

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Thomas Cromwell: A Revolutionary Life* (London: Viking, 2018). Xxiii+728pp. 9 780 6700 2557 2 (hardcover) 978 0 5255 6029 6 (ebook).

Sean Lawrence

University of British Columbia, Okanagan

sean.lawrence@ubc.ca

The life of Thomas Cromwell, chief minister of Henry VIII and Vice-Gerent in Spirituals, has attracted renewed interest with the success of Hilary Mantel's historical novels *Wolf Hall*, *Bring up the Bodies* and *The Mirror and the Light*.¹ Diarmaid MacCulloch, in contrast to Mantel, has written an academic biography, in several senses of the word 'academic'. To begin with, the book is academic in the sense of scholarly, with 175 pages of dense notes, bibliographies and indexes. The hardcover makes a handsome volume, with maps, illustrations and forty-six colour plates, but at 728 pages it may be less practical to carry around than the ebook, even if the ebook were installed on a very large tablet. The few errors are trivial,² and cannot detract from MacCulloch's limpid prose, punctuated by wittily irreverent asides. He describes Henry VIII, for instance, as 'a thorough coward when it came to personal confrontations' (p. 169), as 'the greatest ego of the realm' (p. 145) and as 'promiscuous in his approaches to the most senior eligible ladies in western Europe, in ways entertaining to members of Europe's political elite with a greater sense of the absurd than himself' (p. 444). MacCulloch assures us that Roland Lee's 'letters to Thomas Cromwell sparkle with sharp humour' and so does their recipient's biography (p. 195). The book is not academic in the sense of dry, except insofar as wit can be dry.

It is, however, academic in its overt historiography. On his first page, MacCulloch begins a description of the surviving archive and its limitations. He draws heavily on Cromwell's papers, confiscated in 1540 and now divided between the National Archives and the British Library. Helpfully, MacCulloch even includes facsimiles of

¹ Hilary Mantel, *Wolf Hall* (London: 4th Estate, 2009); *Bring up the Bodies* (London: 4th Estate, 2012); *The Mirror and the Light* (London: 4th Estate, 2020).

² 'Their' is used for 'there' on page 174, and some references to plates refer to the wrong ones.

particularly important documents, such as a rare surviving letter from Cromwell to Cardinal Wolsey (p. 123). Throughout, MacCulloch is charmingly self-aware as a reader of primary texts, taking the time to insert a footnote expressing his gratitude that Archbishop Edward Lee's 'fussiness was also reflected in his habitual dating of his letters by year, a highly unusual gift to posterity' (p. 228n). It is a measure of MacCulloch's engagement with the surviving documents that he often refers to historical figures in terms of their scripts: Cromwell had only 'undistinguished handwriting' (p. 50); Thomas Winter (Wolsey's illegitimate son) was equipped with 'beautiful italic handwriting' (p. 82); Agostino de Augustinis wrote a 'rather tiring small italic hand' (p. 133); Norfolk had a 'distinctive and rather pleasing handwriting' (p. 181); Hugh Latimer and Roland Lee shared 'a rather similar hand, rapid and semi-italic' (p. 214); Richmond (Henry's illegitimate son) wrote in a hand which 'is rather touching in its eager adolescent awkwardness' (p. 259); Henry's own 'distinctive royal handwriting' betrays his occasional notations (p. 502); Cromwell's son Gregory used a 'neat secretary-hand, a touchingly close if slightly clumsy imitation' of his tutor's (p. 441); his wife, Elizabeth (*née* Seymour, sister to Henry's third queen), boasts a 'characterful hand' (p. 425) and MacCulloch later notes that she 'always inspires admiration' (p. 538). MacCulloch indulges in graphology no more than he indulges in any other pseudo-science, but he repeatedly describes historical figures in terms of the physical form in which they present themselves to him, as handwriting on old documents. This is documentary history not only at its best, but also at its most intimate.

Thomas Cromwell nevertheless amounts to far more than a *précis* of old letters. For one thing, someone purged Cromwell's correspondence of much that might prove incriminating, including almost all the outgoing correspondence (p. 2). Near Cromwell's fall, especially, 'much of what we know has to come from reports back home of the French ambassador [Charles de] Marillac, absorbed and darkly entertained by the unfolding drama' (p. 521). MacCulloch goes far beyond merely using different sets of reports to supplement each other, however. He informs his reading throughout with an intimate expertise in the Henrician Reformation in particular and the whole sweep of Christian history in general, placing events in both the immediate context of deadly court politics and the pan-European context of violent religious change. This biography could serve as a history of the entire Tudor Reformation, albeit from the idiosyncratic perspective of one of its principals. Mantel endorsed *Thomas Cromwell: A Revolutionary Life* as 'a book that . . . we have been awaiting for four hundred years' and except in the vanishingly unlikely case of Cromwell's outgoing correspondence being found, it may last four hundred years without needing significant changes. MacCulloch's biography is also academic in that the author engages in academic disputes, correcting previous readings and discovering new ones. He dedicates the book

