

Cromwell as Dictator.

WE see to-day a reaction against democracy, such as fifty years ago no one even dreamed he would ever witness. Dictatorship is an accomplished fact in Italy and Germany, and shows signs of making headway elsewhere. Indeed, it begins to look as though the day may not be far distant when England will stand alone in Europe for a constitutional monarchy.

For that she does stand. Constitutionalism is as deeply engrained in our political being as absolute monarchism is in the German's. It is the outcome of our centuries-long history as a nation—a history in which we have experimented with various forms of Government, and learned to repudiate or adhere to them, according as they brought us ill or good. Among them was dictatorship—or so at least our histories tell us. This may be no unfitting moment to ask how far Cromwell was a dictator; how he came to be such, and in what spirit, and to what issues, he exercised the office.

What is a dictator? "Absolute ruler, usually temporary or irregular, of a State, especially one who suppresses or succeeds a republican government." So says the *Oxford Dictionary*, and its definition will serve our purpose as well as another. And it must be confessed at once that the cap fits Cromwell, so aptly indeed, that the definition might well have been drawn in view primarily of Cromwell himself. He suppressed and succeeded a Republican Government. His position was irregular, despite all his earnest attempts to give it a constitutional appearance. It was temporary, lasting only for the few years till his death, and then speedily disappearing once for all. And if it was not absolute, it was, perhaps, as nearly so as that of any dictator known to actual history.

Let us next proceed to enquire what manner of man this English dictator was.

His very name may seem ominous. He was a direct descendant of a sister of that Thomas Cromwell, secretary to Henry VIII, whose name is a byword for utterly unscrupulous pursuit of his own self-aggrandising aims, and whose spoliation of the monasteries was the source of the wealth of the Cromwells. Naturally, the family were staunch and militant Protestants. And a day was to come when Oliver himself would be in the van of those who demanded the abolition of episcopacy,

and another when he would approve drastic confiscation of the property of Royalists. But for all that, he was a man of an entirely different spirit from Thomas Cromwell. Thomas had not the fear of God before his eyes. Oliver always had; and it was not to private, but to great public purposes that he appropriated the proceeds of ecclesiastical or political confiscations.

He had always the fear of God before his eyes. It will be well to emphasise this at the outset. For it is the indispensable key to the understanding of his whole life and work. Nothing in either was apart from his religion. Mistakes of course he made, but in all things he tried honestly to know and do the will of God. I make bold to say that if anyone, after reading through his speeches in Parliament, his dispatches to Government, and his private letters, can still seriously doubt *that*, there is nothing for it but to leave him to what must be regarded as a judicial blindness!

But the question may fairly be asked whether Cromwell's personal religion did not belong to a type that, to say the least of it, readily lends itself to a dictatorial attitude—a type that fosters confidence in one's own perception of what is right, and a consequent disposition to thrust this on the acceptance of others, will they, nill they. It was, as we all know, a sturdy Independency. And among the Independents of his day were not a few who laid claim to private intimations of the mind and will of Heaven, and even appealed to them in support of the political programmes which they themselves advocated. Such men were indeed to make trouble enough for Cromwell. It is important therefore to note that Cromwell made no such appeal to private revelations. It is true that his behaviour at times suggested that he had a source of knowledge or anticipation of God's purposes that was inaccessible to others. On the eve of Naseby hardly anyone dared to hope for the success of the raw recruits who formed a great part of the Parliamentary army. Yet we find Cromwell writing thus, a month after the victory: "When I saw the enemy draw up and march in gallant order towards us, and we a company of poor, ignorant men, to seek how to order our battle . . . I could not . . . but smile out to God in praises, in assurance of victory, because God would, by things that are not, bring to naught things that are." But it will be observed that Cromwell was founding himself here on a promise of Scripture. It would moreover be a great mistake to suppose that such confidence in God ever made Cromwell negligent of such expedients for achieving victory as lay within his own power. On the contrary, he owed his unique record as a successful general not least to the unflinching

vigilance, industry and promptitude of action which he devoted to the direction of his campaigns.

