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CROMWELL AND THE IMAGERY OF NINETEENTH CENTURY RADICALISM: THE EXAMPLE OF JOSEPH COWEN

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JOSEPH COWEN was one of the best known figures of nineteenth century Newcastle.¹ Indeed, his reputation, especially in radical circles, extended far beyond his native area; he was a friend and correspondent of many of the influential figures in the European radical movement, including Mazzini, Blanc, Kossuth, Herzen, and Bakunin. His active support of the Chartists and membership of the Northern Reform League were natural counterparts to his interest in revolutionary movements on the continent, while his journalistic activities as editor of the *Newcastle Chronicle* and *The Northern Tribune* afforded considerable opportunity for the dissemination of his views. Likewise his career as a Liberal member of Parliament for Newcastle (1873–1885) gave him ample occasion to comment on the major issues of the day. Concerning the perspective from which he commented, Cowen had no doubts: “I am not a conventional adherent of the fashionable Liberalism of the hour, but I am a life-long Radical by conviction, sympathy, training, and taste.”²

As a convinced radical and also “a devourer of histories”,³ Cowen had to come to terms with England’s own revolutionary past. While one’s attitude towards the protagonists of the seventeenth century Civil War was no longer the political touchstone that it had been in the eighteenth century, the events of the 1640s and 1650s were frequently referred to in the political language and imagery of the nineteenth century.⁴ The figure of Oliver Cromwell himself was obviously central to such references and while a general (and on the whole favourable) reassessment of his role was well under way by the middle of the nineteenth century, it is of significance that evocation of his name was frequently associated with radical causes of the sort that Cowen championed such as the Chartists.⁵ Cowen, in his writings and speeches, provides a telling illustration of the use of Cromwell as a radical image, an illustration all the more striking since Cowen’s formal education appears to have stressed the more traditional picture of the Lord Protector as an ambitious hypocrite and tyrant.

Cowen’s notes as a student at Edinburgh University survive. Though the entries with respect to Stuart England, made in 1846, are brief, the ideological orientation is clear enough. Charles I was “tried by a mock Parliament”. The period of the Commonwealth was “full of faction and caprice”, while Cromwell’s reign was characterized as “one continued scene of bloodshed”.⁶ In his notes regarding the characters of the King and Cromwell, Cowen recorded that Charles I was “a good

Master, a kind husband, a generous foe, and gracious sovereign” while the Lord Protector’s qualities were summed up as “deceit, cunning, pride, jealousy, and haughtiness.”⁷ The contrast between such a view and the evocation of Cromwell to praise Garibaldi on his visit to Tyneside only eight years later could not be more striking: “When they who drive out the Austrian build up again a Republican capital upon the Seven Hills, the heirs of Milton and Cromwell will not be the last to say, even from their deepest heart, God speed your work!”⁸ The student notes from Edinburgh echo the still prevalent condemnation of Cromwell and the revolution by David Hume;⁹ the address to Garibaldi suggests the radical’s identification with the Puritan revolutionary hero.

If Cowen nowhere set down systematically his views on Cromwell, there is ample evidence both for his favourable assessment of him and for his identification of Cromwell with the sort of moral radicalism he himself advanced. It is suggestive that among the discussion topics in the first year (1848) of the Winlton Literary and Mechanics Institute, an institution in which Cowen took a lively personal interest,¹⁰ appeared the question “Was [sic] Cromwell and his party justified in beheading Charles the first?”¹¹ Three years later, in his notes for a lecture on the study of history, Cowen commented “the history of England shows the futility of Physical force if not backed by moral and intel[lectual] power” and illustrated the point by reference to Cromwell and Chartism among other examples.¹² In 1876 in a speech made at the ordination of the Reverend H. E. Radbourne at the West Clayton Street Chapel, Cowen spoke feelingly of the greatness of Cromwell at home and abroad in connection with the theme of an alliance between dissenters and Liberals to secure religious and civil liberties:¹³

He begged to remind these supercilious critics [of the dissenters] that this country was once ruled by Nonconformists and that never in her history was her influence greater or her power more respected. (Cheers) “A king without a sceptre and a prince without a throne” swayed the destinies of this great country, and never was that power wielded with more dignity in the long period of her history as an independent state. . . . His authority at home was as potent and effective as it was a broad: he enforced submission from the aristocracy, the priesthood, and the factions that then disturbed the country. Ashamed to be a Nonconformist! For his own part, he gloried in the name. (Cheers). Achievements in the past had won for it the renown of history and the gratitude of the nation and there was still a nobler future in reserve if its adherents walked in the way of their forefathers. (Loud cheers).

