historyheads

An interview with Blair Worden

This interview with Blair Worden (BW) was carried out by Wall to Wall Television (WW) for the Channel 4 programme *Cromwell: New Model Englishman*. Blair Worden is a professor of history at the School of English and American Studies at the University of Sussex.

The Puritans

WW: What is Puritanism?

BW: Since the Reformation of Henry VIII, there have been two conflicting traditions within English Protestantism: the High Church, or Anglican tradition, which values ceremony and ritual, and wants to retain as much of the tradition of the Church as possible; and the evangelical movement, which in the 16th and 17th centuries regarded ceremony and ritual as remnants of popery, which they wanted to get rid of. The Puritans took the latter view.

They thought of themselves as 'the godly', but 'Puritan' was the name that was cast upon them. They wanted a religion of faith, of the Bible, which they knew so intimately, of preaching, not of external ceremony, which they thought of as idolatry.

These two traditions within the Church had been battling against each other since the reign of Henry VIII, but the conflict had been more or less contained until the reign of Charles I. Then it exploded under the archbishopric of Archbishop [William] Laud, who was determined to crack down on the Puritans.

Many of them went into exile, to Holland or North America. Thousands who had thought of themselves as orthodox members of the Church of England found themselves driven out of it with no means of worship in the proper way. Many Puritan ministers were deprived of their livings.

Laud insisted much more firmly than his predecessors on the ceremonial aspects of religion – the railing in of the altars, the separation of the priests from the congregations, the emphasis on the priest as a divine figure through whom the sacraments are mediated.

This is very different from the Puritan conception of what worship is about. When the sacraments would take place, it would be merely a service of commemoration round a table in the body of the church, with no separate divine or sacerdotal authority given to the clergyman.

It's impossible to exaggerate the hostility, the fear, the anxiety that Laud creates. It seems to the Puritans a return towards popery. Anti-popery is really the guiding impulse of Puritanism. Since the Reformation, England had lived under siege, or so it seemed. Catholic powers threatened to invade. There was always the danger of a Catholic rising at home. There had been two miraculous deliverances: in 1588, the defeat of the Spanish Armada; and in 1605, the providential discovery of the Gunpowder Plot. But there were still perils.

In the 1620s, when the outlook of Cromwell and so many other of his generation was formed, it really seemed as if the whole Protestant religion on the Continent might go under as the Catholic armies in the

Thirty Years' War advanced. Then, in 1640 and 1641, it seemed that popery might triumph, not merely from without but from within.

The court has become popish. There was the influence of Henrietta Maria, Charles I's French Catholic wife, who was perfectly prepared to bring in foreign forces or Catholic Irish forces to help her husband's cause. And then there was what Laud himself was doing to the Church, the restoration of idolatry as the Puritans saw it.

WW: How did the Puritans feel about this kind of idolatry?

BW: They were shocked by it. It was a religion of the senses. It dragged the soul down towards earthly contemplation and away from God.

For the Puritans, the miraculous thing is the intimacy of their relationship with God, the blessing of the illumination of the soul. Not these exterior things, the ceremonies, the emphasis on observance, on forms, on set prayers, rather than spontaneous communion with God.

They were also angry, and many wanted to destroy the symbols of idolatry. When the Long Parliament gets going in 1641-2, it issues orders for the destruction of images in churches – stained-glass windows suffer a lot. In a way, it's surprising there isn't more of that in the Civil War, given that you have armies on the move with the capacity to destroy buildings and deface them. But quite a lot of it does happen.

WW: Why did the trappings of 'idolatry' provoke such a strong reaction in the Puritans?

BW: Well, it was an age of faith. We think people should be allowed to worship as they want, or believe as they want, but people in the17th century didn't think that. Religion was at the very heart of society, and the way in which you worshiped reflected all sorts of things about political and social relationships, about what you live for – man does not live by bread alone.

We try to explain religious belief in sociological or economic terms, and you can do that to some extent, but there's a point beyond which you can't. In the 17th century, people thought that their souls were at stake, and the Puritans thought that, if you believed the wrong things, you went to Hell. If you worshipped in the wrong way, this would take you away from God; it would take you towards the Devil.

So it is about the organisation of society, about social and political relationships, but it's also about the afterlife.

The political aspects of Puritanism

WW: Is there an element of Puritanism that made it revolutionary?

BW: Well, if you look at Puritanism before the Long Parliament meets, on the whole its instincts aren't revolutionary. In many ways, Puritans are quite conservative people. They wanted to preserve what they thought had been established in the reign of Queen Elizabeth I – an orthodox Protestant ministry, an orthodox Protestant faith.

They are, on the whole, pretty conservative about social order. They believe in hierarchy, as most people did at that time. They're not in favour of the toppling of the nobility or anything like that. They're not in any way republicans. They believe in monarchy. They want to have a godly monarchy, rather than an ungodly one, but they're not thinking about getting rid of the monarchy.

And until Archbishop Laud comes along, not many people want to overthrow the institutions of the Church, the structure of the Church. Bishops – which, after all, you might think were a remnant of popery – had survived. They hadn't in other Protestant countries, but they had in England, when you might have expected Puritans to have wanted to overthrow episcopacy. But they didn't in large numbers until Archbishop Laud makes the institution so hateful in their eyes. They feel that, as long as the king can appoint people like Laud to bishoprics, there's a danger.

WW: Is there something within Puritanism that make it anti- authoritarian?

BW: Yes, there is, but the Puritans had difficulty in formulating it in theoretical terms.

Until quite late in the Civil War, they're nervous saying 'Our faith entitles us to destroy the institution of monarchy' – for example, the House of Lords, which is what happens in 1649 – 'or to change the Constitution, or to bring Charles to justice.' That's the position that they reached at the end.

But the imperative of faith, that determination to build a godly commonwealth in England, has revolutionary force. Then there was the providential experience of winning all those victories in the Civil Wars. The army radicals knew that God was on their side.

The Puritans interpreted the world around them in terms of God's will. They had a very strong sense of providential history, a history of God's mercies to the nation, of his guidance of the nation. To understand the experiences they were living through, when the institutions of Church and state collapsed, when whole landmarks of the world around them disappeared – in those extraordinary, dramatic times, they knew that God had some extraordinary purpose for the English.

They thought the nation was the parallel of the people of Israel in the Old Testament. And to understand God's purpose, they turn to the Old Testament, which they knew intimately. There they found the parallels through which they were able to interpret their own experiences.

So there's a sense of something very, very special and unusual. England is going to be a launching pad for the

reformation of the world. Before a force like that, principalities and powers can go down – and they do.

WW: Are there the seeds of revolution in Puritanism?

BW: There's always a great revolutionary potential in Puritanism, simply because its imperatives are going to be greater than any other ties of loyalty, obedience or obligation that people might have.

When Puritans look at the society around them, they would like the nobility and the gentry to be godly rather than ungodly, but on the whole, they look to the nobility and the gentry – as Cromwell did – to become 'Puritanised', to be made godly. They want them to lead by example, lead the people below them. They're not social revolutionaries, and they're not innately political revolutionaries.

After all, what had the Reformation been for? The papacy had been booted out, the monarchy had taken over and it was the job of the monarchy to stand up to popery abroad, to crush popery at home. The important thing was to surround the monarch with godly, prudent advisers.