He was correspondingly distrustful of people who proposed their own inspirations as a short and easy way to the settlement of political difficulties. "I know a man may answer all difficulties with faith, and faith will answer all difficulties, where it really is; but we are very apt, all of us, to call that faith which perhaps may be but carnal imagination and carnal reasoning." At a meeting where some present had claimed such inspirations, he frankly avowed, "I cannot say that I have received anything that I can speak as in the name of the Lord." His own way of ascertaining the purposes of God was less pretentious—and more laborious. It was to study the logic of events. "Let us look into Providences; surely they mean somewhat. They hang so together; have been so constant, so clear, so unclouded." His reference here is to the almost uniform series of victories whereby, as he believed, God had declared His judgment against Charles I and his despotic government. But the trend of events was not by itself the sole means of Providential manifestation. There was also the mind of God's people. "What think you of Providence disposing the hearts of so many of God's people this way?" "Briefly stated," says Firth, "Cromwell's argument was that the victory of the army, and the convictions of the godly, were external and internal evidence of God's will, to be obeyed as a duty."¹ (In passing, we may note, again with Firth, that this method of Cromwell's helps to explain both his occasional slowness in coming to a decision, and also his apparently inconsistent changes of policy at times.)

If this is the way to ascertain the will of God, then the fitting method of bringing others to your view of it is not by the exercise of authority or force, but by persuasion. This was fully recognised by Cromwell. Naturally hot-tempered as he was, and sometimes liable to passionate outbursts that broke down his habitual self-control, he was always averse to violent methods of procedure. Even when he was Protector, he was distinguished by the readiness with which he allowed subjects access to himself, and listened to the representations of opponents. "If ever," says S. R. Gardiner, "there was a man who suffered fools gladly, who sought to influence and persuade, and who was ready to get something tolerable done by consent, rather than get something better done by forcing it on unwilling minds, that man was Cromwell."²

¹ Firth's *Oliver Cromwell* (Heroes of the Nations) : the best biography, to which this paper is heavily indebted throughout.

² *Cromwell's Place in History*, p. 46.

Particularly in religion was Cromwell tolerant of differing opinions. In this matter also his inward conviction was confirmed by the logic of events. He found that Independents made as good soldiers as Presbyterians, if not better. He insisted on the removal of a major-general because the latter had cashiered an officer on no more convincing ground than that he was an "Anabaptist." Cromwell stood for religion that was inward and spiritual, and for the unity for which such religion affords the basis. "All that believe have the real unity, which is most glorious because inward and spiritual. . . . For . . . Uniformity, every Christian will for peace sake study and do as far as conscience will permit. And from brethren in things of the mind we look for no compulsion, but that of light and reason." In truth Cromwell "was intolerant [only] of everything opposed to the highest and most spiritual religion, and of the forms which, as he thought, choked and hindered its development."³ Popish ceremonies to him were "poisonous," because they "eat out the core and power and heart and life of all religion." Prelacy was inadmissible, because it was allied with the persecuting rule of the Stuarts. But short of these, and of blasphemous infidelity, he could make room for almost any honest belief. "I desire from my heart . . . union and right understanding between the godly people—Scots, English, Jews, Gentiles, Presbyterians, Anabaptists, and all." Nay, elsewhere he affirms, "I had rather that Mohametanism were permitted amongst us, than that one of God's children should be persecuted." He was opposed to depriving a man of his natural liberty "upon a supposition he may abuse it. When he doth abuse it, judge." The securing of religious liberty became eventually the supreme object of his political activity. "Religion was not the thing at first contested for, but . . . at last it proved to be that which was most dear to us. And wherein consisted this more than in obtaining that liberty from the tyranny of the bishops to all species of Protestants to worship God according to their own light and conscience?"

"The thing at first contested for" was civil freedom—the constitutional rights of an Englishman. For these too Cromwell was prepared to fight. In his young manhood it looked as if England were following the lead of the Continental powers towards absolute monarchy. "We are the last monarchy in Christendom that maintains its rights," a speaker had declared in Parliament in 1625; and Cromwell doubtless shared his apprehensions. He had himself suffered fine and imprisonment under the oppressive measures of Charles I's government. His

³ Gardiner, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

maiden speech in the House was made in order to complain of a bishop for countenancing a clergyman who preached "flat Popery" at St. Paul's Cross, and attempting to silence a Puritan preacher who refuted him. And in the ever-memorable Long Parliament of 1640 he came forward to present the petition of John Lilburn, confined in the Fleet for his outspoken condemnation of the Queen's dancing, and also to support an agitation for the abolition of the high-handed bishops. How came such an ardent champion of the constitutional liberties of the subject himself to exercise the office of dictator?

