



Thomas Cromwell: A Life

Diarmaid MacCulloch

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Thomas Cromwell is one of the most famous - or notorious - figures in English history. Born in obscurity in Putney, he became a fixer for Cardinal Wolsey in the 1520s. After Wolsey's fall, Henry VIII promoted him to a series of ever greater offices, such that in the 1530s he was effectively running the country for the King. That decade was one of the most momentous in English history: it saw a religious break with the Pope, unprecedented use of parliament, the dissolution of all monasteries, and the coming of the Protestantism. Cromwell was central to all this, but establishing his role with precision has been notoriously difficult.

Diarmaid MacCulloch's biography is the most complete life ever written of this elusive figure, making connections not previously seen and revealing the channels through which power in early Tudor England flowed. It overturns many received interpretations, for example that Cromwell and Anne Boleyn were allies because of their common religious sympathies, showing how he in fact destroyed her. It introduces the many different personalities contributing to these foundational years, all worrying about what MacCulloch calls the 'terrifyingly unpredictable' Henry VIII, and allows readers to feel that they are immersed in all this, that it is going on around them. For a time, the self-made 'ruffian', as he described himself - ruthless, adept in the exercise of power, quietly determined in religious revolution - was master of events. MacCulloch's biography for the first time reveals his true place in the making of modern England and Ireland, for good and ill.

Thomas Cromwell: A Life Details

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From Reader Review Thomas Cromwell: A Life for online ebook

Stuart Brown says

Exactly what you'd expect if you've read any other of MacCulloch's writing: an exhaustive, detailed, and careful biography of Cromwell, focussing largely on his role in promoting the English Reformation. Well written, with the well-judged flashes of style and humour that make MacCulloch so enjoyable.

Ethan says

Utterly magisterial and thorough exploration into the life of Thomas Cromwell.

Based on voluminous research of all existing primary and secondary sources regarding Thomas Cromwell, the author sets forth his thesis of Cromwell as having developed a religious faith highly influenced by the Nicodemians he encountered in his youth in Italy, and in so doing was able to work to build Tudor England as not only a modern state but specifically a more "evangelical" one. The author buttresses the argument by focusing consistently on Cromwell's associations and endeavors.

We explore Cromwell's humble upbringing and youthful travels. We find him becoming a lawyer of some standing, and drafted into the service of the powerful and influential Cardinal Wolsey to whom he would prove well committed long after Wolsey's fall from grace. We see the surprising events of 1531-1533 which find Cromwell not ruined by Wolsey's fall but somehow elevated by it, now in the King's circle of influence. The author sets forth how Cromwell worked with Cranmer to provide adequate political solutions to the "King's Matter" of annulment of one marriage to justify another; we see him active in the elimination of monasteries to the betterment of the Crown's estates and finances; his foreign policy and domestic connections are described at length, and we learn of his exploits in facilitating connections between "evangelically" minded Englishmen and the Reformed luminaries of the day. We then see Cromwell's precipitous and quick fall and death, and the effects of his work in Tudor England and the world to this day.

The argument is dazzling, but even in the author's telling there are some points of disconnect, which may just involve the compromised nature of Cromwell in his work. I, as a reader, cannot adequately judge all of MacCulloch's claims about Cromwell, but can tell that any student of Tudor England will have to grapple with this work. There is much to commend the thesis, and to see Cromwell as not just one of the architects of what would become the modern English state but also as a pioneering champion to make sure that the Church of England would not be an exact imitation of Roman Catholicism.

And yet, with all the evidence, gaping holes remain. We know more about what people write to Cromwell than what Cromwell himself wrote; at key moments correspondence has been removed, either an attempt by his allies to purge more compromising information or taken by his enemies to justify the condemnation. Much remains hidden; but the story is well set forth by MacCulloch.

Recommended for those interested in Tudor England.

**--galley received as part of early review program

Trish says

Until Hilary Mantel wrote “Wolf Hall”, I had almost no knowledge of the extraordinary English “Reformation”; the Anglican Church only impinged on Scotland when that tyrannical Charles I and his son tried to impose their personal “papacy” on us, with murderous results.

Diarmaid MacCulloch has produced an informative and entertaining biography of Cromwell, who managed to survive working for that impossible, cruel, narcissistic, unpredictable King Henry VIII for longer than anyone could have imagined, in spite of his modest origins, and influenced English government and the emergence of an idiosyncratic English church.

Henry VIII considered himself a theologian, but his doctrine followed his whims. Nobody could be sure that they wouldn’t be burned as a heretic and/or traitor (regarded as interchangeable capital crimes). Tomorrow’s heresy could be today’s orthodoxy.