But what happens from 1640 to 1642 is so extraordinary, unprecedented – the sense of God's presence in the world, of the ancient institutions being toppled by a momentum beyond anyone's control, a sense of miraculous deliverance from the 1630s. When they compared themselves to the Israelites, as they did, they remembered the Israelites moving out of bondage in Egypt, through the Red Sea towards a promised land. That's what they thought was happening to them.

And when they see themselves as the instruments of God, a people raised up so miraculously – after all, in Puritan eyes, men were worms, they were worthless – it was a very heavy responsibility. You couldn't let God down; that was the greatest sin of all. If he demanded extraordinary things of you, sacrifices from you, risks from you, courage from you, you must give them.

And before that, whatever the logic of their feelings about the organisation of society or politics, whatever their inherited assumptions, those things yield. In the end, the determination is that God's will should prevail.

WW: Why does popery scare them so much?

BW: It scares them for religious reasons and for political reasons.

It scares them for religious reasons because it's undoing the Reformation and it's destroying the whole basis of the Protestant faith, which had been established since 1558. It would lead thousands of souls to perdition; it would be an affront to God. So it frightens them from a religious point of view.

It frightens them from a political point of view, too. There are Catholics in England who might rise up at any point, if they had proper leadership. Still more, there are Catholics in Ireland who rose in 1641, and there are Catholics on the Continent – the great Catholic powers of France and Spain. So there's always the external threat of invasion, the internal threat of rebellion, or insurrection.

The two great moments in Protestant memory are the Spanish Armada, when invasion from without had been so miraculously thwarted, and the failure of the Gunpowder Plot in 1605 when opposition from within had been thwarted. But they seemed extraordinarily deliverances – the wind had changed, the plot had somehow been discovered ...

Patriotism comes into this, too. Protestants think of themselves as the 'English religion'. Catholicism is a foreign, alien force.

Cromwell's conversion

WW: What effect does religious conversion have on Cromwell?

BW: Well, it's hard to know, because Cromwell presents himself in a letter as having led a very ungodly life, from which he's gradually emerging from darkness to light.

This was a conventional thing for Puritans to go through. They thought of themselves as reclaimed sinners and, I think, sometimes tended to exaggerate the evil of the lives they'd lived before the process of regeneration had begun, before the work of God's grace had entered their paths.

So it's hard to know quite how 'wicked' Cromwell was before the conversion experience began. But, once it has begun, you have the sense of a life consecrated to God. Worldly things really mattered very little in comparison.

WW: Does it politicise him?

BW: Charles I is opposed by Cromwell for a variety of reasons – some of them political, constitutional, illegal taxation, the use of prerogative courts. The liberties of the subjects are in peril.

Those things by themselves would never have made Cromwell into a revolutionary. It made some other people into revolutionaries, but not Cromwell himself. His conversion politicises him because his ability to worship as he wants, his sense of God's cause prevailing in the world is intimately bound up with politics. There's a wicked regime in power that is trying to trample on God's truth.

Cromwell supports lectureships, preaching, the spreading of the Word, the means by which God's grace would be imparted to people. The government is preventing this. How can this be in a Protestant country? It seems the most extraordinary affront. And he thinks, like many people, that there is a popish conspiracy to exterminate Protestantism. It's a European movement, but it had

very strong support in England at court, and in the English Church.

The only way of stopping it was to break it politically, and that, for Cromwell, is the function of the Long Parliament in its early stages. If you look at the committees and so on that he sits on, he specialises in the religious issues of the revolution, and always does thereafter.

Charles I's religious policies

WW: Charles must have known his religious policies were deeply unpopular, yet he pushes them through. What does Charles want? Why does he do this?

BW: Charles thought it was time the nation was brought to order. The 1620s had been a time of tremendous turbulence – conflict in Parliament, great religious controversy – and Charles looked to his fellow monarchs in France and Spain who were able to deal with this kind of trouble more effectively than he did.

In a way, Charles was a reformer, an administrative reformer. He tightens up his government. He wants to make his government financially independent of Parliament. He wants to build up the authority of the government, and the Church is one way through which he can do this. The Church has tremendous power and influence in shaping the values, the conduct of society. This is one reason why the Puritans are so anxious to capture it.

Charles also is an aesthete. He's attracted by the sensual, ceremonial aspect of Laudianism. He couldn't understand Puritanism. He thought Puritans were hypocrites. These were people who wanted to weaken the state and they were using the Church as a cloak for their political ambitions. So he never trusted them and he wants to break them and that's what Laud will do for him.

WW: Does he see his religious policies as a way of bringing the country together or promoting harmony? Is there a positive side to his policy?

BW: Previous rulers had understood that you had to have some flexibility in religious policy if you were to preserve harmony. There were bound to be tensions within Protestantism, between the desire to cling to the old and the desire to create anew. But Charles is not a man for compromise or flexibility. He feels that the government is to be obeyed. He makes up his mind what his religious and political policies are, and he demands obedience to them. His subjects have got to be brought to obedience. The 1620s showed how weak the monarchy was, at least in comparison with its European counterparts. It had to be built up and opposition to it had to be broken. Because religion and politics are so closely intertwined, he wants to make the Church uniform, as well as the state.

Charles I's personality

WW: How does his own personality feed into this?

BW: He is an insecure figure, I think. Charles didn't expect to be king. He thought that his elder brother would be king, but of course, Prince Henry died young and Charles was unexpectedly thrown into the limelight. He is an extraordinarily complex figure – in some ways, as hard to know as Oliver Cromwell.

In the early stages of the Long Parliament, the Parliamentarians and Puritans who oppose Charles I are very careful not to attack the institution of monarchy itself. They say that the problem lies with the king's evil advisers. Only get them out of the way, get Charles to listen to good people and he'll be all right.

Now that's convention. You have to say that kind of thing – you can't criticise the king directly, at least not until well into the history of the Long Parliament. Yet there's that in Charles that makes sense of those sentiments. He was a courageous man – he showed great courage in the course of the Civil War – and he's capable of kindness, honour, consideration. But there is a fatal instinct for intrigue. He can never be trusted; he breaks his word regularly.

But there's also this insecurity in Charles, who needs to be obeyed. His sense of his own identity and his sense of his kingly office are very closely related to each other. If he's not king, if he's not obeyed, who is he? What is there left?

WW: So when Parliament raises an army of its own, symbolically how would Charles have seen that?

BW: The irony from Charles's point of view is that his policies provoke a rebellion in England that hadn't occurred before. Not just a rebellion of barons, which you had in the past, but a Parliamentary rebellion, a body claiming to be the representative of the people and, in the end, raising an army by itself to try to overcome the resistance in Ireland and then raising an army to fight him.

I mean, kings ruled by divine right. They were answerable to God, not to their subjects, not to parliaments. When parliaments were called – solely at the king's discretion – their job was to give advice to help the king to pass laws and, above all, to give money – and then to go home again. You have this extraordinary transformation in the 1640s, when Parliament becomes, in effect, the government. It's never been anything like that before. Previously it has met just for short periods at very long intervals, called and dissolved at the king's behest. Now Parliament manages to make its own authority permanent – that is, it pressures the king into agreeing that it can't be dissolved without its own consent.

