41 OLIVER CROMWELL

1599-1658

Oliver Cromwell, the brilliant and inspiring military leader who led the Parliamentary forces to victory in the English Civil War, is the man most responsible for the eventual establishment of parliamentary democracy as the English form of government.

Cromwell was born in 1599, in Huntingdon, England. As a young man, he lived in an England torn by religious dissensions and governed by a king who believed in and wished to practice

absolute monarchy. Cromwell himself was a farmer and a country gentleman, and a devout Puritan. In 1628, he was elected to Parliament; but he served only briefly, because the following year King Charles I decided to dismiss Parliament and govern the country alone. Not until 1640, when he was in need of money to prosecute a war against the Scots, did the king call a new Parliament. This new Parliament, of which Cromwell was also a member, demanded assurances and protections against a resumption of arbitrary rule by the king. But Charles I was unwilling to be subservient to Parliament, and in 1642, war broke out between forces loyal to the king and those loyal to Parliament.

Cromwell chose the parliamentary side. Returning to Huntingdon, he raised a cavalry troop to fight against the king. During the four-year duration of the war, his remarkable military ability won increasing recognition. Cromwell played the leading role at both the critical Battle of Marston Moor (July 2, 1644), which was the turning point of the war, and at the decisive Battle of Naseby (June 14, 1645). In 1646, the war ended with Charles I a prisoner, and with Cromwell recognized as the most successful general on the parliamentary side.

But peace did not come, because the parliamentary side was divided into factions whose goals differed substantially, and because the king, knowing this, avoided a settlement. Within a year, a second civil war had begun, precipitated by the escape of King Charles and his attempt to rally his forces. The outcome of this renewed conflict was the defeat of the king's forces by Cromwell, the elimination of the more moderate members from Parliament, and the execution of the king in January 1649.

England now became a republic (called the Commonwealth), ruled temporarily by a Council of State, of which Cromwell was chairman. But royalists soon gained control in Ireland and Scotland, and gave their support to the dead king's son, the future Charles II. The result was the successful invasion of both Ireland and Scotland by Cromwell's armies. The long series of wars finally ended in 1652 with the complete defeat of the royalist forces.

Now that the fighting had ended, it was time for the establishment of a new government. There remained, however, the problem of the constitutional form that government should take. This problem was never to be solved during Cromwell's lifetime. The Puritan general had been able to lead to victory the forces that opposed absolute monarchy; but neither his power nor his prestige were sufficient to resolve the social conflicts of his supporters and enable them to agree on a new constitution, for these conflicts were intricately interwoven with the religious conflicts that divided Protestants from each other, as well as from Roman Catholics.

When Cromwell came to power, all that remained of the Parliament of 1640 was a small, unrepresentative, extremist minority, the so-called Rump. At first, Cromwell tried to negotiate for the holding of new elections. When the negotiations broke down, however, he dissolved the Rump by force (April 20, 1653). From then until Cromwell's death in 1658, three different Parliaments were formed and disbanded. Two different constitutions were adopted, but neither functioned successfully. Throughout this period, Cromwell ruled with the support of the army. In effect, he was a military dictator. However, his repeated attempts to institute democratic practices, as well as his refusal of the throne when it was offered to him, indicate that dictatorship was not what he sought; it was forced upon him by the inability of his supporters to establish a workable government.

From 1653 to 1658, Cromwell, under the title of Lord Protector, ruled England, Scotland, and Ireland. During those five years, Cromwell provided Britain with a generally good government and an orderly administration. He ameliorated various harsh laws, and he supported education. Cromwell was a believer in religious toleration, and he permitted the Jews to resettle in England and to practice their religion there. (They had been expelled from England more than three centuries earlier by King Edward I.) Cromwell also conducted a successful foreign policy. He died in London, in 1658, of malaria.

Cromwell's eldest son, Richard Cromwell, succeeded him, but ruled only briefly. In 1660, Charles II was restored to the throne. The remains of Oliver Cromwell were dug up and hung from the gibbet. But this vindictive act could not hide the fact that the struggle for royal absolutism had been lost. Charles II fully realized this, and did not attempt to contest Parliament's supremacy. When his successor, James II, tried to restore royal absolutism, he was soon deposed in the bloodless revolution of 1688. The result was just what Cromwell had wanted in 1640, a constitutional monarchy with the king clearly subservient to Parliament, and with a policy of religious toleration.

In the three centuries since his death, the character of Oliver Cromwell has been the subject of considerable dispute. Numerous critics have denounced him as a hypocrite, pointing out that whereas he always claimed to favor parliamentary supremacy, and to be opposed to arbitrary executive rule, he in fact established a military dictatorship. The majority view, though, is that Cromwell's devotion to democracy was quite sincere, although circumstances beyond his control sometimes compelled him to exercise dictatorial powers. It has been observed that Cromwell was never devious, nor did he ever accept the throne or the establishment of a permanent dictatorship. His rule was usually moderate and tolerant.

How shall we assess Cromwell's overall influence on history? His chief importance, of course, was as a brilliant military leader who defeated the royalist forces in the English Civil War. Since the parliamentary forces had been getting somewhat the worst of it in the early stages of the war, before Cromwell came to the fore, it seems quite possible that their ultimate victory would not have occurred without him. The result of Cromwell's victories was that democratic government was maintained and strengthened in England.

This should not be thought of as something that would have occurred in any event. In the seventeenth century, most of Europe was moving in the direction of greater royal absolutism; the triumph of democracy in England was an event running

counter to the overall trend. In later years, the example of English democracy was an important factor in the French Enlightenment, in the French Revolution, and in the eventual establishment of democratic governments in western Europe. It is also obvious that the triumph of the democratic forces in England played a vital role in the establishment of democracy in the United States and in other former English colonies, such as Canada and Australia. Although England itself occupies only a small part of the world, democracy has flowed from England to regions that are not small at all.

Oliver Cromwell would have been ranked higher, except that almost equal credit for the establishment of democratic institutions in England and the United States should be accorded to the philosopher John Locke. It is difficult to assess the relative importance of Cromwell, who was basically a man of action, and Locke, who was a man of ideas. However, given the intellectual climate of Locke's day, political ideas closely similar to his would probably have been presented fairly soon, even had Locke himself never lived. On the other hand, had Cromwell never lived, there is a strong chance that the parliamentary forces would have lost the English Civil War.

Cromwell refuses the crown of England.