

Ronald Hutton. *The Making of Oliver Cromwell*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2021. xxii + 400 pp. + 20 illus. \$35.00. Review by Niall Allsopp, University of Exeter.

Ronald Hutton's fascinating new biography offers a compelling portrait of Oliver Cromwell's early life and initial rise to power. There is much here to engage a seventeenth-century specialist, especially in the rich endnotes, but the book will also appeal to a wider audience of general readers. In this regard, Hutton succeeds in producing a typically lucid and propulsive narrative history. His writing is particularly memorable in what he has described as "absurdly lavish" descriptions of the English countryside, evoking a tradition of English nature writers like Oliver Rackham. As Cromwell pursues Prince Rupert through the Trent Valley in the spring of 1644, for instance, we pause to observe that "the hawthorns had come into their creamy white blossom" (169). At one especially dramatic moment, Cromwell crests the ridge at Langport, Somerset and takes in the view of the Somerset levels, recognizing a miniature version of his native Fens (277)—Hutton's observation is characteristically acute, both in terms of topography and in the sense of narrative theatre, as anyone who regularly bursts through this very vista on the Great Western railway line can attest. This epic scale, however, works as a kind of displacement. Hutton conjures up the grandeur of the civil wars in England's landscape rather than in her people—who appear, like the grasshoppers in Marvell's "Upon Appleton House," cut down to size.

The question that any book on Cromwell must answer is: why another book on Cromwell? Hutton confesses to "trepidation" at contributing to an industry that is currently putting out a new biography of Cromwell every five years. Of direct contemporaries, only Milton can rival him as a subject for biographers. Hutton's effort joins Nicholas McDowell's recent landmark *Poet of Revolution: John Milton in the Making* (also from Yale, 2021) in a recent fashion for "Making Of" titles. For both of these recent books, this means stopping the story in the mid 1640s, arguably just when things are getting interesting. Hutton's book closes in 1646, with Cromwell the victorious general buying his first house in Westminster ready for the

political struggles ahead. The advantage of this framing, apart from keeping the book of a manageable size, is to remove the hindsight-goggles of what Cromwell later became, to reveal a Cromwell who was still becoming. It is in this sense a classically revisionist manoeuvre, revealing Cromwell the junior “enforcer and bully-boy” (104), being driven by events rather than driving them. The disadvantage of this approach is that it throws a lot of attention onto the long period of Cromwell’s life of which we know practically nothing, including the long list of apocryphal incidents that almost certainly *didn’t* happen. Conversely, to try to make sense of Cromwell without any mention of the regicide, or Drogheda, or the expulsion of the Rump, or the refusal of the Crown—this also seems arbitrary in its way. On the one hand, Hutton’s conclusion suggests, persuasively, that by 1646 the full complexity of Cromwell’s nature had been revealed: “courageous, devout, resolute, principled, intelligent, eloquent, able, adaptable and dedicated, but also self-seeking, unscrupulous, dishonest, manipulative, vindictive and bloodthirsty” (338). But on the other hand, Hutton slightly undercuts this by frequently writing as if Cromwell had arrived fully-formed from the beginning: doubtful anecdotes about his student life are dismissed because they “could have been deduced anyway from his later character” (19).

As the above list of his character traits shows, Hutton’s central and distinctive emphasis is on Cromwell’s powers as a politician (again, a feature that was not exactly diminished after 1646). The riddle that has always fascinated students of Cromwell is his amazing capacity to be “both godly and wily” (3), the possessor simultaneously of Providential gifts and inhuman guile. Many biographers, Hutton contends, have strived too hard to overturn the stereotype of “Craftie Cromwell,” the perfidious Machiavel of royalist tradition, by placing an over-correcting emphasis on Cromwell’s piety. Such biographers, following in the Victorian footsteps of Thomas Carlyle and S. R. Gardiner, have drowned in the torrent of words Oliver himself left behind him, pleading his zeal and earnest good intentions. Hutton the revisionist works to reinstate Crafty Cromwell. Craftiness, in fact, went hand-in-hand with piety, as being God’s instrument justified one in pursuing God’s ends with ruthlessness. There is a danger with this approach of inadvertently recreating the tactics of royalist propaganda, in which any routine

act of pragmatism can be seized on as revealing demonic cunning—a simple face-saving letter after a drawn battle, for example (111). But Hutton is restrained and forensic in unravelling the events of battles from Cromwell’s biased accounts of them. He reveals a distinct and repeating pattern, through battles at Lowestoft, Crowland, Belton, Gainsborough, to Marston Moor, and Naseby, of manipulation and inflation of his own achievements. All while subtly diminishing his rivals—often by attributing their successes, with seeming modesty, to the impersonal hand of Providence. These self-promoting reports were rhetorically effective and, crucially, were retailed as fact in London.

