Robert Hutchinson

*Thomas Cromwell: The Rise and Fall of Henry VIII’s Most Notorious Minister*

New York: St. Martin’s, 2009

360 pages

In an age that loves biography, the absence of Thomas Cromwell [from that] genre seems a bit of a mystery. [By my reckoning] Roger B. Merriman’s work, [*The Life and Letters of Thomas Cromwell* (1902)], has been the standard biography for a very long time. [One would think such a man would generate plenty of excitement among biographers: He came from nothing and got everything by dominating every aspect of King Henry VIII’s government, and English life as well, only to lose it all and end his days by the sword—executed as a traitor to the King he had so loyally served.]

The Cromwell years were among the most crucial in England. In the bibliography of the book under review there are two biographies published in England in 1887 and 1891[,] and another one in 1935. But [in addition] a biography by B. M. Beckingsale [appeared] in 1978 [(which I read)] and a more recent one [(which I have not read)]: J. Patrick Coby’s *Thomas Cromwell: Machiavellian Statecraft and the English Reformation* (2009). Hilary Mantel must have noticed the gap[; her much praised novel, *Wolf Hall* (ecstatic reviews appeared everywhere, and won Man Booker in 2009),] fills it with a vengeance. It pleased Christopher Hitchens so much that the reader of his review in [*The Atlantic*] would think [that the novel is not only] a masterpiece of historical fiction but the best possible biography Cromwell [could] ever get, [that she expresses] the most profound and complete historical truth about the man and his achievements [(even without covering his entire life)].

Two historians, G. R. Elton and A. G. Dickens, worked hard at shaping an image of Thomas Cromwell as the man who gave England a parliamentary monarchy, the single author of a revolution in English history of enormous consequence. But after G. B. Bernard’s *The King’s Reformation* (published in 2005 and not quoted by Hutchinson) we know better. This, of course, does not mean to diminish Cromwell’s achievements. Merriman thought [omit: that] he merited “a place higher than that of most men of his type”. But what was his type exactly, the type of this physically short but solid, utterly
practical, and efficient man? Right away, in the prologue of Hutchinson’s biography, the reader comes across some strong descriptive words. [This “notorious minister”] was not merely ambitious but a “totally corrupt statesman”, a “devious, ruthless instrument of the state”[omit:, “the most hated man in the kingdom”]. And later in the book, Cromwell is described as “thoroughly materialistic”, “always the opportunist”, “simple and brutal”, a man of “habitual duplicity” and “ruthless manipulation”, “as guilty of corruption as sin itself”. Hutchinson writes that he was “probably the most hated man in England” and that his “carefully drafted legislation transformed Henry’s nation into what we would now recognize as a totalitarian Stalinist state”. [That’s not something] Mr. Hitchens is going to like.

But even Merriman would agree that Cromwell had absolute disregard for justice or the morality of any action, something which is quite compatible with feeding daily scores of poor people from his own London home or of having been a genius in the organization of state bureaucracy. [The man who] started his career as a vagabond and soldier of fortune, placed all his practical ability, as well as his mind and heart, [into] serving king and country, [while simultaneously excelling at] using everything and everyone for his own purpose [(that seems to have been, as with most men of his time, pure greed).] “His chief concern, if not obsession, was the accumulation of property,” writes Hutchinson. Years ago I read a statement by a Tudor scholar [who said] that, in this respect, we should not judge [Thomas More’s contemporaries in light of his] material detachment. But I don’t see why we shouldn’t. Greed, a deadly sin [More knew, explains a lot more than we might expect—both good and bad behavior]. Hutchinson announces a story of “greed, corruption and ambition” and, page after page, chapter by chapter, delivers [that story] with ample and concrete documentary evidence. His biography follows [primary sources] very closely. The chapter on the destruction of Catholic art and culture, the destruction of the monastic orders in England, [for example, left me amazed—and astonished, too, at the fact that written records remain] of all that robbery and devastation, an immense loss to sheer greed. The Cluniac priory and church in Lewes [fell to] Cromwell’s son, as so [much of the accumulated treasure did into the hands of] the English nobility.
Cromwell’s efficiency in business, his superb talent for the practical, with total disregard for anything else, was his great talent, an uncanny ability to use everyone (except the absolute monarch) and everything (religion included) for his own purpose. Here the man appears as one who changed the ways of government and administration. He knew that his own fortune depended on keeping a despotic man happy at all times, while [at] the same time watching [out] for the nobility that disliked the minister’s success. In Tudor times (not unlike other times) the best way to serve oneself was to serve the powers that be, and Cromwell excelled at that. The dominant force was always and in all things, the king, and “Master secretary” did his bidding so efficiently and loyally that he, and others, when necessary, took the blame for all things. We can understand his horror at the end [(in the Tower)] and his pathetic cry [begging the sovereign for] “mercy, mercy, mercy.”

Though Cromwell sympathized with [the advancement of Lutheran ideas in] England in the 1530s[,] Hutchinson does not see him going the way of radical Protestantism (there is no evidence, for instance, that he denied the real Eucharistic presence). [Although] he did make the Bible widely available in English[—] one of his great achievements[,] according to Hutchinson[—] this does not mean that he had embraced Lutheranism.

The book is short, easy to read, and entertaining[, but not in the same way as fictional stories about Cromwell and the Tudors are.] I found the research excellent and the quotations always on target. Lamentably, J. J. Scarisbrick, the historian and biographer of Henry VIII, appears (every single time!) as Scarisbrook. Here and there the reader will wonder about a bias against Cromwell, but I think that, if there is one, it is slight, more a matter of words or emphasis.

[new paragraph:] In the case of Thomas Cromwell, ambition for power and sheer greed, along with the amorality that necessarily results, [explain] the man well, no matter how efficient he was in terms of affairs of state or the good things he did achieve in the administration of the kingdom. I only wish the spectators of The Tudors, the television series, and the many readers of Wolf Hall would read this biography. There will be other biographies, perhaps better ones, but this, I think, is a good one, [based, as it is for the most part,] on the brutal evidence of the historical record[. Hutchinson brings out the man, Thomas Cromwell,] for scholars and non-scholars alike [to behold].