I think it must be clear to any open-minded reader of the story that it was contrary to his own deepest desires. What we see there is the spectacle of a man struggling desperately to avoid something towards which nevertheless he is irresistibly borne by the force of circumstances. Throughout, we see him opposing extremists, and striving to make moderate counsels prevail. When, after the first civil war, negotiations were on foot for a new settlement of the government of the country, and a rupture between Parliament and Army, and consequent anarchy, seemed imminent, Cromwell did his best to get the Army to bow to the authority of Parliament. "If that authority falls to nothing, nothing can follow but confusion." When, notwithstanding, the Army mutinied, Cromwell did indeed join them, but because it seemed the only way to prevent the outbreak of civil war or anarchy. He was on principle against the employment of force, except in the last resort. "That you have by force, I look upon as nothing. I do not know that force is to be used except we cannot get what is for the good of the Kingdom without it." When the Army leaders pressed for a written constitution, setting up a democratic republic, Cromwell again demurred. Abstractly, a republic might be desirable, but he held that it was not practicable. More important than the best of all possible governments was a form of government acceptable to the majority of the people. And for this reason he was for retaining monarchy and a second chamber, and he held them needful to the security of life and property. Once more, when extremer sections in the Army began to clamour for the prosecution and punishment of the King, Cromwell sought to find terms by acceptance of which the King's life might yet be saved. Only when it became manifest that Charles would not accept conditions needful to protect the nation against abuse of his royal power, did Cromwell consent to his trial. Then indeed, and characteristically, he acted resolutely, and even helped to keep steadfast others of the Regicides who showed signs of wavering.

A contemporary story credits him with muttering, as he gazed on the corpse of the King, "Cruel necessity." Whether the story be true or not, the utterance certainly reflects his view of the execution.

The House of Commons proceeded to vote the abolition both of Monarchy and the House of Lords. But it had been forcibly purged successively of its Royalist and its Presbyterian members, and was thus not representative of the nation. Essentially it depended on the support of the Army. The soldiers, however, wanted it to pass their proposed republican constitution, and then dissolve itself. Parliament for its part would neither "get on nor get out." The situation became increasingly menacing. The Army itself was divided. Part of it followed the "Levellers," radicals who demanded the *immediate* setting up of a democratic republic. Cromwell himself saw that, unless the war was to have been fought in vain, they must be summarily dealt with. "I tell you [the Council of State], you have no other way to deal with these men but to break them, or they will break you; yea, and . . . frustrate and make void all that work that with so many years' industry, toil and pains you have done." On the other hand, English Royalists were plotting for Charles's son; Ireland, and then Scotland, declared for him. Cromwell was appointed commander-in-chief of all the country's forces to crush the Scotch. When he had done so, he returned to the constitutional question. He brought together in conference representatives of the Army and the Parliament. Again Parliament proved dilatory or obstructive. Cromwell grew impatient. "What if a man should take upon him to be King?" he exclaimed in a *tête-à-tête* with Whitelocke. The Army threatened to turn out the Parliament by force. Cromwell complained to a friend that he was being driven on to do something, "the consideration of the issue whereof made his hair stand on end." He proposed one more compromise. Parliament rejected it; and then Cromwell forcibly dissolved them. "It is you that have forced me to this, for I have sought the Lord night and day, that He would rather slay me than put me upon the doing of this work."

In his own view, Cromwell, as commander-in-chief, was the only constituted authority surviving. He felt that this situation must be ended as soon as possible. On his writ was summoned a Parliament consisting of 140 persons, chosen by the Army Council from those nominated by the Independent churches in the various counties, and, accordingly, not truly representative of the nation at large. We need not review its proceedings in detail. From the first, serious divisions disclosed themselves. On the important question of a State establishment

of religion, the parties for and against were almost equally balanced. At the same time the menace of royalist reaction grew more serious. Cromwell tried in vain to reconcile the warring interests. He came to regret his part in calling the Parliament, and asked himself whether it was not "due to a desire, I am afraid sinful enough, to be quit of the power God had most clearly by His providence put into my hands, before He called me to lay it down." Hence, when the Moderates got a vote through the House in favour of restoring to him the power he had put into their hands, he concurred with them. And when a section of the Army, led by General Lambert, offered him the Protectorate, again he accepted. At a later date he declared, "I did out of necessity undertake that business, which place I undertook . . . out of a desire to prevent mischief and evil which I did see was imminent in the nation." And to a warning that nine in ten of the nation would be against him he is said to have replied, "Very well, but what if I should disarm the nine and put a sword in the tenth man's hands? Would not that do the business?"

This Protectorate, however, did not amount to an irresponsible dictatorship. There was a written constitution, the "Instrument of Government." This provided for a Parliament every third year, and a Council of State, whose members, most of them named in the Instrument, held office for life, and had the choice of the Protector's successor. The Dictator could only veto such laws passed by Parliament as contravened the constitution. He had the executive power, but "in domestic administration and foreign affairs, he could not act without the consent of the Council; in taxation and for the employment of the Army, he needed the consent of Parliament or Council." None the less, his powers were undeniably formidable, as was speedily apparent. In the nine months before Parliament could meet, he with his Council issued eighty-two ordinances (nearly all of which were subsequently confirmed by Parliament). These I cannot stay to particularise. One feature, however, of his administration I cannot omit here. He strove unweariedly for religious toleration, and for mitigation of sentences on individuals accused of "heresy." It was thanks to him, says Firth, that "Nonconformity had time to take root and to grow so strong in England that the storm which followed the Restoration had no power to root it up."

