
Those barbarous wretches

Tom Reilly: *Cromwell : An Honourable Enemy*
(Brandon, 1999)

Reviewed by **Tony Little**

Oliver Cromwell's reputation in Britain has always been ambivalent. To some, including many Liberals, he stood up to the Divine Right of Kings and made possible constitutional parliamentary government. This is why he has been honoured by his statue at Westminster. To others he was the Puritan spoilsport who martyred a misguided but romantic king and supplanted him with a military dictatorship. Each of these is a distortion of facts enhanced by myth but not dangerous.

In Ireland, Cromwell's reputation is darker and more dangerous. To nationalists he was a war criminal who massacred innocent civilians in hot-tempered assaults on Irish towns and then drove the remaining Catholic population into exile in their own country. He instigated the sense of grievance which led the native Irish to back James II against William of Orange and fed that sense of grievance through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. History colours the thinking of both sides in Northern Ireland, seventeenth century grievances still rankle and seventeenth century attitudes to the Christian religion are fervently expressed. Tom Reilly suggests that this view of Cromwell still informs the teaching of history in Irish schools and that it is wrong. His work is a useful exercise in challenging stereotypes, the way in which images are created and the care needed in the use of sources.

Cromwell set out for Ireland in the summer of 1649. The civil war in England had been ended by the execution of the King in January of that year. But in Ireland there remained substantial bodies of armed men proclaiming loyalty to the Prince of Wales, the future Charles II. Cromwell

took with him a 12,000-strong army, later reinforced. His enemy never fought him in the field but faced up to him in a series of town sieges, of which the best remembered is the first, Drogheda. Cromwell saw himself facing an Irish royalist – and more importantly Papist – enemy, which had been responsible earlier in the decade for the massacre of innocent English Protestants.

In reality the situation was always much more complex than Cromwell understood. He never at any stage faced a united enemy. The nominal leader, the Earl of Ormonde, and many subordinate commanders of the royalists were Protestants; indeed, many of them considered themselves English rather than Irish, including some of those born in Ireland. Ormonde was never able to muster a force strong enough to face Cromwell in the field. His strategy, in so far as he had one, was to draw Cromwell into a siege and allow time, bad hygiene and the winter to weaken the Ironsides. Cromwell had no choice but to face this tactic head on. The critical test was Drogheda, to the north of Dublin and the gateway to Ulster.

The siege proceeded according to seventeenth century etiquette. Cromwell requested the surrender of the town. The defending commander, Sir Arthur Aston, had the choice of making terms to hand over the walled and fortified town or of defiance and facing the consequences. It was understood that those consequences were likely to be very bloody. Aston stood his ground and Cromwell began pounding the walls with cannon superior to anything the defendants had available. In due course he blasted a hole in the wall substantial enough to allow an assault. After an initial resist-

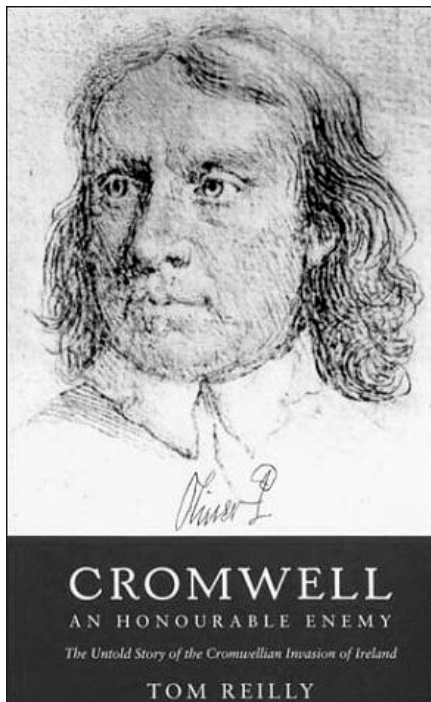
ance the defendants of the breach were overwhelmed and the speed of the parliamentary onrush prevented the defenders from making a second line of defence. It is here that the controversy starts. At the time, and over the next few days, the whole garrison was slaughtered to the extent of about 3000, with fairly superficial Cromwellian losses of around 150. It is reported that Aston was beaten to death with his wooden leg.

