

THE MOST HATED MAN IN ENGLAND

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On July 28, 1540, Thomas Cromwell, Henry VIII's chief minister and closest adviser, was beheaded on order of the King. His body was taken to the Tower and buried in an unmarked grave. His possessions were seized by the King's treasurer. And in the streets of London bonfires were lit in celebration of his fall.

Who was Thomas Cromwell? In the eyes of his enemies, a corrupt and cruel upstart who combined extraordinary political skills and a lack of scruples to claw his way from humble origins to become the most powerful man in England, second only to Henry VIII, all the while amassing enormous wealth for himself. To his apologists, he was Henry's most faithful servant who secured for him absolute rule of his kingdom while managing the transformation of religion in England and the adoption of reforms of government that laid the foundation for today's departments and civil service. No one questions that he was the most remarkable figure of the Tudor era.

The origins of Thomas Cromwell (not to be confused with Oliver Cromwell, Lord Protector of England, 1599-1658) remain obscure. He was born around 1485, six years before Henry, in Putney, Surrey, the son of a blacksmith and a local troublemaker. Unable to get along with his father, he abandoned his family and fled England while still an adolescent to join the French forces fighting the Spanish army in Italy. After the French defeat at Garigliano, Cromwell traveled widely through Europe, picking up several languages and ending up in Florence where he found work with Frescobaldi, a wealthy banker. After a time, he moved to Flanders and entered the clothes trade. By 1512 he had returned to London and launched his career as a lawyer, eventually becoming a Fellow of Gray's Inn.

As an experienced business man fluent in several languages, he developed useful contacts and often served as agent for wealthy merchants. He married Elizabeth, the mother of two girls, and prospered, serving as a member of Parliament. Along the way he displayed extraordinary gifts; it was said that on a business trip to Rome he memorized the entire New Testament in Latin.

About 1524 Cromwell entered the service of Cardinal Wolsey as counselor. Wolsey, who was Archbishop of York and Lord Chancellor, was Henry's chief minister managing his important affairs. He relieved a still youthful and irresponsible King of the arduous duties of running his government. Wolsey had risen from common origins to gain a powerful position in court by getting done what Henry wanted done, in particular raising the revenue needed to support Henry's profligate ways, including an unsuccessful war Henry waged against France. With Wolsey controlling the levers of power, Henry was left free to pursue his favorite activities, hunting and gambling. But his dominant position also enabled Wolsey to accumulate immense wealth, becoming the second richest man in England but also an object of envy and disdain which eventually led to his downfall. Wolsey's career foreshadowed Cromwell's.

Cromwell had performed services for Henry while in Wolsey's employ and thus came to Henry's attention. When Wolsey fell, Cromwell, while remaining loyal to him, sought to advance himself in Henry's service. Henry was favorably impressed, both by his loyalty to his former chief and by his skill, and in 1531 made Cromwell a junior minister.

Henry had ascended the throne on the death of his father, Henry VII, in 1509. That year he had married Catherine of Aragon, the aunt of the Spanish Emperor Charles V, then Europe's most powerful monarch. Though the marriage

had been happy, over the years Henry became frustrated and dissatisfied as Catherine proved unable to produce a male heir; Princess Mary was the only surviving child of the union. The lack of a male heir left Henry deeply troubled over the safety of the Tudor throne should a female sovereign succeed on his death and so he began to think of divorce. And divorce became more urgent when Henry fell in love with one of Catherine's ladies in waiting, Anne Boleyn. Anne, who was anything but docile, refused to be merely the King's mistress, insisting on becoming queen. Henry now became desperate to end his marriage to Catherine. Meanwhile he had convinced himself that that marriage had been invalid *ab initio*. He reasoned that Catherine, having previously been married to Henry's brother Arthur, stood in a prohibited degree of relationship to him since their marriage violated the biblical injunction in the book of Leviticus which decreed that a man who married his brother's widow shall be childless. Given an unbiased interpretation, however, this verse rather applied to a man's adultery with his sister in law, not Henry's situation. The verse that would have been applicable under canon law was from Deuteronomy which ordered a man to marry his dead brother's widow if she is childless, which was the case when Henry married Catherine. But Henry was adamant that his marriage to Catherine was unlawful and a great sin, in spite of the special dispensation he had received for it at the time from the pope. He insisted that only a divorce could secure the succession and deliver him the wife he desired.