Cromwell was no saint, and this is no hagiography. He was also a more sympathetic person than many of his contemporaries, including those who have been canonised, or commemorated as martyrs. He was loyal to his old employer, Cardinal Wolsey, to the extent of supporting Wolsey’s children, and successfully shielded his own family from the fallout from his condemnation. He managed to implement several reforms under the radar of his monstrous monarch, and sometimes softened the punishments of those condemned by the unjust “justice” of those times.

Cromwell’s story is of broader import than any of those popular accounts of Henry’s unedifying marital adventures and his legacy hasn’t been adequately acknowledged.

Still, I can’t help wondering what might have happened if the Pope, at the time of Henry’s self-serving crisis of conscience about his first marriage, hadn’t been under siege and imprisonment by the “Holy Roman” Emperor, close relative of the unwanted wife.

Perhaps, like the escalation of the Luther disputes into Reformation, wiser management by the Vatican could have maintained the unity of western Christianity and much bloodshed could have been avoided.

I learned a lot from this book, which is never dry and dusty, not just about Thomas Cromwell, but about England, and why it is as it is. I’ve lived down here a while now, but if you don’t know the start of the story..

Jason Wilson says

Traditionally a rapacious mercenary whose reputation has been rethought in recent years, Cromwell here emerges as a man who was ruthless when required by King Henry’s will, but as with more famous descendant Oliver, much more nuanced. He was loyal to his master Wolsey when the latter fall made it dangerous, and Machullock credits this with his anti Boleyn feeling and his undoubtedly untruthful part in her fall. He also tried to protect some monasteries despite his dislike of them and pushed the reformation further than was politically safe, wanting an English bible in every church, faith to be understood and children to know the Lord’s Prayer. He was kind to More (despite his Emnity to the latter for his hounding of Tyndall) and princess Mary. A man of many shades whose execution over the Cleves marriage debacle the king quickly regretted.

Socraticgadfly says

MacCulloch shows once again how and why he is the dean of British Reformation historians with this magnificent, magisterial biography.

At core, MacCulloch shows that, while there would not have been an English Reformation without Henry VIII and his concern for his succession (obviously) that Reformation happened as it did do to the activity of Cromwell more than any other single person. And, that was with Cromwell regularly pushing the bounds and envelopes of both his official power, and even more, of Henry's intent for what the Church of England should look like.

In his earlier years in power, Cromwell did that mainly through his title of Vice-Gerent, which officially made him Henry's right-hand man for religious regulation in England. Cromwell started the process of monastic dissolutions and mergers and later extended that to friaries. At the same time, by the monasteries he did not consolidate, he used this in connection to bestowing political favors. He went on to do that with the award of leading bishoprics.

MacCulloch also shows that while Cromwell and Anne Boleyn worked at somewhat similar purposes, they were not allies and that, for a variety of reasons religious and non-religious, he took a leading role in her downfall.

He reached his peak of power when Henry then married Jane Seymour, aided in large part by his son Gregory marrying Jane's sister.

But the fall eventually came. Not so competent in foreign affairs in general, he pushed the idea of a foreign marriage, and that of Anne of Cleves in particular, onto Henry. When Henry found zero bond with her and resolved immediately on annulment, Cromwell was in trouble. One or two unforced errors by him aided Henry and Cromwell's enemies.

That said, Henry did not put his head on a pike, and soon thereafter, regretted his decision — as he did the rest of his reign.

Beyond the above, MacCulloch shows how Cromwell had two major controls on the direction of the Reformation in England.

One was, as hinted above, to move the movement beyond Henry's idea of an Anglo-Catholicism to something that was truly Protestant. To do this, Cromwell made extensive connections with the movement in the Low Countries and Germany, talking to leaders of both the Lutheran side in North Germany and Reformed leaders in the Rhineland (Bucer mainly) and Switzerland (eventually centering on Bullinger).

He tied this to political efforts, looking at an alliance with the German Lutheran Schmalkaldic League. However, due to a mix of German arrogance and Hapsburg HRE Charles V making peace with France, the League looked like it might be a thin reed.

Meanwhile, as MacCulloch shows, Cromwell himself was becoming more explicitly Reformed in his beliefs during this time. And, before he died, he had tilted enough this way, with enough intervention, that the Reformed side of Protestantism had definite roots. This was probably helped by the Reformed, not Lutherans, also taking the lead in the Netherlands, though MacCulloch doesn't go too much into relations

there in the latter part of the book, other than how they involved English Protestants in exile there.

This contradicts what I had learned in my conservative Lutheran seminary years, namely, the idea that the Lutheran movement still had some influence under Edward VI and only totally lost its chance under Elizabeth. Some other light reading further confirms MacCulloch is right, and my old profs, for whatever reasons, were wrong.

I won't write any more, so I don't get into spoiler alert territory.

Roman Clodia says

As we would expect from MacCulloch this is a finely researched and detailed scholarly study of Cromwell. Given MacCulloch's own research interests, it's also one which reads Cromwell through his religious activities: here called 'evangelical' rather than the anachronistic 'Protestant'.