Cromwell hoped that the example of Drogheda would prevent further bloodletting elsewhere. To a large extent he was right. With Drogheda secure, he headed back south and was not seriously challenged until he arrived at Wexford. The key to the defensive position at Wexford was a castle just outside and looking down on the town. Colonel Sinnott, the commander of the town, but with a detached force in the castle, stalled for time by stipulating unacceptable conditions for his surrender. While negotiations continued, Captain Stafford surrendered the castle, which was quickly occupied by parliamentary troops who launched an assault on the town without waiting for orders. With little or no resistance, a second massacre ensued. Many troops and citizens who escaped slaughter in the streets drowned fleeing across the river. The town was plundered.

Unsurprisingly, Cromwell faced little further resistance, with the exception of Clonmel, to which we will return. Cromwell was summoned back to England, never again to leave the mainland. Arriving in April 1650, he had little rest before he was required to head off the renewed royalist threat from David Leslie and Charles II in Scotland and reconstruct a constitution to replace the parliamentary government that had failed its civil war protagonists. He became a monarch in all but name.

The case against Cromwell in Ireland is threefold

- The slaughter of the troops in Drogheda was unnecessary and occurred after they had surrendered
- Civilians of both sexes and un-armed Catholic clergy were slain



without mercy; indeed, it is alleged that the population of Drogheda was wiped out.

- The slaughter of the garrison at Wexford occurred while negotiations were under way.

Tom Reilly's defence of his hero is similarly threefold:

- The slaughter at Drogheda was within the rules of war at the time.
- The massacre at Wexford was outside Cromwell's control.
- There is no evidence of deliberate civilian deaths (Catholic clergy excepted and excusable).

Clonmel is used to clinch his argument. Here the forces of Hugh O'Neill offered a spirited resistance. The inevitable happened. The cannon were too strong for the walls and a breach was created. However, O'Neill, a professional soldier with extensive experience from the Continent, was ready for the assault, trapping and killing significant numbers of Cromwell's troops. Despite Cromwell's efforts to rally his men they were beaten off. This was the heaviest defeat that Cromwell met in Ireland and one of the heaviest of his career. However there was a price to be paid. O'Neill's men were running short of ammunition and would not survive another assault. During the night the mayor and other civilian leaders approached Cromwell to parley terms. The condi-

tions were accepted and the agreement signed. It was only at this stage that Cromwell asked whether O'Neill concurred. To his fury, Cromwell was advised that O'Neill had withdrawn from the town under cover of darkness. Despite the immense provocation and the mayor's deceit, Cromwell honoured the terms he had agreed, and the town and its inhabitants remained unharmed.

The strength of the book is that Reilly goes back to the – very limited – written eyewitness accounts and quotes extensively from them. He draws attention to the bias of accounts written after the restoration in 1660, and heavily discounts additions to the legend from the nineteenth century as being manufactured for nationalist or religious propaganda purposes. There is no doubt of Cromwell's hostility to Catholicism or that it was reciprocated both then and later. His response to the declaration of the Irish hierarchy at Clonmacnoise puts Rev. Ian Paisley's outbursts in the shade. Cromwell showed no mercy to priests he found in Drogheda or Wexford. But he always drew a distinction between the priests and the – to him – misguided people.

Cromwell's reputation in Ireland is too damaged to be salvaged by this book. Reilly makes a fair case in clearing Cromwell from the extensive civilian massacres of legend and shows that he was by no means the worst

behaved military leader in Ireland either at the time or subsequently. The risk of such a book is that it becomes too partisan in favour of the maligned hero. It is a danger that Reilly does not wholly avoid but his willingness to provide extensive quotations from the source materials gives the reader the chance to hear the arguments but make up his own mind. To a modern mind, Reilly fails to exonerate Cromwell's treatment of the soldiers who had surrendered at Drogheda. Today this would be a war crime. The killing of clergy cannot be condoned, as Reilly appears to, on the basis that they might have been armed when he quotes no evidence of this. Wisely he avoids a detailed discussion of the consequences of the plantation of English settlers which followed the success of the Cromwellian military campaign.

Military affairs of the seventeenth century are outside our usual subject matter in this journal but the continued relevance of these historic events to modern Anglo-Irish relations and the challenge it offers to long accepted beliefs make Reilly's work a worthwhile read. It is the continuous challenge for historians to work with the evidence rather than the propaganda, whether modern or ancient.

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