And so the divorce, known as the King's Great Matter, became the central concern of Henry's rule. Henry turned to Cardinal Wolsey, still lord chancellor, to solve his marital problem by obtaining a divorce. Wolsey sought a commission from the pope. But the pope, fearful of offending the Emperor Charles V if he

authorized the removal of his niece Catherine from the English throne, declined and instead appointed a legatine commission, consisting of Wolsey and the pope's legate Cardinal Campeggio, to hold a trial on Henry's case. Campeggio's game was delay, frustrating Wolsey's efforts to get quick action on Henry's plan. Eventually, after the commission had heard extensive evidence on whether Catherine's marriage to Arthur had been consummated on her wedding night, referred the matter back to the pope for a decision. Three years passed while Henry waited in vain for a divorce.

Still married, Henry decided to take the matter into his own hands. He removed Wolsey from office. Parliament indicted him for violation of the praemunire statute which made it treason to aid a foreign power, in this case his dealing with the pope. Henry appointed a new lord chancellor, Thomas More, a devout catholic, and he declined on principle to take part in the divorce matter. Henry then tried to bring diplomatic pressure on Pope Clement, but the pope, remembering that Charles' army had earlier occupied Rome, was not inclined to offend the Emperor by letting Henry divorce his aunt Catherine. Nor would the English clergy support Henry in this; they were willing to acknowledge his supremacy in religious matters but only "so far as the law of Christ allows," and that law did not sanction divorce. And so another three years passed with Henry no closer to obtaining the divorce from Catherine who stubbornly refused to give her consent.

The urgency of Henry's marriage to Anne Boleyn arose not simply from his romantic obsession but also from dynastic considerations. Although Princess Mary could succeed to the throne, should she marry, the throne would go to wherever her husband ruled. Thus to ensure the survival of Tudor rule, Henry had

to have a male heir out of a legitimate marriage. For that he needed a divorce but the pope remained uncooperative. Here Cromwell entered the picture.

Then still only a minor minister, Cromwell suggested to the King that he give substance to his vague claims of supremacy by cutting all ties to the pope. This would be a momentous step, reversing hundreds of years of history. To accomplish the objective Cromwell conceived a brilliant campaign to win over Parliament. Using his extraordinary skills, augmented by the King's iron fist tempered by his power to reward, Cromwell persuaded Parliament to adopt a series of bills that would irrefutably establish Henry's supremacy over the English clergy. In the space of two years, 1532 to 1534, under Cromwell's leadership, the Parliament, which became known as the Reformation Parliament, passed an array of complex legislative acts that carried out Henry's supremacy policy. The first of these was the bill of annates under which the so-called first fruits payments, previously made to the pope by bishops on succession to their sees, would be made to the crown instead; this resulted in a substantial loss of revenue for the pope and gain for the crown. Next came the great act of appeals. It prohibited appeals to Rome in ecclesiastic matters, removing from the pope all jurisdiction over matters such as Henry's divorce and placing it under the King. A famous preamble of the bill declared England to be an empire free from all foreign authority and governed by the king as the supreme head, thus establishing English sovereignty and ending all papal authority over the English church. The king had now become the church's supreme head unfettered by foreign authority. Finally the act of succession declared his first marriage invalid and the second valid and made it treason--by deed or word--to attack the second marriage.

Having established his supremacy, Henry was now free to divorce

Catherine and marry Anne Boleyn. Cromwell had cleared the way for the divorce but he had done much more. He had transformed England from a parochial medieval kingdom into a sovereign world power, master of its destiny. In the process he had created the Church of England under the king over which much blood would be shed in future years. For the English Reformation was not, as some have claimed, a victory of the national church over an alien domination, but rather the victory of the state over the church. And Henry was determined to make the most of this new power.

