounding in signs and portents in the heavens, but by 1660 all this had gone, for nothing predicted had actually come to pass. Neither Christ nor his saints had come to claim their kingdom. People were exhausted by years of religious controversy, and the mood of the country was swinging sharply towards a more ordered, quieter, faith and piety.

In 1642 the country gentry and lawyers who sat in the Commons had seen the monarchy as a threat to their property through the agents of prerogative rule. Those infringements by the crown must have appeared by 1660 innocuous compared to the ragings of the many-headed monster from below, sects who questioned property, rank and status. The post-Reformation state had been an alliance between the crown and the property-owning classes in the sharing of political power. The monarchy was now seen as the only guarantee that this could continue, and the threat from below be held in check. The state was now set for a strong reaction against everything which had taken place during the previous twenty years. The governing classes were to be reconciled to the crown as the one way of ensuring their sway over the country. This point of view was to prevail until the Victorian age, when reformers were to rediscover the rich legacy of ideas from the age of Cromwell, reactivating them to justify the claims of the new middle classes to a share at last in that political power.