It becomes the government. It raises an army, it runs the localities and it develops, in fighting against Charles I, the ability to raise huge taxes, far beyond anything that Charles I had been able to envisage.

So to Charles, the raising of the army is an affront to nature. Charles believes in monarchy, and monarchy is personal monarchy and his will should prevail. When Parliament says, 'We know that you're virtuous, but it's people around you who are wicked,' he says, 'No, I take full responsibility for my actions.'

Parliament's army

WW: The army is ultimately the last straw?

BW: When you get religious and political and social conflict of such a fundamental kind, when two parties are forming for control of the state, in the end what matters is who controls the army.

Until recently you hadn't had an army in England. You'd had local forces, county militias, which were pretty amateur, not very effective on the whole. Armies had been raised for particular military campaigns, then disbanded, but the war in Scotland creates an English army, and from then on, there is a permanent army of some sort present in English politics.

And as, in 1641, king and Parliament fall apart, the question arises: who is going to control the, the armed forces? The question comes up particularly in relation to the Irish rebellion of November 1641, which for Protestants was the most horrendous event.

They didn't ask themselves what grievances might have led the Irish to rise up. The rebellion and the massacres in 1641 – which were rather exaggerated by propaganda – these proved, first of all, that it was a popish conspiracy, and secondly, that popery remained what it had always been – bent on murderous persecution and bloody suppression of Protestants. So that rebellion has to be put down.

But who's going to put it down? If the king raises an army for Ireland, he'll then have a big military force at his back that he can then turn on the Parliamentarians. How are they going to defend themselves? So Parliament has to pre-empt that and raise its own army. It's at that point that Parliament is, in effect, making a claim for sovereignty – not a legal claim, it doesn't put it like that – but if Parliament controls the army, what doesn't it control?

The beginning of the Long Parliament

WW: So what was it like in Westminster when they all turned up in 1640?

BW: The Parliament that meets in November 1640 knows that it's going to be like no Parliament that's been before. This is a very particular, extraordinary historical moment. Over the course of the history of the Long Parliament [1640-60], Parliament is going to be changed very greatly in character. It is going to become the government, the executive. It's going to raise armies, raise taxes, pass laws without the king's consent.

All these kinds of thing had been quite inconceivable before 1640. Parliaments had met only occasionally, for brief periods, then there'd be several years without a Parliament. Their job was to advise the king, to help him pass laws and, above all, from the king's point of view, to raise money.

The Parliament that meets in November 1640 becomes a very different kind of beast because defeating his policies and then defeating him on the battlefield create the need for parliamentary sovereignty.

Now the people who met in November 1640 didn't want that. They weren't looking forward to 20th-century parliamentary democracy or anything like that. But they do see that Parliament is the instrument by which they can break Charles's regime.

They had been thwarted in this before. Three parliaments earlier in Charles's reign, there had been bitter criticism of his religious and political policies. That had been defeated. Charles had then ruled for 11 years without a Parliament. Who was going to stop him? And he seems to be making himself financially independent. He introduces the ship money tax, which, despite the opposition to it, he is able to raise.

Then Charles gets himself into deep trouble in Scotland. That, of course, is what weakens him. Nothing that happens in England particularly does. It's what happens in Scotland that counts. It's what produces this extraordinary possibility of, from the Puritan point of view, deliverance from Laudian persecution.

Now a Parliament meets in the spring of 1640. It lasts only for a few weeks and it's not particularly assertive. Its leaders are testing out the ground to see how much support they have. They don't really stand up to Charles when he dissolves it.

But between then and the autumn, the mood changes. The humiliation of Charles by the Scots, the fact that he's now totally dependent for financial survival on Parliament – this gives Parliament a handle it is determined to use. First of all, it's going to break the instruments of ecclesiastical and political tyranny. Archbishop Laud, [Thomas Wentworth, 1st Earl of] Strafford [Charles I's chief adviser and lord-lieutenant of Ireland] – these people have to be removed. Strafford is executed. To thwart Charles, rather than to create long-term constitutional change – which they were interested in – they pressure the king into agreeing to a Triennial Act. There will be, from now on, a Parliament every three years, whether the king likes it or not. And Parliament can't be dissolved without its own consent. The probative courts of Star Chamber and High Commission are broken in 1641.

All these changes are, for Charles, terrible, humiliating defeats, but he really has no alternative but to agree to them. They transform the whole character of politics. They give Parliament a power, a confidence and a momentum that is very hard for Charles to resist.

Cromwell as military and political leader

WW: Now Cromwell appears dramatically. What sort of figure was he as a military leader?

BW: Cromwell develops slowly as a military leader. Because of his fame, we tend to think of him as the person who, from the start, was in charge of the Parliamentary armies. Not at all. If you look at the early stages of the campaign, he's doing remarkable things. He's raising soldiers, godly troops of a very dynamic and effective kind, but lots of other people are doing that, too, in different parts of the country.

It's really only towards the end of the Civil War that he emerges as the leading military figure on the Parliamentarian side. That role and his standing are hugely increased by his extraordinary victories in the Second Civil War in 1648 – a much more bitter and dramatic war even if more short-lived than the First Civil War – and then those extraordinary campaigns in Ireland and Scotland where he overcomes what seem to be absolutely massive obstacles.

How does he do it? Not, I think, through any great or profound strategic sense. I don't think anyone would claim that Cromwell was a strategic military innovator. It has to do with personal authority, with his command over his troops, his ability to discipline his troops, to give them a sense of what they were fighting for, to sustain their morale in adversity. It's a matter of charisma more than anything else. He did make some clever military moves in his lifetime – he made some less clever ones, too – but I don't think that he's a great military strategist.

WW: People talk about Cromwell's charisma. How do people remember him?

BW: They were all awed by him. Some of them reviled him, most of them mistrusted him. But by the end of the Civil War, he's obviously emerging as the dominant figure of the era because of his extraordinary rise to power from provincial obscurity, his success in defeating the king and, indeed, in defeating the opposition on his own side, the resolution with which he's prepared to press forward while others hesitate. After historical events, it's easier for us to suppose that what happened was inevitable. But Parliament's victory in the Civil War seemed a sort of miracle at the time. In the early stages of the war, the king very much had the upper hand. Then there's Cromwell, who is the dynamic force within the New Model Army, which is created in the winter of 1644/5 and can do things that other armies can't. It can win victories in a way that no other army can.

WW: What's the significance of the period at the end of First Civil War in making Cromwell the political figure that he is?

BW: He's the leader of the godly party, if you like. He's the person who's going to stand up for liberty of conscience against the more orthodox Puritans – the Presbyterians as they were called – who wanted absolute religious orthodoxy, who were horrified by the diversity of religious belief that's tolerated in Cromwell's army.

There tends to be an alliance between the religious radicals – those people who wanted liberty of conscience – and the political radicals who said, 'It's no good trying to reach a negotiated settlement with Charles. As long as he's there, as long as there's any authority, he'll outmanoeuvre you. You've got to break him. You've got to impose terms on him.'

That's what Cromwell strives for. Those people who support the radical policies in both politics and religion see him as their salvation. They don't always like him, they don't always trust him, but he's necessary and they are very awed by him.

The role of the press

WW: Now what's the role of the printing press in all of this? How important was the press in swaying people and how important were the ideas in it?