In a show of appreciation Henry promoted Cromwell to Chief Secretary, the most powerful of the many offices and honors he received while serving Henry, including Chancellor of the Exchequer, Master of the Jewel House, Master of the Rolls, Lord Privy Seal and ultimately, only days before his execution, Earl of Essex. As Chief Secretary, Cromwell held the foremost office of state, responsible for government administration, revenue, justice, foreign affairs, trade, education, defence and the church. His skillful administration of these offices, removing their functions from the King's household into the hands of professionals, had a lasting impact on the structure and operation of England's government.

The act of succession required members of the clergy to swear loyalty not only to the king but also to Queen Anne and her heirs; refusal to swear was treason. Most of the clergy took the required loyalty oath willingly but some refused, including Thomas More who would not deny papal supremacy. To save More's life, Cromwell urged him to compromise, but he refused and insisted on a trial. He was convicted of treason and Henry, in one of his more blood thirsty moods, ordered his execution.

Henry had married Anne in 1533 and made her queen. She shortly gave birth to Princess Elizabeth but, to Henry's disappointment, no male heir followed. Relations between Henry and Anne became strained. Her several miscarriages convinced Henry that he could not expect a male heir from Anne and conveniently he also fell in love with another lady at the court, Jane Seymour. He directed his council to prepare papers for a divorce. Then rumors began to reach Henry that Anne had been unfaithful which if true, constituted treason. Though the truth was never established, it might well have been the case that Anne sought a partner who would help her fulfill the King's wish for a male heir, even at great personal risk. It was also true that in the hotbed of intrigue that pervaded Henry's court, Anne did not lack for enemies. Her arrogant ways made her unpopular among the court as well as among the public which loved Catherine. And her position as Henry's spouse was weakened as her miscarriages spelled a likely end of her hope for a male heir. With Henry's honor at stake, he ordered Cromwell to investigate the rumors. Soon five suspects were identified, including Anne's own brother. One, a young court musician named Smeaton, confessed, though it remains disputed whether Cromwell used physical coercion, a practice not unknown at the time. The King ordered Cromwell to draw up the indictment, charging Anne with treason. A commission convened by Cromwell held a trial, found Anne guilty as charged and ordered her execution. On May 2, 1536, Anne, along with her alleged coconspirators, was beheaded on Tower Hill.

Some have charged Cromwell with having conspired to eliminate Anne to free Henry to acquire a new wife. But the historical evidence does not support such a gloss on the facts. Cromwell was acting on orders of Henry. That he did so with brutal efficiency does not make him guilty of bringing down Anne. Cromwell

was intelligent and pragmatic, clever and resourceful, hard-headed and ruthless in pursuit of his objectives. He would charm people or intimidate them. Cromwell was known for his affability but there was steel beneath his charm. Above all he was committed to serve the King –whom he intended to make the richest king who ever ruled England--and for that he was willing to do all things necessary, evil or good. He and the King did not always agree but the King had the last word when he pursued his own policies, and increasingly, as age and the abuse of his body took their toll, the King asserted himself, pushing Cromwell to the sidelines.

Cromwell's most notable achievement, and the one for which he is best known, was the dissolution or reformation of the monasteries. For nearly a thousand years some eight hundred establishments, large and small, were spread across England and Wales. Under the general oversight of the papacy, they served various social purposes (schools, hospitals, homes for the poor) as well as being places of worship. But by the 1530s, monasticism had greatly declined and abbots and monks were more concerned with managing their vast properties than with performing religious duties. Henry saw the act of supremacy as his opportunity to put an end to these institutions which remained tied to the papacy as well as to gain control of their wealth, perhaps half of all the land in England. His chosen instrument was Cromwell. In 1535 he appointed him Vicar general and later vicegerent, placing him in charge of the administration of the Church of England. This gave Cromwell virtually unrestricted power—Henry largely left him alone—but just how he exercised that power remains steeped in controversy.

Exercising the royal power, Cromwell launched a general visitation of all monasteries and churches. His commissioners inspected the monasteries and other establishments armed with reports—often little more than rumor—of

corruption and other scandalous behavior; they investigated the lives and morals of abbots, monks and nuns, removing or punishing those with whom they found fault. They seized property and land and forced many ecclesiastic communities to disband. And they imposed harsh injunctions regulating their conduct which encouraged many monks and nuns to abandon the monastic life. To carry out these tasks Cromwell selected a crew of tough, heavy handed and notorious operatives who, in the eyes of many, turned the visitations into a reign of terror and, for Cromwell, a road to riches.

