



Cromwell

Antonia Fraser

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In *Cromwell*, award-winning biographer Antonia Fraser tells of one of England's most celebrated and controversial figures, often misunderstood and demonized as a puritanical zealot. Oliver Cromwell rose from humble beginnings to spearhead the rebellion against King Charles I, who was beheaded in 1649, and led his soldiers into the last battle against the Royalists and King Charles II at Worcester, ending the civil war in 1651. Fraser shows how England's prestige and prosperity grew under Cromwell, reversing the decline it had suffered since Queen Elizabeth I's death.

Cromwell Details

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Robert says

I was more than a bit disappointed by this book, I'm afraid. And it's a shame, because I'd been dying to learn more about Oliver Cromwell, and a several-hundred-page tome of lightly written history seemed like just the thing for a person like me who wants to feel like he's learned a lot without (ahem) plowing through a lot of hard-to-read academic papers.

Let's start with the positive. I really did learn a lot. Cromwell was a lot better off financially than I would have expected; it wasn't obvious early on that he'd become the Lord Protector; the English Civil War was a lot more protracted, confused, and multi-staged than I imagined; and there were a lot of different groups vying for power.

Part of the problem I had was the sneaking suspicion that Ms. Fraser fell in love with the subject of her research. Cromwell comes across as a driven yet pure-hearted man, barely able to keep himself afloat among these competing interests, and a loyal subject who would have saved the king if it was at all possible. She admits that a lot isn't known about his thoughts and motivations, but seems to paint in a lot of details where there doesn't seem to be much reason.

The main problem I had, though, was the prose style. Now this could be because I'm an American. I'll be the first to admit that there are a lot of differences between American English (and its myriad dialects) and British English (and its myriad dialects), but I actually enjoy most British writing that I've encountered, and this just seemed different.

The sentences wander all over the page. Subordinate clauses are used with wild abandon and the use of commas is almost criminal. You can reach the end of a sentence and find yourself backtracking to the beginning to try to understand what it was about in the first place. Or you may simply sit there with your eyes glazing over, struggling to care, and being unable.

I made it as far as the execution of the king, then set the book aside. I'll have to learn my history somewhere else.

Nancy says

Whew, what a slog. A mountain of facts largely lacking synthesis and analysis. It needed to be cut by a third; as it was, it was difficult to see the forest for the trees. The problems were compounded by Fraser's weird fangirlish sensibility, where Old Noll was a brilliant soldier and administrator and a kindly fellow to boot, apparently. (Well, except in regard to those pesky Irish, where his attitude tended more toward the genocidal end of the spectrum. Even Fraser couldn't put much of a gloss on that.)

For all that, a lot of information and I've retained a sufficiency, so mission accomplished, I suppose. But if I had to do it again, I'd pick a different biography.

Erik Graff says

Until looking Fraser up on Wikipedia, I had no idea that she was so famous, not only as an amateur historian but also as a writer of mystery stories. Having previously read her earlier biography on Mary Stuart and learning that she is not only an aristocrat but Catholic, I am impressed at how sympathetic her portrayal of that arch-protestant, Oliver Cromwell, is. (Perhaps her father's Labour connections figure in this). Further, given that, while she holds a degree from Oxford, she is no academic, it is easy to mistake her for a professional historian.

Although critical of his campaign in Ireland, overall this study presents a very human, even well-meaning, Lord-Protector. My only complaint is that she expresses too little sympathy with the truly progressive forces of his rule, that is, the Levelers and other egalitarian democratic movements primarily identified with the popular army.

Joseph Sellors says

There's no doubt Antonia Fraser knows her stuff when it comes to Cromwell and the Protectorate period. She explains the complex religious and political conflicts extremely well, and has plenty of source material to enhance her work. What lets the book down massively is Fraser's constant bias in Cromwell's favour and tries to exonerate him from any wrong doing, even in situations such as the slaughters at Wexford and Drogheda. It's extremely frustrating and almost ruins what is otherwise a solid book.

David says

The best biography of my hero. There's a statue of him outside Westminster. We had our chance to become a republic and we blew it. The French did much better. I mention whenever I have the opportunity that the best thing to put on the empty plinth in Trafalgar Square is a guillotine.

Lawrence says

I took up this biography to learn about Oliver Cromwell and what I had always thought of as the Puritan revolution. The Puritans were a group with considerable influence, after all, in the settlement and formation of America. I also wanted to see the context in which persons like John Milton and Andrew Marvell dwelt and thrived. And, last, I had a sense that the Cromwellian revolution was anomolous and earth-shaking in its time.

I did, indeed, learn a great deal --- about the personality of a man who emerges as humble, loving, and devoted to service, and yet powerful, political and born with a natural military genius. It seems as if he is the first of the Western populist leaders. It further appears that his times were marked by a sense of experimentation even to the point of the absence of a specific platform for the future and an essential uncertainty of success and even a sense of doom. I am also impressed by the sincerity of Cromwell's religious conviction, his compassion, and his general good will.

I do have a couple of criticisms of the book. One is that there is almost too much fact. In this sense, I found sometimes that the author made no distinctions about what to write. This leads to my second criticism. I found that the book lacked themes or, better, explanations. In this sense, I would have profited from a discussion about theories or doctrines of kingship up until Charles I; about what precisely was so unique and experimental about the interregnum; and about how the Cromwellian revolution might have influenced later British institutions, including the monarchy and parliament.