BW: Before 1640, there are, of course, printing presses. Books are published, there are a few pamphlets on current affairs, lots of sermons, but there's fairly tight control through censorship. There's a strict limit to the sorts of opinions that can be expressed, and Archbishop Laud is very firm on cracking down on any kind of printing that goes against the party line.

In 1640-41, censorship breaks down, and there's an extraordinary flood of publications. This is when print culture comes to England. An outburst of publications – pamphlets, newsbooks – and a new literary style emerge. People are now learning how to reach a mass audience.

This is the first stage of journalism. Pamphlets are one of the means by which these extraordinary, new, wild (as they seemed at the time) ideas begin to spread. That's horrifying for the orthodox, hard-line Puritans. They thought, in 1640, they were going to get rid of Laud and introduce doctrinal orthodoxy, the strict Puritan kind. Instead, these new sects rose up, arguing for the liberty of conscience. Orthodox Puritans weren't in favour of liberty of conscience. This would lead to heresy, seduce people's souls, take them to Hell. Yet you can't stop the great spread of ideas.

The printing presses are one thing. The political background is another – the collapse of the landmarks in Church and state. And the formation of armies – people coming together from different parts of the country, finding they had common experiences from their different localities. In that time of extraordinary, unprecedented, revolutionary change, new horizons open up, new possibilities are explored.

WW: In terms of Cromwell's own reputation, what role did the press play, particularly after Marston Moor?

BW: There's quite a struggle after the battle of Marston Moor to see who's going to get the credit for it. The Presbyterians – who tend to be the supporters of the peace party, of moderation, who want a Presbyterian Church and a restored monarchy – want the credit to go to their allies and fellow Presbyterians, the Scots. They don't want it to go to Cromwell, who is the champion of heresy, as they see it, and of political radicalism. So there's a struggle in the newsbooks, in the reporting of the battle, to see who gets the kudos for it.

Cromwell writes rather disingenuously in his own account of the battle, suggesting that the Scots were merely in the background and hadn't really played very much part. It was the godly party that was really responsible for the victory.

So then, as indeed all through the revolution, the press is used by different parties, different factions, to present their point of view. Those possibilities of journalism are being discovered.

The end of the First Civil War

WW: What would you say is the mood of the country when the First Civil War ends?

BW: You might expect the Parliamentarians to feel triumphant. I don't think they did. They were exhausted and had a great sense of apprehension. Yes, they had defeated the king, but now what to do with him? Very few of them by this stage are republicans; they're not thinking about abolishing the monarchy. So you have to have the man back, but on what terms? There are such divisions on the Parliamentarian side – the political and religious divisions, divisions between hard-line, orthodox Puritans and the religious sects that are growing up under Cromwell's patronage, the disagreement about the extent of the monarchy's powers, what powers should be restored to Charles I. So Charles thinks, 'These people are divided. I can divide and rule.' It's actually not a stupid tactic in itself.

But there's also the question: what is Parliament going to do? It has acquired huge powers. It's raised taxes to an extraordinary level. It's established a system of administrative control in the localities that is extremely burdensome and oppressive. Now, if you'd supported Parliament in the Civil War, you might put up with that while the war was being fought, but now that it has been won, how could you justify it? There were also these huge armies still in existence. Surely they should be disbanded?

There's a great groundswell of feeling in the country in favour of a return to normality, to stability, and a sense that these Parliamentarians had got above themselves. Division in politics is never helpful, and the divisions on the Parliamentarian side are, in some ways, much more serious than those on the Royalist side.

The king, as a king, can impose a policy and unity on his followers. There are many on the Royalist side who were very unhappy about his rule in the 1630s and about the way the war was conducted. But those differences, on the whole, don't get into the public domain in the same way as the divisions within Parliament are bound to because debate is reported, word gets around the City of London very quickly, people know which side Cromwell is on. Those bitter divisions within the Parliamentarian cause are very disabling.

So it's not an optimistic mood on the Parliamentarian side in 1646. Nor, obviously, is it on the Royalist one.

The army mutiny

WW: Now you get the mutiny in the Parliamentarian army. Why does it turn against its own leader?

BW: In 1647, the moderate, or Presbyterian, majority in Parliament decides it wants to disband the New Model Army. What purpose does that army have now? After all, the war has been won. Parliament has disbanded its other armies easily enough and now it's the New Model's turn to go.

It affronts the New Model by failing to satisfy its material grievances, particularly the arrears of pay. The soldiers haven't been paid properly for a long time and they want to be paid before they go home. But Parliament treats that desire with contempt. It orders the New Model Army to disband or else some of the regiments will have to go to Ireland to deal with the resistance there. They won't and they stand up to Parliament, and out of that emerges, in 1647, a revolutionary consciousness in the army. What begins as a list of material grievances expands into a political programme.

Early in 1647, Cromwell is in favour of this. He sees the new political machinery that's emerging in the army – the agents or agitators, the representatives of the troops – as instruments through whom he can control the regiments, turf out the Presbyterian supporters within the army. But as time goes on, the machinery turns against him.

A political programme first emerges with which Cromwell is in some ways in sympathy. There was a lot about it that he agrees with. He wants liberty of conscience and the radicals, the Levellers, want that too. But they also want social change of a kind that he is very unhappy about.

He is unhappy about change in itself, but he is also unhappy about the divisive effects of this kind of programme. Cromwell always wants to hold the revolution together, to hold moderates and radicals together. If people press for universal franchise or for the abolition of tithes (the levy that was paid by parishioners to finance the clergy), if congregations become purely voluntary with no basis of state control, if pastors are simply people appointed by congregations, who could be dismissed by them, if there is no national structure of the Church, all kinds of dangerous things could happen. He sees a social programme getting out of control in 1647.

His instincts socially are conservative. He believes in

the nobility, the gentry, hierarchy, deference, and he sees those things threatened in 1647.

Cromwell against the Irish and the Scots

WW: Jumping forward a bit to after the regicide, the first thing Cromwell seems to do then is go to Ireland. Why is that such an imperative?

BW: What happens in 1648-9 is rather closely parallel to what happens exactly 40 years later in 1688-9. In both cases, the king of England is deposed. The trouble is that he's also king of Scotland and king of Ireland.

It's a huge risk, the regicide, in that way. The army can control England but can it control Scotland and Ireland? The same problem came to William III when he invaded England in 1688 and then had the Irish and the Scottish opposition to overcome. The new regime will never be secure as long as there is royalism surviving in Ireland and in Scotland, so it's got to be dealt with. I think Cromwell also knows that there's a very strong anti-Irish and anti-Scottish feeling in England.

After all, look at this new regime. It's profoundly unpopular, it has a very narrow base, it's cut the king's head off – this is not what the war was fought for. How is a broad base of support to be created? Well, as often happens in revolution, the answer is: you go and fight somebody else and you try and rally the nation behind it.

What Cromwell does in Ireland – which so shocks posterity – is in accordance with conventional opinions about the Irish and popery. The clever thing he does in Scotland is to allow the Scots to invade England and there they meet the full brunt of English dislike. All sorts of people who were opposed to the regicide, who aren't in any way republicans themselves, still come out to fight for English forces against the invading Scots. So there's a strategic side to this, too.

