

J.C. Davis. *Oliver Cromwell*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. i + 243 pp. \$19.95. Review by BRETT PARKER, UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA.

Oliver Cromwell has never suffered from a lack of historiographical attention, and in most cases explanations of his remarkable career have suffered from a persistent need to portray him and his apparent greatness as an unavoidable paradox. Because of Cromwell's professed godliness, his skillfulness in military leadership, and his efforts in crafting a political settlement, he has, on the one hand, long enjoyed the reputation as a saint and devout republican who delivered England from the clutches of a treacherous king and an outmoded constitution. Concomitantly, he has been considered the greatest apostate, especially in light of his turning out of the Rump and his acceptance of the Protectorate. As a result, Cromwell has been understood as both a saint and hypocrite, victor and villain, and statebuilder and destroyer; all of which, unfortunately, have stemmed from the myopic view that for whatever else he was, his force of personality and protean qualities informed history more than history, in all its complexity, informed his public life. This is a pitfall J.C. Davis successfully avoids in his new work on Cromwell by carefully negotiating his reputation through a thorough contextualization of the events and circumstances that bounded Cromwell and made him less enigmatic than particularly revealing of the dilemmas of his day. As a result, the Cromwell that emerges from Davis's nuanced approach is of an endearing figure whose commitment to civil and religious liberty, coupled with his desire for political consensus, makes him less a mystery and hero than a principled, albeit pragmatic, statesman.

Davis's organization is well suited for his aims. He begins by giving a dense narrative of his life before providing a diachronical assessment of Cromwell's reputation. This allows him to suggest how Cromwell's legacy has been fashioned in concert with changing political circumstances, and the degree to which such renderings have contributed to modern scholarly interpretations. One of the main threads Davis follows is the process by

which alternate histories of Cromwell were constructed, one which sees him as the destroyer of church and state, a view propagated during the Restoration, and one as the restorer of order and temporizer of political retribution, an analysis offered in part, ironically enough, by Clarendon, the ex-Royalist. The balance of these views, however, was that Cromwell was a reproachable character with a few redeeming qualities. If there was historiographical consensus in the next two centuries, it was, simply enough, that Cromwell was an ambiguous leader, a complex figure who even the celebrated Thomas Carlyle could not clarify. For Davis, recent scholarship offers some hope out of the interpretive box, as historians have begun to shear traditional labels of Puritan and Independent and stitch together a more complex and fruitful picture of the circumstances of the Civil War and Interregnum periods. But getting past notions of Cromwell as “a horrible great man” or a “brave bad man” requires not only a sensitivity to evidential limitations but also to this process of reputation building (64).

Davis considers five forms of Cromwell’s reputation, each of which receives a chapter—his rise from “obscurity,” military leadership, godliness, political instincts, and role as a statebuilder. At every turn Davis is iconoclastic, beginning with the received wisdom that Cromwell was a self-made man who climbed to the top of the English political nation through merit and natural talent. Drawing on John Morrill’s rich study of Cromwell’s early history, Davis shows that far from a meteoric rise, Cromwell suffered from a series of setbacks and disappointments in the 1620s before slowly improving his status in the 1630s. Moreover, his move to gentility and increased political prominence cannot be explained by class or Puritan ideology, but instead only by his ability to draw on three networks—cousinage, godly, and political ones—all of which overlapped and not only propelled Cromwell’s national ascent but also allowed him to form valuable alliances crucial to his public aims in 1640s and 1650s.

Having established this general explanation of Cromwell’s rising stardom, Davis explains how the other forms of his reputation resulted, in part, from his movement within these connections.

For instance, Davis emphasizes that much of Cromwell's military success, at least in the early years of the Civil War, was due to his willingness to be a team player, and this in part explains his commitment to the army between 1645-1646, a period when increasingly national settlement required a political rather than a military solution. As for his campaigns in Scotland and Ireland, where historiographical criticism has been acute, Davis disavows suggestions of Cromwell's brutality by pointing to his appeal to a stern and often chastising God, as well as, in Ireland's case, the widespread anti-Catholicism that, if anything, demanded even harsher treatment than Cromwell allowed. A crucial component of this interpretation requires seeing Cromwell's military goals as driven by political aims, both of which remained subservient to God's will for his children. Davis situates Cromwell's thinking in a discourse of millenarianism, one in which a living and active God possessed a dynamic relationship with his people and that sublimated secular institutions as unreliable forms of God's order. Cromwell, like many of his contemporaries, read events through this lens and thus every political proposal or military encounter was considered a test for the nation.

Davis sees Cromwell's Providential discourse as more than political capital and argues for his sincerity by pointing out his consistency in following the logic of this *mentalité* even when things did not go his way (129). But there was a political snare to his religious thought as well, and Cromwell consistently sought to balance liberty of conscience with civil order. This meant finding a workable settlement with a myriad of religious faiths while pushing a reformation of manners aimed at purifying the nation in an effort at comprehensive unity. Cromwell's commitment to religious and civil liberty made him less Machiavellian than has been suggested, and Davis insists that Cromwell's primary goal was to reach a political settlement based on the principles embodied in The Heads of Proposals. All of this—his providential outlook, desire for consensus, and commitment to tender consciences and civil order—made Cromwell a disinterested, if not ineffective, statebuilder. According to Davis, the 1650s required a national order and sta-

bility not clearly projected by Cromwell, and a widespread conservatism among the ruling nation meant old forms would die-hard. Again, Cromwell was only as “great” at circumstances allowed.

Davis’s contextualization of Cromwell’s reputation has produced anything but a paradox, and instead Cromwell the enigma has been reduced to Cromwell the sincere and moderate leader. But while Davis’s approach allows him the latitude to ask significant questions, his answers do not always comport to the context he so vigorously purports to evince. For example, while he recognizes that the language of liberty by the mid 1640s contained multiple meanings, he is unwilling to engage its implications for Cromwell and Independents. A more thorough examination of the ecclesiastical debate among Protestants about the nature of and style of a national church may have further elucidated Cromwell’s political strategy. Finally, it is not churlish to demand a greater understanding of Cromwell’s role at Putney than seeing it as a moment of attempted consensus building and adherence to the principles of The Heads of Proposals. A variety of political understandings were present there, and Davis’s reticence on this significant debate is symptomatic of his own warning that the ultimate meaning of Cromwell’s reputation depends on the narrative form given to the English Civil War.

Lindsey Hughes, ed. *Peter the Great and the West: New Perspectives*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Publishers Ltd. in association with School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College, London and National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, 2001. xxiv + 280 pp. + 15 plates + 3 tables. \$45.00. Review by CATHY J. POTTER, CHINESE UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG.

The essays comprising this volume first were presented at a conference organized by the National Maritime Museum and the School of Slavonic and East European Studies in 1998 to mark the tercentenary of Peter the Great’s unprecedented expedition to