In the following year, speaking at the Nonconformist Conference, Cowen reiterated the point. While the Nonconformists were not the strongest section of the Liberal party they were, he said, “without question the most trustworthy and reliable” and he added, “They have been the backbone of the party for centuries. Like Cromwell’s soldiers, they make a conscience of their politics.”¹⁴

It is likewise noticeable that Cromwell received frequent and favourable reference in Cowen’s journal *The Northern Tribune*. In volume one a sympathetic brief biography of the Lord Protector appeared as the sixth in a series on “Britain’s Worthies”;

others in the series had been Milton, Drake, Bernard Gilpin, George Stephenson, and John Wyclif.¹⁵ Paxton Hood, later the author of a highly commendatory biography of Cromwell,¹⁶ contributed pieces periodically to the journal; they included "The Battle of Dunbar" with its reference to "our glorious Cromwell" and its hope that his spirit might reform the present "days of shame"¹⁷ and "The Farmer of St. Ives" with its similar theme that Cromwell's name "shall return to light our world to future liberty".¹⁸ Even more aggressively radical was the printing of "Cromwell's Sword", one of the "Songs for the People" by W. J. Linton. Designed to be sung to the tune of "The Marseillaise", it linked Cromwell to the nineteenth century struggle for freedom and equality.¹⁹

Awake, thou sword of England's glory!
 The day of strife dawns on thy grave:
 Gleam again as in our old story:
 Let thy flash light the brow of the slave!
 Bright flash! light the brow of the slave.
 Too long, O sword hast thou lain sleeping:
 Leap forth from thy tomb to the fight!
 The nations depend on thy might.

Yet another issue reprinted a speech by Charles Larkin, originally delivered during the agitation over the Reform Bill in 1832, in which Cromwell was evoked as a person who "brought a treacherous, a perfidious, a tyrannical, a promise-breaking, anti-reforming king to the block."²⁰ When *The Northern Tribune* criticized the Aberdeen ministry for its conduct of foreign affairs, the image of Cromwell was once again employed; "Oh for one hour of Alfred or Coeur-de-Lion, of Cromwell or of Chatham, to burst the bonds that hinder this nation's energies and give free scope and fair play to its mighty moral and material power!"²¹ And evoking Cromwell's image in a matter of considerable local concern, the paper linked the Protector and Ralph Gardner with the nineteenth century battle over the conservancy of the Tyne.²²

One theme particularly elicited Cromwellian echoes and imagery in the speeches of Cowen, the theme of empire and the exercise through it of moral strength in foreign relations. Speaking on "The British Empire" at the Mayor's Banquet on 26 June 1897 in connection with the Diamond Jubilee celebrations, Cowen raised a characteristically Cromwellian note:²³

Once we stood forth as liberators, and always threw our influence, and often our sword, into the scale of people struggling to be free. (Cheers) We encouraged and subsidized neighbouring nations during their periods of despondency and destitution. But we have retired from this gratuitous protectorship and abandoned the pretension to restrain all the wicked, to defend all the weak, and guide all the foolish.

That the time Cowen was referring to was that of Cromwell seems abundantly clear when the passage is compared with Cowen's earlier summary of Cromwellian achievements in foreign policy as expressed in a speech of 1876:²⁴

The Protestant residents of an Alpine valley were at that time treated as the Bulgarian shepherds have recently been by their Moslem rulers. And what was his action? The memorable message that Cromwell sent to the Catholic Powers of Europe to secure protection for these suffering co-religionists was in very different terms, and couched in a very different spirit from the half-hearted and hesitating remonstrances addressed by our present Foreign Secretary to the Sultan. (Hear, Hear) The Tories boasted of their spirited foreign policy. There never was a Tory statesman who manifested the energy, courage, and determination that the Puritan Protector showed. There were three great powers in Europe—France, Spain, and Holland; he intimidated one, coerced the other, and beat the third. (Cheers)

He made similar statements in speaking on foreign policy in January 1880: "I contend, therefore, for these two principles—the integrity of the Empire, and the interest, the right, and the duty of England to play her part in the great battle of the world, as did our illustrious ancestors, the forerunners of European freedom."²⁵ And in speaking on the empire in February 1885, he likewise stressed the moral obligation of Englishmen to spread the benefits of liberty and law: "One of the duties demanded of Englishmen is the extension of the benefits conferred by liberty and of the security conferred by law to the communities created by their enterprise."²⁶