Hardy says

I approached this book eagerly, having been exposed to the beauty of Antonia Fraser's writing in her later "The Wives of Henry VIII." I knew the basics of Oliver Cromwell's victories in the English civil wars and his subsequent rise to power, but hoped to gain a deeper understanding of the man and his world through Fraser's book. While it taught me a lot, the book did not meet the high expectations I had for it. Fraser has a knack for elegant turns of phrase, but they are lost to a great degree in the sheer density of the text. At 706 pages (and 68 more of notes and index), "Cromwell" is not the book for the reader interested in an overview of the period. Fraser lets herself get carried away in details; ordinarily I find such attention to detail rewarding, but here it was overwhelming. One measure of a book's appeal and quality is how easily the reader is able to put it down, and I found myself putting this book down quite often, its density allowing only for short bursts at a time. No doubt there are those who will find the complex political intrigue and descriptions of various government factions more interesting than I did. Fraser is a gifted author and historian whose work I have enjoyed more in other settings. "Cromwell" plunges the reader into a pool of knowledge of the Protector and his rule; that said, the water may be deeper than many readers will appreciate.

Czarny Pies says

Cromwell offers exactly what any reader should seek; it is a biography of great Puritan written by a prominent Catholic. Antonia Fraser does not idolize Cromwell but she does clearly show what made him a great. He was a brilliant organizer and excellent battlefield commander. His judgement was sound and in the dirty business of war, he was as fair as could be expected. This is yet another excellent work by one of the great historians our age.

As Athos, Porthos, Aramis and D'Artagnan observed Cromwell was the only king of England ever to have begun life as a brewer. Bottoms up!!

Anne says

Turgid telling of what should have been an exciting story.

Jason Wilson says

Fraser is a painfully dry writer at times but she is always fair and that's especially important with controversial figures such as Cromwell. This book is far from dull but it can be stodgy ; it's the knack of combining depth and pace.

It's worth the journey though. The figure who emerges may not be the one we expect; he loves music and latterly tolerates theatre a bit more. He cares deeply for the poor against the Puritan self help ethos that equates poverty with dissoluteness. He is often merciful even to Catholics, and more religiously tolerant than given credit for, except when treason is an issue. But he seems to battle depression and it's his habit of sometimes letting rage cloud his judgement that causes things like the Irish massacres, though recent scholarship has reappraised these in terms of slaughter. He has good grasp of foreign policy and to an extent economics. Towards the end he is also a bereaved father; whatever our view of him that can only be sympathised with. He came close to accepting king ship , but backed off . As well as not really seeing it as for him he knew it would antagonise the army. And there is the return, albeit for an odd mixture of economic and eschatological reasons primarily, of the long exiled Jews, in the face of opposition from merchants who feared the competition. For those who uphold royalty he's a king killer, and while I don't know if I agree with Fraser that though not morally right it was politically necessary, I don't disagree that the Stuarts partly brought it on themselves. Same mistake as Russia and France; if there ever was an age of absolute unaccountable monarchy, it had long gone. And then there's the suppression of Christmas; i can see the thinking but it was unwise and unnecessary.

Whatever else he is , he's not a narcissist. Fraser isn't sure whether his famous insistence that his portrait be painted warts and all is apocryphal or not but she does see it as constant with his character. : in the end, one can see what this era was trying to do, but there is only so far, if at all, you can try and legislate a concept of Godliness; some things must be personal convictions.

On a secular level there are fascinating what-ifs. could a republic, hereditary or otherwise, have survived into a less militant age ? Could a more sensible post Charles II Stuart line have hung on or did it take the George's to begin again ? And given that this era feeds into modern party politics in the sense that its loyalty to the Georges and Stuarts that first defines whigs and Tories What else might have defined them ?

This era also bequeaths us , of course, a Puritan body of what is still some of the richest theological writing all time, and a breathtaking working out of the psychological aftermath of the brief Republic in the works of Milton, Marvell, Bunyan and many others.

So would a republic ever work again? Would it be right? Who knows....

CJ says

At 706 pages, this book is in dire need of a good editor.

Whenever the situation went in Oliver Cromwell's favor it was due to his brilliance, vision and tenacity. But if it didn't, it was the fault of incompetent Army leaders, recalcitrant Parliament, or those who just didn't see the Glorious Vision.

I hung in with this book only because about the time I was ready to quit, an interesting tidbit would appear. There are more balanced biographies of Oliver Cromwell available. Read those instead.

Steven says

Cromwell has been accused of being a tyrant, a murderer, a guy with a rotten temper, and just about every other negative name I can think of. This book provides fresh (in depth) insight into the character of this man, and provides a proper historical viewpoint of the times that he lived in. Cromwell was not misguided or a monster. In a sense, he saved England from a tyrannical monarch who threatened to destroy the protestant reformation. He also provided the first, (and last) true constitution England had ever had. He stood as an impenetrable wall against the Roman Catholic power, and a symbol of hope to those who loved freedom.

This book is quite lengthy. Only those who are really interested in Cromwell, or just love reading in general will take the time.

Wendy says

I wanted to like this book. I really did.

I don't think the problem here is so much Fraser, her writing and scholarship are, as always, impeccable.

I think the problem is that Cromwell himself was just really boring. You'd think a man who cut off a king's head would have more personality, but in this case, you would turn out to be wrong.

Karen says

Usually I like Antonia Fraser's books but I found this one tedious. I didn't know much about this period to start with, and maybe that's part of the problem. I think, though, that it's that she doesn't take a clear point of view--was he the devil, a saint, or just a man of his times? Did he believe he was the instrument of Divine Providence or was this just a smokescreen for overwhelming personal ambition?

I did find it interesting that Teddy Roosevelt wrote a bio of him--maybe sometime I'll look it up.

Caroline says

I quickly realised that there was far too much detail and depth in this book for a figure that just doesn't grab my imagination to that extent. I also found that Frazer did not digest, regurgitate and polish her research enough for me - not for the limited amount of effort I was prepared to put into reading the book. I need more of an overview.
