



Following in the Footsteps of Oliver Cromwell: A Historical Guide to the Civil War by James Hobson.

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It is said that historical figures live on in popular memory for approximately two hundred years before they start to fade away. But Oliver Cromwell (1599–1658) stubbornly persists in his afterlife, eliciting a continued fascination to this day. Some Brexit protesters called for a new Cromwell, while others compared him to Boris Johnson, and not favorably; an Irish minister also likened Johnson to Cromwell in a quickly deleted tweet; twenty years previously, the Irish prime minister Bertie Ahern allegedly referred to Cromwell as “that murdering bastard” on seeing his portrait in the British foreign secretary’s office.

Though not as visible today as he was when Thomas Carlyle lionized him in the nineteenth century (as did various dictators in the twentieth), Cromwell continues to exert his spell. Much of this interest is based on his extraordinary life: how, after all, could an obscure, middle-aged, lower-gentry Puritan figure with no military experience come to lead one of the most brilliant armies in history, overthrow and execute a king, and rule over a monarch-less England for nine years?

In *Following in the Footsteps of Oliver Cromwell*, independent historian James Hobson provides (despite the book’s subtitle) not so much a guide to the civil wars of 1642–48 as a concise and readable account of Cromwell’s life with a stress on the places where he left his mark “physically and mentally” (xi). The author is well equipped to tell that story in this distinctive manner: he was the student of the noted British historian John Morrill and has personally visited the key sites of “Cromwelldom” (Carlyle’s word), which guide each chapter’s unfolding.

Hobson begins with “Huntington,” where Oliver was born, and proceeds through “Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge,” which Cromwell attended for a year before leaving upon the death of his father. From there, he moves on to places where Cromwell struggled in failure (“St Ives, 1631–1636,” “Ely”) before entering parliament in 1640. One chapter considers how Cromwell was guided by the divine providence that undergirded his Puritan belief system, in his case, by encouraging “both agonising doubt and euphoric certainty” (30). Cromwell had little part in the political debates over the king’s infringement on parliament’s rights. He did however, remain a “social conservative” opposed to regicide until the civil wars had ended and he truly came into his own.

As Hobson puts it, Cromwell “was one of the first people to act as if war was going to happen” and, once it erupted (1642), “pushed for a total military victory” against the Royalists and a “defeat of the king before any negotiations could take place” (38, 40). The “Edgehill” and “Marston Moor” chapters use those famous battlefields to describe Cromwell’s use of superior numbers, excellent cavalry, and highly disciplined, God-guided recruits from all social orders to win great fame and the sobriquet “Ironsides.”

A particularly good chapter on “Naseby” and “Basing House,” looks at these conflicts as ushering in “a new era of incivility” (48) in warfare: no quarter would be given and a new kind of brutality was to be inflicted on women and Irish servants. Chap. 13, “Drogheda and Wexford, 1649–

1650,” connects these actions to Cromwell’s later atrocities in Ireland. Other chapters include discerning ruminations on the Putney debates, the execution of Charles I, the battle of Worcester (1651), and Cromwell’s years in power. Hobson connects these topics with their memorializing traces—museums, ruins, plaques along footpaths. In this regard, the book is a useful travel guide as well as a history.

The concluding chapters follow Cromwell beyond the grave by examining the voluminous scholarly literature on his reputation and legacy. His life has attracted radically different interpretations and comparisons—Hobson mentions those of men like Thomas Jefferson and John Adams. One wishes he had included as well William Tecumseh Sherman and Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson, who were compared to Ironsides.

Shortly after Charles II’s coronation, Cromwell’s body was dug up and hanged at Tyburn and he was condemned as “ambitious, evil, hypocritical, uncontrollable” (108). Carlyle turned him into a hero in the nineteenth century, and statues were erected in honor of a man reconceived as “a patriot and imperialist,” who “suited the Victorian age” (unless one was an Irish nationalist with a long memory). Hobson calls the twentieth century the “Age of Ambiguity.” (Mostly) Liberal MPs upheld Cromwell’s image, while others compared him to V.I. Lenin, Adolf Hitler, and Benito Mussolini (the latter on record as “prefer[ring] Cromwell to Napoleon” [116]).

One might wish for more detailed analysis of Cromwell’s methods and (literal) fields of battle, not to mention some discussion of the larger picture of wars waged there. We are not told that the Irish campaign continued through three more years after Cromwell himself returned to England in spring 1650, after the tough fight at Clonmel. But Hobson’s intent was always to write a history of places as much as of a man. The result is a valuable, even-handed contextualization of the forces that drove Cromwell and spawned his military philosophy.

Hobson is dismissive of popular lore about places Cromwell still haunts. But folklore is another channel of memorialization, claiming historical figures as much as they claimed the places they affected. Hence the enduring images of Cromwell the castle-destroyer and church-desecrator; Cromwell the ogre and source of an Irish imprecation (“the curse of Cromwell on you”); Cromwell whose horse’s footprints are still imprinted on the floors of the churches where he stabled them, even if he never traveled to them at all (e.g., Galway, Ireland). All these bespeak a man whose colossal presence both belonged to and traveled across space, a man whose ghost evokes uncertainty and irresolution and even today refuses to go away.