WW: How do his victories in Ireland and against the Scots affect his standing in England? What's the dividend?

BW: They leave him in a rather strange position because, constitutionally, Cromwell is merely one of 100 and more members of the surviving remnant of the Long Parliament. He isn't even head of the army at that stage. The Lord General is still Lord Fairfax and he remains this until the summer of 1650, shortly after Cromwell's return from Ireland, when Fairfax resigns rather than lead an army against fellow Protestants in Scotland. Yet everyone knows that the army is Cromwell's.

The army has already purged Parliament and set a republic in place. The new Parliament is not successful; politically it's not popular. Will Cromwell dissolve it? That's what people fear and, of course, they're right. In the end, he does.

His return from Ireland is perceived by people as being rather like Caesar crossing the Rubicon before destroying the republican institutions of Rome. People aren't used to Parliamentarian rule. It is a kind of nonsense in 17th- century terms. Surely, in the end, you're going to have some monarchical element in it, and who other than Cromwell? Who has the stature, who has the potential to hold the different groups of the revolution together and to face the magnitude of the challenges that will befall them?

The end of the Rump Parliament

WW: Which brings us to the expelling of the Rump Parliament. What drives him to that?

BW: Cromwell was not very interested in constitutional forms. He describes them as being 'dross and dung in comparison of Christ'. Political forms can come and go. He'll work through parliaments if that's the best way of getting national support. He'll work through soldiers, he'll work through major- generals, he's prepared to have kingship – in 1647, two years before the execution of the king, he's proposing to restore Charles I on generous terms. He's prepared to become a kind of semi-king himself in 1653.

His goals are religious and social, not constitutional. When he looks at parliaments, what he wants are good men to run them. Just as, before the Civil War, he wanted good men to surround Charles I and have a godly king, so he wants a godly Parliament.

The Parliament that's left after Pride's Purge, after the abolition of the monarchy and the House of Lords, has supreme, unchecked power. It turns on the army, which is claiming a political role for itself, pressing a particular programme on Parliament. Parliament resists that, and what you see is the thwarting of a reform programme that Cromwell backed, a programme for the creation of a godly 'ministry for machinery', if you like, to vet candidates, a programme of law reform, the overhaul of the electoral system, the calling of fresh elections. These things Parliament resists, and a tremendous sense of anger and frustration builds up in the army. After all, it's the army that has won these extraordinary victories. Why should it be treated so contemptuously by Parliament?

So the conflict between military and civilian is one thing. The conflict between conservative and radical is another. Cromwell tries to hold the two together, but it's desperately difficult and his patience wears down. One of Cromwell's problems is that, temperamentally, he can be very patient in trying to build up political unity and to bring together people of different views, people who worship in different ways, and say to them, 'Look, what you have in common is much more important than what divides you.' Then suddenly, there are these dramatic, volatile changes of political course, when he'll suddenly destroy the political instruments that he's built up.

The Rump Parliament, as it was known later on by posterity, was really his creation. He was the person who,

after Pride's Purge of the anti-regicides, brought back some of the more moderate MPs into Parliament to try and widen the base of the regime. Yet that regime, having had its base widened, proves too conservative for him. It resists his reforms, and then in 1653, shortly before its dissolution, it does something else.

Cromwell is always trying to hold the radicals, the hotheads, back and say, 'Look, if the army tries to press its own programme on Parliament or topples Parliament, what basis of legitimacy and authority is there? We may not like this Parliament but to the nation at large, it provides reassurance that there is some kind of constitutional rule. So you must try and keep it there.' Similarly, at the same time, he's saying to Parliament, 'Look, these soldiers who fought for you, they deserve your gratitude. They deserve the enactment of parts of their programme at least.' He works very hard to keep them together, but then there are these sudden reversals of course.

Before the dissolution of the Rump Parliament is one of those moments. He behaves rather similarly to the way he does before deciding to reject the crown in 1657 – a time of tremendous introspection and a great deal of prayer while he tries to discover God's will. Then suddenly, on 20 April 1653, there is this intemperate harangue when he calls the Members of Parliament drunkards and whore-masters and so on. He says to himself just before he does it: 'This is the time that I must do it.'

Obviously, things had been leading up to this for quite a long time. He'd resisted it, he'd tried to prevent it, but the military pressure has proved too strong, and so he acts and it's an extraordinary moment – the seizing of the mace, bringing musketeers into the chamber to drive the MPs out.

Think of Charles I in 1642 trying to arrest the five members whom he thought were guilty of treason, and the outrage that this breach of parliamentary privilege – a king coming into the House of Commons and demanding the arrest of MPs in the place where they are supposed to be allowed to debate freely – caused on the Parliamentarian side. Then see how this general leads musketeers into the House of Commons and clears out the MPs by force. If anybody had foreseen that in 1642, they'd have been horrified.

The Barebones Parliament

WW: Having kicked out the Rump, Cromwell doesn't make himself head honcho immediately, does he? He sets up this Parliament of Saints – also known as the Barebones Parliament. What was his vision at that point? What were his hopes?

BW: The speech that he makes at the opening of the Barebones Parliament is really a lay sermon, as many of his speeches are. It's an attempt to appeal to the people who sit there, to give them a sense of the extraordinary miracle that they are in fact there. It seems to us a fairly cloudy speech. It isn't very precise about what he wants, but I think Cromwell does have a precise programme that he's pursued since the final defeat of the Royalist cause at Worcester in 1651.

He has practical hopes for the making of a godly ministry [that is, clergy], for the establishment of liberty of conscience and for the reform of universities, which were where the future magistrates and ministers of the nation were going to be trained and made godly. He also wants an overhaul of the electoral system – a redistribution of constituencies – and reform of the legal system.

He tried to achieve these things through the Rump, and the Rump had resisted them, so he got rid of the Rump because it had been too conservative. He then turns to the Barebones Parliament and tries to get them to push through the same programme.

Cromwell breaks with the Barebones because, where the Rump had been too conservative, the Barebones was too radical. It seemed to threaten the very institutions of Church and state and society. So the Barebones Parliament goes the same way as the Rump. But you will notice that, in both cases, he doesn't have any objection to parliamentary sovereignty. Since the abolition of monarchy and the House of Lords in 1649, you'd had single chamber rule – no check or balance. Cromwell simply thinks that the important thing is to have good men running the government.

The problem with the Rump, he thought, was that bad men had run it. The Members had been corrupted by power and ruled in their own interest, not in God's, so he got rid of them. He called together a godly assembly. He thought that, if you had good men in charge, the programme could be fulfilled. But single-chamber governments have a way of not working, and it's after the failure of the Barebones that Cromwell is finally persuaded that you've got to have some kind of system of checks and balances. What he does, when he becomes Protector, is to go back to the constitutional programme of the Long Parliament in 1640 – that is, a mixed constitution. You have a king or a Protector – it's a matter of names – but you also have regular Parliaments and any other council who will advise the Protector and give some regularity to the advice that the monarch or Protector is given.

Cromwell as Protector

WW: What is Cromwell like as a Protector?

BW: He accepts the Protectorate almost in desperation, like a drowning man clutching at a raft. He sees that all established, vested interests are horrified by the course the revolution has taken under the Barebones. He's got to reassure the nation, and the point of the instrument of government, the Protector of the constitution, is to try to do that.