This was one interpretation of the historical record. It is the narrative of Hutchison's biography of Cromwell. It differs fundamentally from the Schofield biography which portrays Cromwell as committed to evangelicalism, determined to bring Lutheranism to the Church of England. His policy was not reformation but rather infiltration by introducing like minded clergy into the churches. One must wonder how the narratives of history could diverge so widely. G. R. Elton, the leading historian of the Tudor period, explained this by attributing the latter day attacks on Cromwell to nineteenth century sentimentality over the ruin of the monasteries, as well as renewed adulation of Henry VIII as the true author of Cromwell's achievements, and a desire to exculpate Henry. Moreover, widely held opinion derived from the writings of his enemy, Cardinal Pole, who saw Cromwell as the cruel, sly and greedy servant of an imperious master.

In any event the end of the monasteries campaign about 1536 marked the high point of Cromwell's career. Although he still had the confidence of the King, the split between them deepened. While the ties to Rome had been severed, Henry nevertheless remained firmly committed to Catholic doctrine—mainly transubstantiation (that is, the practice of the eucharist), good works, the mass and

priestly celibacy--and he opposed the evangelism that was spreading to England from the continent. Henry's government was increasingly divided, with the conservative faction (Anglican) bitterly opposed to Cromwell's radical policies favoring protestantism (Lutheranism). Cromwell himself may or may not have become protestant—a question never resolved—but he was determined to do away with sacred shrines, images and pilgrimages and to institute the reading of the English bible.

The conflict played itself out around the person of Anne of Cleves, a German princess whom Cromwell had foisted on Henry as his fourth wife following the death of Jane Seymour. Anne emerged as the final choice only after a bitter struggle between Cromwell and the nobles on the Council who promoted their own candidate, Catherine Howard. Cromwell's purpose in pushing Anne was to win allies among the German anti-papacy princes on the continent to offset the threat he saw in the Spanish Emperor Charles V, the ruler of the Holy Roman empire and a military superpower. He had long been obsessed by fear of a catholic alliance on the continent (among Spain, France and the pope) against England. Henry did not share this concern and favored a policy of neutrality, feeling secure behind his newly built navy which he had been able to finance with the proceeds from the dissolution of the monasteries.

Yet, anxious to marry again, Henry allowed himself to be persuaded to the match with Anne, whom he had never met, but only after he was shown the now famous painting of her by Holbein which Cromwell had ordered. Once he met her, however, he was less than enamored of Anne who won no beauty contests. He demanded another divorce but this time Cromwell, intent on adhering to his foreign policy, was unwilling to go along with his master. This gave Cromwell's

catholic enemies on the Privy Council, led by the Duke of Norfolk, the opening to convince Henry that Cromwell was in league with German heretics, if not himself a heretic, and guilty of treason. Henry, in a fit of temper, believing that Cromwell had betrayed him to serve his own ends, ordered his arrest. Cromwell was condemned in Parliament by an act of attainder without trial, a procedure Cromwell himself had invented. He was executed on July 23, 1540.

How should we judge Cromwell? Professor Elton summed him up thus:

He had more enemies than friends: the nobles hated the upstart; the clergy the man who had disciplined them; the conservatives the radical. Many had suffered during his eight years of power, and the hatred engendered rested on him. Though the cruelty and vengefulness must be laid at the King's door, Cromwell must bear his share of the heavy burden. A man of great mind and enormous ability, he had little gentleness and no mercy once his purpose was fixed. Cromwell lived in a violent age, but he used violence only when he thought it indispensable. When all is said and done, however, Cromwell's work endured and proved not only important but also beneficial.

But the question remains: how does Cromwell fare when assessed on his moral worth. That is a task not undertaken lightly from a distance of six centuries. One cannot ignore the fact that Cromwell was a transformative figure, the founder of a modern constitutional monarchy in England, a sovereign national state, who launched the country on the course to protestantism. Those achievements weigh heavily on one side of the scale but, on the other, weigh greed and avarice, along with human suffering, staggering--even by Tudor standards. "I did it for the King"--Cromwell's final plea--may not exonerate but may temper any final judgment.