When Parliament did meet, the clash between it and the Army promptly revived. It was for asserting itself as supreme authority in the State, and for reducing the Army, and this at a time when wars abroad and conspiracies at home rendered such reduction a perilous measure. Cromwell refused, and

dissolved it. "I think it my duty to tell you that it is not for the profit of these nations, nor for common and public good, for you to continue here any longer."

After suppressing insurrection, Cromwell did somewhat reduce the military establishment. But he proceeded presently to the most unpopular act of his whole administration. He divided England into twelve districts, and set over each a major-general, who was responsible, not only for dealing with disloyal movements in his area, but also for enforcing the government's Puritanical laws against crime and in restraint of popular amusements. By this arrangement "the Protectorate stood revealed as a military despotism" (Firth, p. 417). But lawyers now began to question the validity of these laws themselves, and judges to refuse to administer them. Cromwell repressed them by the strong hand. Further, Republican leaders declined to acknowledge the Government's authority. Ludlow insisted that the nation ought to be governed by its own consent. "I am as much for government by consent as anyone," was Cromwell's retort, "but where shall we find that consent?"

Ere long financial needs constrained him to call a second Parliament. Of those elected, the Council excluded one hundred, as disaffected to government. Even so, Parliament proved not wholly tractable. True, it made it high treason to plot against the Protectorate. But it disregarded Cromwell's plea for mitigation of its barbarous sentence on the Quaker Naylor, and it rejected by an overwhelming majority a government bill for continuing the harsh tax on Cavaliers. On the other hand, the discovery of a plot to assassinate Cromwell aroused the desire for more efficient protection of the Protector. The title of King was more familiar and reverend to the nation. The Commons voted a "Humble Petition and Advice" that Cromwell should accept that title. But acceptance would have rent the army in twain, and after some hesitation Cromwell declined. Thereupon the Protectorate was renewed, but in a form more agreeable to his feelings. For one thing, he could now feel that his office had the authority of the Parliament as well as the Army. Also he was empowered to name his own successor, and, subject to Parliament's approval, the members of a Second Chamber. The powers of Parliament, on the other hand, were extended at the expense of those of the Council. In particular, the Council could no longer exclude elected members of Parliament.

But when Parliament met, history repeated itself. It presently put forward a scheme that aimed at securing the ultimate supremacy in the State to the Commons, and at limiting the Protector's control of the Army. Cromwell summoned both

Houses to meet him, and told them their proceedings tended "to nothing else but the playing of the King of Scots' game. I do dissolve this Parliament. And let God be judge between you and me." One more Parliament he called, but before it met he was dead. And the life of Cromwell was the only force that could postpone the Restoration.

Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter. It can be summed up in a few words. It is clear—is it not?—that Cromwell had no desire for a personal dictatorship; resisted it as long as he could; only accepted it to obviate what seemed to him still greater evils; and when it thus thrust itself upon him, administered it not for his own satisfaction or glory, but for what he took to be the highest welfare of his nation. And in fact he wrought great things for England. He secured just and efficient administration at home, and made her name and power respected abroad. He made absolute monarchy impossible once for all, and ultimately it was he who secured our religious liberty. But if his exercise of the office was thus excellent, only the more apparent does it become that dictatorship itself will never do. To say no more, it carries within it its own nemesis. Inevitably it provokes reaction. You cannot thrust the will of an individual on a nation. You cannot dragoon a nation even into goodness, if it is not ready for it. Further, the goodness itself is not only questionable to many, it is actually deficient, from the limitations inevitably arising from the individual's ignorance or prejudice. And the irritation provoked by the dragooning is aggravated by burdensome taxation necessary to the maintenance of the armed force that dragoons. In the end, the dictatorship is felt to be at least as intolerable as the evils which it was instituted to remove!

A. J. D. FARRER.

THE UNITARIAN HISTORICAL SOCIETY has completed the fifth volume of its Transactions. The great feature is Joseph Priestley, about whom many writers contribute articles; two letters of his own to James Bilbrough, of Gildersome, in 1828, have been sent by Harold Knott. The quality of the Society's work is high, with research by Walter H. Burgess, George Eyre Evans and Ernest Axon; with only £45 income it is hard to do more. The next volume will be edited by Miss Anne Holt; Mr. Burgess, secretary since 1915, now becomes president.