The problem with it is that it's a military constitution. It's created by the army as the Rump had been and the Barebones had been. What the people who run the shires – the nobility and gentry – want is a civilian constitution and so they're determined that, if there is going to be a Protector, it's going to be on their terms, on Parliament's terms.

As Protector, Cromwell was always torn over style – whether to try to be a monarch in the traditional sense or not to be a monarch. After all, what business had he to become a monarch? If he was just going to be like the Stuarts, if it was just going to be like replacing the Yorkists by the Tudors, what had the Civil War been about? Had it merely been about his own ambition or personal advancement?

He sees the importance of ceremony more and more as time goes on. The Humble Petition and Advice of 1657, the new constitution, makes him a more stately kind of monarch. His inauguration is rather a stately affair with hints of a return to the old ceremonies, and yet at the same time, Cromwell wants not to be king. He is there by virtue of his own personality or by the fact that he's an instrument of providence, God's instrument, not by heredity, and you can see the contrast in his speeches.

If you look at speeches at the opening of parliaments by earlier monarchs, they're formal, stately, ornate. They don't reveal the inner character of the monarch. They're meant to disguise it. They're official documents. Cromwell's speeches to Parliaments are sermons. They're autobiographical. He talks endlessly about the experience he and the nation have been through. The exposition of psalms in his speeches may seem to us a rather odd way of trying to persuade MPs, but many of them were Puritans, too. This was the kind of language they spoke, but it's a very different kind of language and behaviour from what you would have expected from a heredity king.

WW: How would you define Cromwell's relationship to power?

BW: Power is to be used to advance a godly programme. He's not interested in the trappings of power. He knows the burdens of office, too. It's massively difficult trying to govern England in the 1650s – to sort out all those divisions, to try to keep the army and Parliament together, to Puritanise the land in a way that will reassure people to associate Puritanism with stability after all the destabilising things that had happened, to try to reduce the army so that eventually you wouldn't have to have military rule, and yet at the same time to press ahead with the programme that the army had wanted. These are massive challenges, and Cromwell ages quite rapidly under the Protectorate. There's a sense of tremendous strain and loneliness towards the end.

Supreme power can be quite lonely. It's very hard to know what the people around you think because they're going to tell you what they think you want to hear. At moments of real crisis, Cromwell does tend to turn in on himself, into prayer.

There's a jocular, informal, rather brusque side to Cromwell's character, and yet on occasions of state, he could be rather formal. During the great crisis in 1657, when he has to decide whether he should take the crown or not, one of the people who takes part in those conferences says that sometimes Cromwell would lay aside his greatness and talk familiarly to them. So you have a sense of somebody trying to look like a king, but that's only one half of story.

The Puritans' – and Cromwell's – lifestyle

WW: We have this image of that period as a pretty dour time – cutting down of maypoles, killjoys and so on. Is that fair?

BW: Cromwell and most Puritans were not against pleasure in moderation. They weren't against wine or laughter or music. But they were certainly against an excess of those things.

Now that in itself is not all that unusual in the 17th century. You don't have to be a Puritan to be against adultery or whoredom or drunkenness or swearing. These were regarded as bestial things, man's reason surrendered to lust and appetite. It was the duty of the state, of the magistrates and the clergy, to stop these things from happening.

But the Puritans are firmer against sin than others in some ways. This is partly because they thought that sin provokes God. Their God is an Old Testament God, a jealous, vengeful God, who punishes sins. If the nation – which has been given this extraordinary historic opportunity and historic duty to begin the purification of the world – turns aside to sin, God will punish those sins as he punished the Israelites in the Old Testament.

But the other thing is that, for the Puritans, worldly pleasures are so trivial and a distraction from the real pleasures. The happiness of living closely to God, the miracle of the illumination of the soul – what was drinking or eating or enjoying yourself compared to that?

WW: What about Cromwell's own lifestyle at this time? He lived in Hampton Court. Did he enjoy the trappings of kingship?

BW: There's no evidence that he enjoyed the trappings of kingship. There is this balancing act, this attempt to be a king and not a king. He gradually comes to realise that the nation won't be stabilised, won't support his rule, unless there is some institutional link with what's happened in the past, some return to normality. Living in Hampton Court, that's important, and receiving foreign ambassadors. England has got to look impressive on the Continent, so there has to be that formal side to the Protectorate. But I don't think it has any attraction for Cromwell.

WW: Is he not an ambitious man?

BW: Cromwell, like so many of his close friends, is a

very hard man to fathom. He's left us thousands of words in his letters and speeches, far more than most people of his time, and yet, down the generations, who has ever really felt that they've understood him?

I don't think he has any personal ambition, if by that you mean that he wanted to rule people or establish his own family in power. Power was to be used for a godly purpose, and if that involved being Protector, he would become Protector. If he really thought that it involved becoming king, he'd become king. But I don't think that wearing ermine or a crown had any appeal to him.

Liberty of conscience

WW: Why does he allow the Jews back into England?

BW: Most orthodox Puritans were horrified by the idea of religious toleration or liberty of conscience. They were quite as convinced as Archbishop Laud that there was only one way and one truth and that must be imposed.

Cromwell belongs to that minority that wants a measure of liberty of conscience. In fact, if there is a single guiding ideal through his life, that's it. It's the one thing that he never compromises on, the one thing that he always insists on in his quarrels with Parliament. It's a sticking point, and to us, it sounds attractive. It seems a modern quality. We think people should be allowed to worship as they want and believe as they want.

But Cromwell's idea of liberty of conscience is very different from ours. He's not interested in the rights of man as we are. He's interested in the rights of God. It's through liberty of conscience that God's word can reach people. Persecution cuts off the lifeline of salvation by preventing people from discovering the truth in their own way.

Cromwell saw in his own army how people from different religious affiliations – Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Baptists – could discover a unity of spirit even though they had a diversity of form. He also thought that the regeneration of the soul, the process of conversion, the reaching of truth, could be a painful, difficult and very slow process and one might make some mistakes on the way, one might stumble into error. So he has a concept of religious diversity that is an unorthodox belief, but there are limits to it. Cromwell favours liberty to worship differently rather than to believe differently.

He has himself quite an orthodox, doctrinal view of the Protestant faith, and he's shocked by some of the heresies that emerge in the 1650s. He is very happy to have diversity of belief in his army among Baptists, Presbyterians and Congregationalists. Their religion is sober, biblically based. The Quakers are not like the Quakers of the post-Restoration period or of modern times. They're not respectable, sober, peaceable people. They're itinerants. They roam the countryside, trying to make converts; they break into churches, interrupt church services, challenge conventional or Puritan ideas – the very basis of biblical faith: Was Christ an historical figure? Did he really exist? Wasn't he just an allegory? Shouldn't the Bible be thought of in quite different ways?

Cromwell is appalled by that and by James Nayler who rode into Bristol on a donkey in the manner of Christ's entry into Jerusalem. That's not the kind of liberty of conscience that Cromwell had been fighting for, and when he writes to Parliament during their debate on Nayler, he makes it very plain that it's not Nayler's own principles that he's defending. What worries him is that Parliament is claiming the right to act as a court to try religious heresy. If it can do that in the case of Nayler, it can do that in the cases of people like the Baptists to whom Cromwell was close, whom he did protect and shelter. So it's the constitutional issue and not a theological one that he takes his stand on.