If you want a personality study then this might disappoint: the sources simply don't give us access to Cromwell the private man (for that go to fiction such as Hilary Mantel), so that when, for example, we learn that Cromwell never married again after his wife's death, we – and MacCulloch – can't tell whether that's due to overwhelming devotion (unlikely) or simply that he's too busy and, having sons already, simply makes do with housekeepers.

MacCulloch does what he can with Cromwell's early years: he traces him to Italy and some kind of involvement with the cloth trade but much is still left obscure: where he picked up Latin and Greek, for example, and learnt his love of books - Cromwell was an autodidact without a university education.

Once back in London, we're on surer ground and MacCulloch has certainly scoured the sources (which, together with the bibliography, take up almost 200 pp. at the end). I like that this is intelligent about its readership and thus doesn't rehash all the familiar stories of Henry and his various wives, though the narrative can't side-step them altogether given Cromwell's involvements with Anne Boleyn, and the ill-fated Anne of Cleves match, especially.

I would say that this is a book targeted at fellow scholars with crossover appeal for those deeply interested in Cromwell – if you have a mere passing interest this may well be too in-depth. As a work of reference – and one which is immensely readable – this will likely be the standard academic life of Cromwell for some time to come.

ARC from Amazon Vine

Caroline says

Well. This was interesting. As a historian of the English reformation, MacCulloch packs a lot of credibility, and I'm in no position to judge his assertions. Having said that - this was a slow but compelling read. (I have to say that my eye moved quickly through some of the discussions of how a certain person was connected in the webs of court and nobility to another; but that's ok...) His piecing together of what Cromwell might have been doing before he came back to England as a young man and got hooked up with Cardinal Wolsey made

for a good explanation of what he had to offer initially as an employee as well as reasons for him taking up certain issues.

He turned some of my previous assumptions about Cromwell a little sideways. Having come at this character originally through a lifelong habit of reading whatever is published about Anne Boleyn, I had kind of thought of the two of them as allies at first, but then turned into adversaries by Henry's sudden loss of interest and need to be rid of her. MacCulloch posits that Anne's controversial personality and path actually made her an obstacle to Cromwell's main agenda, which was to accomplish a complete eradication of the Catholic church and infrastructure in England, and that as soon as he saw signs pointing to her falling out of favor, he jumped on them and drove the process. It did not help her that, according to MacCulloch's interpretation, Cromwell always maintained a core loyalty to Cardinal Wolsey and saw Anne as the means of his destruction.

Again having met Cromwell only through reading about Henry's queens, the simple explanation for Cromwell's ultimate fall (that he pushed Anne of Cleves and Henry disliked her) is far from the whole story. Late in the 1530s it seemed Cromwell began to lose his habitual sense of caution, and did more aggressive things more publicly to advance his reformation and also to advance his son, which not only further aggravated his long-term enemies who were conservative in religion (such as the Duke of Norfolk) but gave them more ammunition with which to come between him and the king.

Henry comes off as a sort of trumpian king, inconsistent and volatile, content to play with whatever woman took his fancy, occasionally taking an interest in what was going on (and causing his staff great inconvenience thereby), but on the whole happy to have Cromwell do whatever he thought good to keep the money rolling in. Cromwell's reformation was more thorough and radical than Henry would have approved of if he'd been in charge of it. It was surprising to see just how much Cromwell was really in charge of England for seven or eight years. As a lover of material culture I've always been saddened to read that some church or monument or grave was "destroyed in the dissolution of the monasteries" but that was peripheral to what Cromwell was really about.

MacCulloch writes the kind of modern revisionist history I love to read - rooted in combing and understanding everything available in the way of primary sources. It didn't surprise me that in thanking his mentor Geoffrey Elton of Cambridge University he mentions a couple of other students of the same man including John Guy, who seems to do history in the same way. (And David Starkey but that's a subject for another day.)

Theodore Kinni says

If you want to know everything there is to know about Thomas Cromwell, this is the book: 5 stars. As it turned out, I didn't, and quit after 200 pages: 1 star

Aaron says

I tried to finish MacCulloch's book but there are so many names and dates, I just could not keep up. Very detailed orientated and the author lays out every source so you know where the info is coming from. I love history but the amount of information is scary. The author not only breaks down his sources in the body of

the book but the footnotes have even more detail. I had to just give up.

Joel Mitchell says

In his exhaustive portrait of Thomas Cromwell, the author focused largely on Cromwell's overseeing and nudging the English Reformation in an Evangelical (i.e. Protestant) direction. The English branch of the Protestant Reformation was seemingly driven more by lust and greed than concern for godly living or doctrinal purity. However, Diarmaid MacCulloch's thesis is that Cromwell was driven, at least in part, by real (but cautiously concealed) Evangelical leanings.

