

“I have through God’s mercy not been unhappy in hindering any one religion to impose upon another. I think he that would have more liberty than that is not worthy of any.”

and Cromwell says again —

“They that have stood so much for liberty of conscience if they will not grant that liberty to every man I think there is not that equality that is professed to be among us.”

Lincoln’s words, he said, are very similar —

“Those who deny freedom to others deserve it not themselves and under the rule of a just God cannot long retain it.”

A few weeks before his death, Lincoln, addressing the Indiana Regiment, puts Cromwell’s case for reciprocal liberty in blunt language — “Whenever I hear anyone arguing for slavery I feel a strange impulse to see it tried on him personally.”

Perhaps I might add, taking up afresh my unfinished argument with my father, that those same views were put even more bluntly and even more briefly with almost Cromwellian rigour by John Lilburne when he said “What is done to anyone may be done to everyone”, which is the whole story of English democracy summed up in a single sentence. And therefore when we meet here to celebrate this occasion (I thought at first we were going to meet in true Cromwellian weather, but that has not been the case) when we meet here we are meeting to celebrate something very important — the classic struggle between force and freedom, the classic argument about the respective rights of authority and conscience — these were the things argued about and fought about in Cromwell’s era and indeed in Cromwell’s own soul. He brought probably the most powerful mind in English history to bear on these intricate, still unsolved problems, and if we were to fail to pay respect to Oliver Cromwell and his followers, including his rebellious followers — if we were to do that we would break the thread of the finest heritage which we have, and we would show that the British people had lost the consciousness of what is true greatness; and therefore this ceremony will go on, I trust, as long as English freedom goes on. I hope there will be a Cromwell Society to sustain it as long as English freedom survives, which I trust and believe will survive as long as English men and women are proud to dwell on this spot.

THE CROMWELL ASSOCIATION



CROMWELL'S DAY 1963

The Address given by

MR. MICHAEL FOOT, M.P.

at the

Annual Commemoration Service

before the statue outside the Houses of Parliament

Mr. Chairman and friends, I would first of all like to thank the members of the Cromwell Association, and in particular the Secretary, Miss Platt, for inviting me to address this assembly this afternoon, although I must confess that I do so with diffidence. Dr. Johnson said that he gave up the idea of writing a life of Oliver Cromwell because everything that needed to be said on the matter had been said already. I am glad that some subsequent historians, and in particular your distinguished President, the great scholar and a great historian, Mr. Maurice Ashley, was not also deterred on that account from writing about Oliver Cromwell. Maurice Ashley of course would have been infinitely better qualified to perform this function this afternoon than myself. Moreover, I feel slightly as if I am appearing here on false pretences. I have never been an unqualified one hundred per cent Cromwellian, and I sometimes had disputes with my father on this matter in which I expressed my sympathy for John Lilburne and the Levellers. However, I have been encouraged by the thought that there were some other people whom my father greatly honoured who also did not take the same view about Oliver Cromwell as he took. There was, for example, John Wesley, who in the year 1773 wrote these words :—

“In this next journey I read over the life of Sextus Quintus. He had many excellent qualities but was full as far from being a Christian as Henry VIII or Oliver Cromwell.”

I have often thought that when my father left this earth the first mission which he undertook on behalf of the Cromwell Society was to look up John Wesley and settle that little point of controversy once and for all.

Moreover, as I thought over the matter there were other reasons why it was possible for a Leveller to come to this occasion. If there had never been an Oliver Cromwell perhaps we would have heard less about John Lilburne himself and indeed if it had not been for Oliver Cromwell the great unfinished debate about the future of British society which started in Putney Church three hundred years ago might never have been started at all. Indeed, if it had not been for Oliver Cromwell there might have been no Commonwealth for people to argue about.

Everyone has been able to see what they wish for themselves in Oliver Cromwell. There was an occasion at the beginning of the nineteenth century when an assembly of very famous people met in London — Charles Lamb, William Hazlitt and several others. The scene is described in one of the most uproarious essays in the English literature. They discussed the people of the past that they would most like to have seen and William Hazlitt wrote these words :—

“There was but one statesman in the whole of English history that anyone expressed the least desire to see — Oliver Cromwell, with his fine, frank, rough pimply face and wily policy.”

Well, in the home where I was brought up we had about twenty or thirty busts or portraits of Oliver Cromwell looking down upon us. Each of us was able to draw the moral that he wished from that pimply wily face, and indeed I am sure that if many of the Levellers, Thomas Rainsborough, John

Wildman, Richard Overton, William Walwyn and John Lilburne himself,— if they were able to be present, they would be glad to come to this assembly this afternoon. It is true that the proceedings might not be quite as orderly as we have undertaken to make them and the discussion might continue until late tonight, and we would have to adjourn at the end until tomorrow in order that Colonel Ireton and his associates could reconsider the implications of their doctrines. However that may be, I am sure that they too would wish to pay this same tribute that we pay to Oliver Cromwell.

His personality was so varied and the implications of what he did were so far-ranging for our own country and for the whole world that everyone has almost a duty to study what he did and why he did it. Some people honour him as a great revolutionary. Other people honour him as one of those who maintained the fabric of society in a time of turmoil. Other people honour him as a great religious hero and other people again think that he was one of the foremost architects of our national greatness. But whatever anyone may feel and whatever may be their different approach to the subject of Oliver Cromwell, I do not believe that anyone who has studied the matter, particularly the last great book on the subject written by your President — I don't think that anyone would doubt that Oliver Cromwell acted for purposes beyond himself and certainly not in the interests of himself. His story is interwoven with the most distinctive strand in English history, that is the strand of English liberty — I won't say Irish liberty because I don't want to start any controversies — but his story is interwoven with the whole story of English liberty and in particular its expression in parliamentary government, and therefore it is right that his statue should stand out here on guard over the House of Commons, although I must confess that there have been occasions inside it when I have thought to see his face peeping round the door and thinking that he might suspend the apparatus for a while for its own good. However, nobody can doubt that these were his purposes. My father once wrote a book in which he compared Abraham Lincoln and Oliver Cromwell, and it was one of his great prides that all during the period of the second world war from 1939 to 1945 when the statues of some lesser people whose names I won't mention were moved into safe underground cellars for protection, that the statues of Oliver Cromwell and Abraham Lincoln still stood in this Square. My father used to say that he thought they often had conversations between one another and what he describes as “high colloquy” between one another, and he wrote this about the two of them. He said —

“Both men were lovers of liberty, although probably they would not have agreed on their definition. “The world”, said Lincoln once, “has never had a good definition of the word liberty and the American nation just now are much in want of one.” ”

I might add that in the same quotation, I think, Lincoln went on to say that the wolf and the sheep had always had a different definition of liberty, particularly when the sheep was a black one. But he went on, my father in his essay, to say “But however they may have disagreed on the meaning of the word they both believed that liberty meant nothing if it was not, as Cromwell said, reciprocal.” Then he had a quotation from Cromwell —