That Cowen found inspiration in the example of Cromwell is perfectly clear. To his mind Cromwell provided an example of the struggle for liberty and of the exercise of foreign policy on the basis of moral principles. The imagery and the example came readily to him. Indeed, it is possible to say that Cromwell, in company with other radical heroes, presided over the composition of some of his most eloquent statements. Cowen's biographer has given us a picture of the library at Stella in which "his best speeches" were composed; it is a telling vignette of the heroes of Cowen's own radicalism. "The room is a large, lofty oblong, abundantly supplied with books and decorated with portraits and busts of Cromwell and Milton, Mazzini, Garibaldi, and Lincoln, and the demi-gods who have lived to some purpose."²⁷

NOTES

¹ There is a life of Cowen by William Fraser Rae in *DNB: First Supplement* (1901); the only extended study of his career is an adulatory nineteenth century study, E. R. Jones, *The Life and Speeches of Joseph Cowen M.P.* (London, 1886).

² Speech on foreign policy, 31 January 1880 in Jones, *Life and Speeches of Cowen*, p. 175.

³ "He cultivated the Classics, became a devourer of histories, with a passion for the poets and a turn for public debate." *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁴ The point will be explored at length in my forthcoming study of the posthumous reputation of Cromwell. See also J. P. D. Dunbabin, "Oliver Cromwell's Popular Image in Nineteenth Century England" in J. S. Bromley and E. H. Kossmann, eds., *Britain and the Netherlands*, vol. V (The

Hague, 1975), pp. 141–163; O. Anderson, "The Political Uses of History in Mid-Nineteenth Century England", *Past and Present* no. 36 (1967), pp. 87–105; T. W. Mason, "Nineteenth Century Cromwell", *Past and Present* no. 40 (1968), pp. 187–191.

⁵ Henry Vincent provides a good example of a Chartist using Cromwell as a favourable image. Cf. the report of his lectures in May 1850 in PRO HO 45, 3136. Cf. also reports on his speeches at Sheffield in *Sheffield and Rotherham Independent*, 26 September 1846, and at York in *York Herald*, 9 and 16 December 1846. I am indebted for the last two references to Dr. Brian Harrison.

⁶ Tyne and Wear Archives Office, Cowen Papers F 14 ("Notes on Stuart and Hanover"), f. lv.

- ⁷ *Ibid.*, f. 2v.
- ⁸ Cowen Papers D 87, *Northern Tribune*, 1: 174.
- ⁹ Cf. D. Hume, *The History of Great Britain vol. II: Containing the Commonwealth and the Reigns of Charles II and James II* (London, 1757). On Hume's treatment of Cromwell's character see the perceptive comments of L. Braudy, *Narrative Form in History and Fiction: Hume, Fielding, and Gibbon* (Princeton, 1970), pp. 40 ff.
- ¹⁰ Cf. Jones, *Life and Speeches of Cowen*, pp. 95 ff.
- ¹¹ Cowen Papers D 25 ("Report Read at the Annual Soiree of the Winlaton Literary and Mechanics Institute, 10 July 1848"), f. 4v.
- ¹² Cowen Papers D 46 ("Notes of a Lecture on the Study of History"), f. lv.
- ¹³ Cowen Papers B 178 ("Speech on Civil and Religious Liberty, October 18, 1876"), pp. 12-13.
- ¹⁴ Cowen Papers B 181 ("Speech on Religious Equality, February 27, 1877"), p. 6.
- ¹⁵ Cowen Papers D 87, *Northern Tribune*, 1: 409-414.
- ¹⁶ E. P. Hood, *Oliver Cromwell: His Life, Times, Battlefields, and Contemporaries* (London, 1882).
- ¹⁷ Cowen Papers, D 87, *Northern Tribune*, 2: 31-33.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1: 251-253.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1: 147.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 1: 380. The speech was delivered 15 May 1832.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 1: 317.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 1: 104, 295-301.
- ²³ Cowen Papers B 409 ("The British Empire"), p. 5.
- ²⁴ Cowen Papers B 178 ("Speech on Civil and Religious Liberty, October 18, 1876"), p. 12.
- ²⁵ Speech on foreign policy, 31 June 1880 in Jones, *Life and Speeches of Cowen*, p. 157.
- ²⁶ Speech on empire, 14 February 1885, *ibid.*, p. 262.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