to Sir Geoffrey Elton, recalling his supervisor's Scotch as well as his tutelage near the beginning (p. 3), but concludes near the end that 'By now the reader will have seen Geoffrey Elton's particular vision of a bureaucratic "Tudor revolution in Government" dispersed' (p. 543). MacCulloch gives more credit to Thomas Wolsey than was common until recently: 'Wolsey set the pace which Cromwell then continued' (p. 546). Moreover, 'Wolsey was consistently easy-going on heresy . . . never initiating the burning of a heretic' (p. 73), a point in Wolsey's favour to which MacCulloch returns twice, contrasting Wolsey's relaxed attitude with Thomas More's 'positive relish for burning heretics' (pp. 239, 161). MacCulloch shows that the Lincolnshire Rising and the Pilgrimage of Grace were 'aimed at Cromwell and his associates more precisely and carefully than has generally been appreciated' (p. 391). While engaging with earlier historiography, however, he carefully avoids 'the temptation to read everything in terms of faction and self-interest' (p. 439). Even when describing how Cromwell (and *a fortiori*, Henry) 'relished the wealth' gained by suppressing monasteries, MacCulloch is at pains to recall that 'there was a moral and theological dimension of which we must not lose sight' (p. 452). Rather than assigning blame to Cromwell for the dissolution of the monasteries, he notes that some dissolutions had taken place 'long before Cromwell came to power' (p. 488) and that 'The dissolution of the monasteries was not a certainty until it was complete. What it was not was a long-term scheme authored by Thomas Cromwell' (p. 492). Though he thanks earlier historians and expresses 'new respect for the very early historians' (p. 4), MacCulloch avoids falling into their polemical disputes about his subject, maintaining an academic distance.

As a result, the author must admit in his last pages that 'Some readers may consider that this book underplays the theme of rapacity in Cromwell's public career' (p. 548). To be fair, Cromwell seldom accepted bribes and even less frequently allowed them to influence his decisions (p. 194). He fought the building of weirs on common waterways in a sort of personal riverain anti-enclosure campaign, 'regardless of immediate economic rationales', never mind self-enrichment (pp. 186, 304). On the other side of the moral ledger, however, he indulged in 'that most effective of counter-intelligence devices, false news' (p. 207), called for the torture of friars to extract confessions (p. 230), established press censorship (p. 234), indulged in private quarrels from the advantageous position of high office (p. 242), and plotted successfully 'to destroy the Queen' Anne Boleyn (p. 334). Indeed, 'the responsibility for Anne's destruction remains squarely with Cromwell, as he cheerfully admitted' (p. 342). Even more damningly, he 'is irredeemably associated with the campaign of official cruelty that followed' the 1534 parliament (p. 248). Later, he encouraged and even incited Henry's destruction of the Montague family (p. 475). MacCulloch is perhaps too fair to his subject. For instance, he follows his ascription of blame to Cromwell for the campaign

of Henrician terror by immediately adding that ‘one can see him doing his best to reign in while conscientiously doing the king’s ruthless will’ (p. 248). Nevertheless, if Henry was ‘a thorough coward’ Cromwell was a forthright bully. ‘It is not often that we have the chance of hearing my Lord Privy Seal at full throttle’, MacCulloch notes, ‘a privilege best enjoyed at a safe chronological distance’ (p. 408). Moreover, the excuse for Cromwell’s behaviour seems weak: ‘Ultimately one cannot expect the chief minister of an angry and ruthless king to do much more than obey his will or face the consequences’ (p. 284). This is the ‘only obeying orders’ defense advanced on behalf of war criminals. Besides, Cromwell’s position of chief minister was not some sort of misfortune, whereby he found himself in the wrong place at the wrong time, but the product of his own ambition.