MacCulloch's biography is built on an examination of what must have been reams and reams of correspondence and court documents. The whirl of names, titles, legislation, favors granted, animosities provoked, etc. can be a bit dry and confusing, but no one can accuse the author of not being thorough!

Throughout the book, MacCulloch assumes that the reader has a basic knowledge of the major events of the Tudor period especially ones relating to Henry VIII's marriages and relationship with the church. His goal is to describe Cromwell's role and motivations in this history, not to give an "entry level" summary of it.

Cromwell is treated fairly sympathetically throughout, though the author admits more than once to Cromwell having blood on his hands. I can't help but wonder if in his effort to save Cromwell from being portrayed as a monstrous "mustache-twirling villain," MacCulloch hasn't gone a little too far in the other direction. Many of Cromwell's actions (e.g. participation in the destruction of Anne Boleyn) seem to be more about personal vengeance and/or advancement rather than Protestant idealism. Whatever the case, this book filled in some gaps in my understanding of the Tudor period in general and the English Reformation in particular. I recommend it to anyone interested in the time period who appreciates (or at least doesn't mind) painstaking detail derived from primary sources.

Tim and Popie Stafford says

A very detailed, gossipy account of Cromwell that takes great care to reveal its sources, not just in footnotes but in explanation of what we know and don't know, and what documents reveal just what. Not easy reading, but given my ardent love of Wolf Hall, I found it very engaging.

V.E. Lynne says

Thomas Cromwell has always defied biographers because so little is known of much of his life and many of his papers went missing, probably burnt, after his fall from power in 1540. Diarmaid MacCulloch has gone a long way toward redressing that situation by producing an exhaustive whopper of a book that gets as close as anybody is going to in portraying the life and career of Thomas Cromwell. There is quite a bit on his Putney childhood, and how it shaped his whole life, and the role that Italy played after he spent some years in that part of the world, although the detail is sketchy, as it must be.

The main thrust of the book is Cromwell's reformist beliefs, indeed the whole upheaval of Henry VIII's break from Rome and what it meant, both for Cromwell personally and for England. Those parts of the book are extremely detailed and a must read for anyone interested in the subject. MacCulloch also spends a fair bit of

time on Cromwell the man, especially his relationship with his only surviving legitimate child Gregory, as well as all his professional relationships, especially those with Henry VIII and Cardinal Wolsey. I would've liked more time to be spent on Cromwell's downfall as it felt slightly rushed compared to other aspects of the book but that is a minor criticism. Really, this biography is a massive achievement and an essential read for any student of the Tudor period.

Ionia says

As is always the case with Diarmaid MacCulloch, this is a well-researched and painstakingly accurate portrayal of an important but often misunderstood historical figure. I doubt there will be many questions one could pose about Thomas Cromwell that this book could not answer.

I learned a lot of things that I wasn't aware of, and felt that this book clarified some grey area for me that had never quite made sense before. As a longtime researcher of Henry VIII, I have, of course, become quite familiar with Thomas Cromwell, but never felt as close to his real-life personage as I did whilst reading this book. Overall, it is an excellent book with a tremendous amount of rare information. I believe the conclusions the author draws are logical and interesting.

There were times in this book when it felt a little tedious. I enjoyed reading it for the most part, but sometimes there was so much information that it was hard to grasp all at once and I had to go back and reread certain sections again to see how they related to the life of Cromwell. Even so, this is a fantastic book for any Tudor period historian, or anyone who simply wants to know more about the real man vs. the fictional one.

This review is based on a complimentary copy from the publisher, provided through Netgalley. All opinions are my own.

Maura Heaphy says

The library needs to have it back, so I'm taking an enforced break -- and putting my name at the end of the reservation list. So I may get it back *next* Christmas.

This is excellent, but very, very dense -- not for the faint-hearted. A fascinating insight into a man who remains a controversial figure in British history, almost 480 years after his death. Spoiler alert, Thomas Cromwell probably wasn't anything like the warm, cuddly, almost modern individual we know and love from Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall*. But MacCulloch makes it clear how Cromwell broke the mold-- a common-born man, whose *almost* modern attitudes to faith, nationhood and service to your country would become so much the standard that we almost don't notice how unusual he was, until a scholar like MacCulloch points it out.

The percentage I've read is deceptive: out of the 750+pages, there are about 200 pages of notes, bibliography, index and other end pages. So I've read about half of the text.

Ivor Armistead says

Finished with, but not finished. I read a lot of English history and think of myself as a buff, but I gave up on this biography of Thomas Cromwell after a couple of hundred pages. I don't question the books contribution to Cromwell scholarship, but it's not an easy read. Hence the three star rating.

Hilary Mantel, where is volume three?