WW: He lets the Jews return to England. This, again, seems like an extraordinarily liberal, modern thing to do, even in the 21st century.

BW: Of course, Jews weren't officially tolerated in England until the 19th century, so Cromwell's action does seem to us a modern, liberal thing to have done.

Cromwell would have seen it in very different terms. He knew – as Puritans knew from the Bible – that, before the world could be purified, the barrier between Jew and Gentile would have to be broken down. Here was an opportunity to convert the Jews. He wants to Christianise them – that's the motive behind what he did.

The offer of the crown

WW: He then gets the offered the crown. How does he react to that?

BW: Before 1657, Cromwell as Protector always ruled by the favour of the army. The Parliament that met in 1654-5 had refused to ratify his constitution. He desperately needs to form a civilian government to give him constitutional legitimacy. To his pleasure, in 1657 Parliament offers him a new constitution: the Humble Petition and Advice. This offers him a parliamentary guarantee of quite a wide measure of liberty of conscience – a great thing for him to have achieved. However, part of the package that Parliament offers him is the crown. They want to take England back to the old constitution by stages, so the old House of Lords, the monarchy and the hereditary principle will all be restored.

Cromwell sees the political sense of this. He says that people tell him that, until there is a return to kingship, nobody knows what the basis of the law is. The law runs in the king's name, and all the institutions of society depend on those ancient habits. He feels that, if he makes that concession and simply takes the title of king, he would have a great chance to stabilise the new regime, to give it a much wider basis of support in the country.

But if he took the crown, first of all, he would affront

many of the people to whom he was closest, and he'd already broken with a number of them. When he dissolved the Rump, he'd offended all those republicans, people like Sir Henry Vane [effectively civilian head of the parliamentary government between 1643 and 1653] who he'd been extremely close to in the 1640s. When he dissolved the Barebones, he affronted the godly radicals. In fact, he had alienated and antagonised quite a lot of the supporters of the Protestant cause of 1640. There are still some godly or godly radical people who remain close to him and are particularly grateful for the liberty of conscience that he's given them.

But there is this tension in the Protectorate. Do you go forward or do you go back? Do you carry forward the process of Puritan reform? Do you sustain the energy of Puritan reform? Are you still willing to transform institutions or do you retreat back to the old ways?

The offer of the crown is an issue that Cromwell personalises in an extraordinary way and drags out for quite a long time. The godly radicals in the army and in the congregations feel that, if they lose the battle and Cromwell accepts the crown, he'll have sold out. That's a tremendous burden on Cromwell's conscience.

The other thing is that, since 1651, since the end of the Civil Wars, Cromwell had found God's will very much harder to make out. If you're fighting battles and always winning them, you know that God is on your side, but in politics, where you have to negotiate, compromise, fudge, deal, God's will is very much harder to discern.

And then in 1655, there's a military catastrophe. The invasion of the Spanish West Indies results in a humiliating defeat for Cromwell's forces. The military and naval expedition he sends to the island of Hispaniola [modern-day Haiti and Dominican Republic] is routed by a handful of Spaniards.

What does that tell one about God's will for Oliver Cromwell and England? The people who had been turfed out of power in 1649 or 1653 say that the usurper's sin is being punished. Cromwell is a hypocrite, a man who has sacrificed the cause on the altar of his own ambition.

Those reproaches are very hard to live with. Cromwell depends for spiritual sustenance on his contact with these radicals, even though only one half of his mind wants what they want. He's simply not convinced in 1657 that what God wants is for him to take the crown. And if he made himself king against God's will, he would face the God who seems to have rebuked him so severely after the Hispaniola expedition. It would also be an awful mistake if the English simply ended up with a Cromwellian dynasty instead of a Stuart one. Is that what they had fought for?

WW: What was it like to be in his presence?

BW: I wish there were fuller accounts of what it was like. However, there are people who record conversations with him, and you can sense from those accounts the awe of his personality before them. They tend to feel, at least in retrospect, that they'd been deceived by him. He seems to have been an extremely good and sympathetic listener who talked to these individuals with candour and feeling. Then afterwards they wondered how much he had really told them, and they realised how much they had told him.

Cromwell spends a lot of his life talking to, interviewing and listening to people. He's always trying to see who he can use, who's on his side, who wants what because, to build a new political establishment, he needs to find instruments, people who will do his bidding. So he sounds people out, and they go away thinking, 'Hey, he's handled me quite effectively and skilfully and I've got nothing out of him.'

Cromwell at the end

WW: What was his state of mind towards the end of his rule?

BW: In the last year or so of his life, the sense of strain is uppermost and the sense of ageing, too.

Some things had been achieved. An extraordinarily effective system had been put in place for vetting candidates for the clergy. Quite a lot had been done to reform the universities. There was the sense that a godly ruling class was, with time, attainable. The machinery had been put in place to achieve it.

There had been some reform of the legal system, though, on the whole, Cromwell had been outmanoeuvred by the legal profession, as tends to happen. The electoral system had been overhauled in a way that was quite as radical as that of the great Reform Act of 1832. In particular, there was the redistribution of parliamentary constituencies, which ended great inequalities. For example, before Cromwell's reforms, the county of Cornwall, which was rather thinly populated and lightly taxed, had 44 seats. Essex, which was heavily populated and heavily taxed, had 8 seats. All his reforms were going to be swept away at the Restoration, but they did make an impact. But there have been great problems, too. The cause still remains profoundly divided. He's not been able to rebuild the nation as he wanted. The achievement of the Protectorate from the nation's point of view is that it restored an element of constitutional continuity and respectability, particularly after the passing of the Humble Petition and Advice in 1657.

But for Cromwell, that only matters as a means to a reforming end. It doesn't matter in itself. It is useful for Cromwell that people are prepared to put up with him rather than the Stuarts because he provides stability. But it's not what he's living for. The question he must have asked himself towards the end is, I think: had he followed the Lord's guidance as he should have done? That must have preyed on his mind.

Cromwell and Milton

WW: What was the relationship between Cromwell and the poet John Milton?

BW: There have been a lot of misunderstandings about Cromwell's relationship with Milton, primarily created by the Victorians. Previously Cromwell had been seen as a villain. It was the Victorians who turned him into a hero. They saw him as the great statesman and soldier of the revolutionary period and Milton as the great writer. They portrayed them as partners with a communion of soul between them.

They convinced themselves that Milton had been Cromwell's secretary, that he'd lived under the same roof, that he'd eaten at Cromwell's table, that he'd played the organ while Cromwell stood rapt to attention at his side, that he'd helped Cromwell to shape the foreign policies of the Protectorate.

Milton was actually a civil servant. He's not Cromwell's secretary. There's no evidence that the two men were ever alone together, and we know nothing about what, if anything, Cromwell thought about Milton.

We do, however, know quite a lot about what Milton thought about Cromwell. He wrote a famous sonnet – 'Peace hath her victories no less than war' – to him in 1652, and two years later, he wrote a tract that includes a long discussion of Cromwell. Both pieces are exercises in praise, and the praise is, in some ways, entirely genuine.