Occasional references to Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, subject of MacCulloch’s earlier and equally magisterial biography, offer an implied criticism. Where Cromwell conspired to have Anne killed, ‘Cranmer, Anne’s protégé, showed his mettle’ by writing to the murderously paranoid king in her support (p. 338). Cranmer wrote a similar letter for Cromwell, ‘an astonishingly brave letter to write, given Cranmer’s own danger’ (p. 528), and a contrast with the abandonment of Cromwell by practically everyone he had ever helped. Probably the most redemptive thing MacCulloch says about Cromwell is that he shared with the Archbishop ‘an intimate co-operation which went beyond business’ (p. 210). This did not, however, make Cromwell refrain from trying and failing to plant suspicions of his friend in Henry’s mind, as he later confessed. ‘Here’, MacCulloch writes, ‘in a moment of startling clarity, we are transported to the heart of early Tudor politics, as the leading men at Court eyed one another and judged the moment to plant the negative thought in the mind of their terrifyingly unpredictable royal master’ (p. 504). Despite Cranmer’s supposed naivety, it was he who, in the machinations surrounding the king’s marriage to Anne of Cleves, ‘got the king’s psychology right; if only Cromwell had listened to him’ (p. 443). Perhaps Cranmer’s brilliant strategy was to refuse to play the more ruthless games of court intrigue in the first place. Cromwell, on the other hand, played to advance both himself and his ecclesiastical agenda, achieving ‘the most successful Nicodemite enterprise of the whole Reformation’ (p. 543). In the end, he was destroyed when his enemies found that they, too, could weaponise the king’s anger: ‘The psychology with Henry was to find an oblique reason why he should feel savage fury with a victim, to fuel his self-righteousness and draw attention away from his own sense of humiliation’ (p. 524). One might think that it served Cromwell right to be destroyed by the very means he used against others, though MacCulloch maintains too much historical balance to indulge in the sort of moralizing that I probably would. *Thomas Cromwell: A Revolutionary Life* is undoubtedly better for the omission.

This book is academic in a further and rather literal way, when it touches on questions of education and university administration. Cromwell seems never to have attended university (p. 9), and MacCulloch (being an historian, unlike Mantel) refuses to speculate about how Cromwell obtained his education. He knew enough law to practice as a sort of ‘freelance consultant’ (p. 30) and showed ‘a gift for learning languages, though there is no clue to how he acquired them’ (p. 27). I find this disappointing, for the self-interested reason that I would like to know Cromwell’s secret. His lack of academic credentials, however, did not keep Cromwell from being elected Chancellor of Cambridge, and he was involved in efforts to endow the universities with the property of friaries (p. 463). He was also a leading member of the visitations reporting on monasteries and ‘Almost at a tangent’, the universities: ‘. . . this was the first time secular government had intruded on the internal affairs of Oxford and Cambridge, an interference that has never thereafter ceased’ (p. 306). MacCulloch shows himself academic in his praise for curricular independence: ‘It would be pleasing to believe that intellectual curiosity proved a healthy break on official diktat’ (p. 307). He also shows himself academic in his choice of metaphor for Cromwell’s first parliament, which he compares to a ‘committee meeting that could have been shorter’ (p. 52). Soon, however, Cromwell became a master at manipulating the institution (p. 53), though increasing its power along the way: ‘woe betide any later English monarch who tried to dispense with it’ (p. 547). His ‘genius for improvisatory administration with amoeba-like properties of expansion’ reminds me uncomfortably of one of my undergraduate professors, who boasted of having kept copies of the keys to every office he’d ever occupied (p. 274). Cromwell preferred to collect the salaries of offices than the keys. ‘[O]nce appointed he never relinquished his grip on the office’ of Chancellor of the Exchequer (p. 224), and his surrender of the office of Master of the Rolls provides ‘a rare example of Cromwell relinquishing an office once he had been granted it’ (p. 105). Cromwell’s career seems academic in the sense of being much like academic politics, but played on a wider field for mortal stakes. His efforts to reform the English church, sometimes in spite of its Supreme Head, never mind its members, suggests the machinations of a Vice Chancellor bent on his own ideas of reform and treating faculty committees as, at best, instruments to realize that agenda.

Despite his lack of academic credentials, Cromwell might be called a humanist. He clearly displayed a fascination with languages, especially Italian. ‘[T]he key to Cromwell’s employment by Wolsey’, MacCulloch shows, ‘was his ability to deal with Italians’ (p. 58). Moreover, he ‘loved books’ (p. 141). As with many humanists, he maintained wide-ranging friendships, including with Protestant exiles, many of whom were ‘known to Cromwell, at the very least across a crowded room’ (p. 139). He also

enjoyed a ‘catholicity of friendships’ reaching beyond confessional bounds to Wolsey’s other former servants (p. 60). He even shared a friend with Sir Thomas More (p. 42), though that mutual friendship didn’t stop him from helping to arrange More’s conviction and execution. Cromwell’s career, like More’s, may be understood in terms of the humanist debate between the contemplative and active lives, dramatized in the first book of *Utopia*. Both Thomases, as well as their namesakes Thomas Cranmer, Thomas Wolsey, or for that matter Thomas à Beckett, attempted to reconcile learning with political engagement and died trying, sometimes horribly.³ At least in the cases of the Henrician Thomases, the guilt of serving a murderous regime compounded the ultimate failure of at least their personal ambitions. One might conclude that they would have done better to stick to their books. MacCulloch may not mean his biography of Thomas Cromwell as a praise of the contemplative life, but it may be considered academic in this last sense, implicitly opposing the active life of high politics.

³ MacCulloch credits the popularity of Becket’s cult with the number of Englishmen named Thomas (p. 465).