This highlighting of Cromwell’s rhetorical mastery is a significant and highly welcome contribution to the debate. But it also raises questions, and it is to be hoped that Hutton’s work, along with the imminent new edition of the *Letters, Writings and Speeches* under the general editorship of John Morrill (Oxford, 2022) will make possible further insights. As a literary scholar, I am especially keen to hear more detail on Cromwell’s style of rhetorical manipulation. Hutton offers some close readings, for instance on Cromwell’s “scatter-gun” approach to persuasion (338), but there is room for more precision here. Absent are the more textured attention to the language and metaphors of political persuasion in other recent historians of print campaigning, like Michael Braddick and Thomas Leng. My second question relates to the “reliable set of admiring journalists who could normally be relied upon to eulogize” Cromwell (331). These remain shadowy figures in Hutton’s account. It is always difficult when working with anonymous printed materials, but given their centrality to the story, I would have liked to learn more about them. Recent studies driven by book history, by Jason Peacey and especially David Como, have shown what can be achieved in unravelling 1640s printing campaigns and political networks. There is an opportunity here to uncover further new insights into who provided Cromwell’s loudhailer, what company they kept, and how they hoped to benefit.

These requests for further detail may not be consistent with Hutton’s professed aim of delivering a manageable and accessible book—but they should be seen in the context of the long passages given over not only to landscape description, but to the recounting of military campaigns, including several in which Oliver was not himself

involved. It is to military history that Hutton devotes most attention, in this sense returning to the subject of his first book, based on his Oxford D.Phil. thesis, *The Royalist War Effort, 1642–1646* (Oxford, 1982). The military historian's skills of teasing out the movement of a campaign on the ground—the logistical muddles, the interpersonal tensions, the seat-of-the-pants decision making—makes some of the most compelling material here. Hutton also shows the influence of his training by maintaining a revisionist's keen emphasis on the role of contingency in shaping events. Hutton's Cromwell is in some ways an ideal revisionist model: a quiet country gentleman, downwardly mobile, who became a revolutionary late in life, and almost by accident. Few of the political flashpoints of the early Stuart period touched Cromwell's life before 1640. And when they were unavoidable—such as the controversial Fen drainage schemes around the Isle of Ely—Hutton shows him to have been lukewarm on the issue, perhaps even mildly in favour (31–32). Hutton writes collegially and avoids controversy, but as with other historians of his generation, his account of the causes and outbreak of the war can feel bloodless at times. Some historians—like David Cressy and Joh Walter—have more recently stressed the simmering tensions and burgeoning popular politics of the early 1640s: it would be fascinating to read further reflections on how these contexts impacted on Cromwell the charismatic galvanizer.

Hutton provides an exemplary, cautious, and conservative account of Cromwell's early years. He suggests that Cromwell's merit lay as much in his virtues of competence and stubbornness as in his fire and zeal (326). He does give due weight to Cromwell's religion: we are told “it is clear enough that Cromwell's religion was one of the key aspects of his personal make-up” (269), he was “an absolutely stereotypical Puritan” (40), and even “a Puritan jihadi” (332). These observations stress religion, while remaining slightly formulaic—lacking the verve and depth of the descriptions of landscape and of battle. All of Cromwell's greatest hits are here—for instance, electrifying the Commons with his tearful defence of John Lilburne, specks of blood visible on his collar from a shaving accident (62)—but Hutton, persuasively, emphasizes the element of politician's performance in such occasions. The texture of godly life, the rituals and shared experiences that bound puritan communities together, which have been richly uncovered by

social historians of religion including Alec Ryrie, Ann Hughes, and Joel Halcomb, make relatively little impact in Hutton's book. There are, of course, limitations on available evidence, but only fleetingly do we see Cromwell attending sermons or prayer meetings (154, 296), or having a frosty encounter with Richard Baxter (269–70). Without this context it is harder to grasp the fervent personal loyalty—and equally intense feelings of betrayal—that Cromwell could inspire; the shared experience that bound him together with fellow believers, that made him capable of sending a “hit squad” into the Cambridge colleges, and of cutting off the king's head. In this sense I missed here some of the most deeply engaging facets of Hutton's rich, varied, and sometimes strange career: the bold juxtaposing of social history with high politics in his study of *The Restoration* (Oxford, 1985); the ethnography of parish community life in *The Rise and Fall of Merry England* (Oxford, 1994); or even the still more recent histories of witches, druids, and shamans. Not that there is much in the way of church ales or paganism in Cromwell's life, but there is more that a scholar like Hutton might interestingly tell us about the values and practices through which Cromwell and his allies sought to supplant such things.

Hall Bjørnstad. *The Dream of Absolutism: Louis XIV and the Logic of Modernity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021. xii + 230 pp. + 21 illus. \$30.00 (paper). Review By IVY DYCKMAN, INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR.

If we as citizens of our planet are paying even minimal attention to the barrage of daily news throughout the ether, we know that democracies around the globe are facing existential crises. Whatever the principles espoused by autocratic leaders and governments, all of them adhere to a similar political playbook. Historically, we also know that repressive phenomena disappear and reappear in analogous forms fairly predictably. In this monograph, the author Hall Bjørnstad considers one of the world's most recognized authoritarian sovereigns. Louis XIV, whose epithets “Louis le Grand” and “le Roi Soleil” reflected both the image he had of himself and the one propagated inside and outside the confines of his realm, is deemed by many to represent