Cromwell was seen by Milton as a man of great courage who had carried the cause to victory in the face of the most tremendous adversity. So one part of Milton sees Cromwell as a hero – and Milton likes having heroes – at least a hero up to the end of the Civil Wars and the defeat of the Royalists in 1651.

But as he says in the sonnet, what is Cromwell going to do with the victories? What Milton wants him to do and what Cromwell is prepared to do are rather different. Milton wants total separation of Church from state. He wants the abolition of tithes, the compulsory levy by which the clergy was financed. He wants to see the godly cause going forward in the Protectorate.

Within Milton's praise, there are warnings to Cromwell and advice. If you, as a writer, addressed a ruler in the 17th century, you had to praise him – that was the convention. But there were also conventions by which warnings and advice could be wrapped in praise, in rather subtle, interlinear ways. Milton is urging Cromwell very firmly in the direction of complete liberty of conscience and the abolition of tithes, and he also wants him to bring back into his circle many of those people with whom he'd broken in 1653.

In the early stages of the Protectorate, Milton does lend Cromwell his support in that rather tentative and anxious spirit. But by the end of it, his hopes have vanished. The gap between Cromwell and Milton simply becomes too large. In about 1657, Milton, who had set aside his poetic ambitions for nearly two decades to guide the nation through his prose writings towards godly reform, goes back to his poetry and begins to write *Paradise Lost*.

He doesn't come out in opposition to Cromwell while Cromwell is alive, but once the Protectorate has fallen in 1659, after the deposition of Richard Cromwell, Milton becomes open. He talks about the Protectorate as a 'scandalous night of interruption' – an interruption in the progress of the godly cause. He talks about the ambition that had motivated Cromwell and other army officers during the Protectorate.

So it was not the easy, harmonious or close relationship that the Victorians saw and which some people in the 21st century see, too.

The Restoration

WW: Is the Restoration inevitable once Cromwell dies?

BW: It's always hard in history to say that anything is inevitable because we never know what happened not to happen. But my hunch is that the fatal moment for Cromwell was his decision not to take the crown. In terms of his own beliefs, it was the entirely right thing to do, but the way he handled it was disastrous.

Over those months in the early part of 1657, he creates the expectation that he will take the crown. He builds up a conservative party within Parliament that wants to 'civilianise' him and wants the nation to turn its back on military rule. Those people seem to represent the future. They attract a lot of young supporters, who hadn't lived through the traumatic experiences of the 1620s and 1630s or at least hadn't been adult at that time. What these people want is a return to stability, and they have great hopes of Cromwell in 1657. The decision to refuse the crown, which he's made such an important symbolic choice, deflates and demoralises them. However, it revives the colonels, the major-generals and the army officers – people like Desborough and Fleetwood – who, in 1657, had begun to look like yesterday's men. It gives them a fresh lease of life.

If you look at Cromwell's government in the last year of his life, after the acceptance of the Humble Petition and Advice, you see a kind of paralysis between the military and civilian forces. Now the army officers need Cromwell and he needs them, but then Cromwell dies. His son Richard succeeds, but he has none of the authority over them that Cromwell had. Also Richard is in some ways a much more conservative figure than his father was. He wants to move back towards the ancient constitution without any real sense of complication. He doesn't have any sense of proximity to or enthusiasm for the godly cause. The army officers hope at first that they can use him, so they leave him in power, but when it becomes plain that they can't, they topple him.

Had Oliver Cromwell accepted the crown, he would have given his regime momentum and the chance to strike deep roots, even though perhaps at the cost of many of the things that he thought he'd been fighting for. But once he refuses it, it's hard to see how the revolution can hold together.

The trouble for the Puritans was that so many things had happened since 1640 that they hadn't expected or dreamed might happen. As a result, divisions had emerged within the Puritan cause that were so profound it's hard to see how they could have been healed. There was not only the division between moderates (or conservatives) and radicals, but also divisions between military and civilian. The question was asked: why did we have military rule when the tyranny of Charles I had been so opposed?

Cromwell's lasting achievements

WW: Why is Cromwell such an important figure? What was his lasting achievement?

BW: England did not become a godly commonwealth. After the Restoration, the reaction against Cromwell and everything Puritan was absolutely profound. Their legislative achievements were swept away. So it looks like a failure, and if that's how you want to see things, you certainly can. But I think there are lasting marks.

One is that the Protectorate created with a sense of something like legality a diversity of worship in England that's never been got rid of. The whole non- conformist tradition is made possible by that. You can't ever hope for religious uniformity again. You can try and punish dissenters, as Charles II, does, but you can't get rid of them. As a result, non-conformity has had a very strong place in English culture, at least until quite recent times, and that's certainly partially Cromwell's achievement.

The other thing is that he provides an image of rule that can be contrasted with, and used as a reproach to, other forms of government. Even people who reviled Cromwell at the time and have reviled him in posterity have recognised extraordinary things about his rule.

There were his achievements abroad. England under the Stuart kings in the 17th century was a weak power, easily becoming a satellite of other foreign powers. Yet, under Cromwell, the army and navy cause the great monarchies of France and Spain to tremble and they desperately want to be allied with Cromwell. They are frightened of him. Although his foreign policy had its failures, he did make England great abroad in a way that, from the late 17th century to the 19th century, at times of military weakness or national uncertainty, made people look back with pride. This was the man who stood up to foreigners and could defeat them. They couldn't boss him around and he wouldn't vacillate.

There's also, I think, the recognition – even by Royalists and subsequently even by Royalist historians – that his regime, whatever its failings, however wicked the means by which he might have come to power, did have its virtues. It was frugal; it was not corrupt. It was an efficient regime, a dynamic regime, in some ways rather more attractive than the government by royal courts under the Stuarts or by a semi-parliamentary oligarchy in the 18th century. So the image of Cromwell as an uncorrupt and effective ruler has been important in English history.

Cromwell's reputation

WW: How is Cromwell regarded from the moment he dies?

BW: Every generation sees the past with its own values and preconceptions in mind, and Cromwell's image has been adapted to changes of value and in preoccupations down the centuries.

Until some point in the first half of the 19th century, the predominant view of him is hostile. He's regarded as terrible aberration, the person in whose character all the evils of Puritanism somehow seem to have been concentrated. The 18th century – the Age of Reason – couldn't abide Puritanism. It couldn't understand the dreadful fanaticism that had led to military rule, republicanism and sectarian rule. So Cromwell was regarded as the wicked usurper, not only by Royalists but also by republicans because he was the person who had betrayed their cause.

The 19th century discovers the inner Cromwell, the Puritan Cromwell, the Cromwell of the letters and speeches. This is largely as a result of the rise of religious non-conformity, though it also has to do with the Victorian respect for earnestness of spirit. Puritanism, which had been so unintelligible and seemed so horrible to the 18th century, had a much better press in the 19th century.

In some ways, the Victorians did become much closer to Cromwell than previous generations had been, but they also 'Victorianised' him. They made him into a kind of Victorian liberal, a 17th-century Gladstone. They thought that the things that they didn't like about Cromwell – the way he behaved in Ireland, his resorting to military rule – were unfortunate deviations from better and more civilised feelings or patterns of conduct. I think many of the misunderstandings about Cromwell, particularly about his attitude to religious toleration, were created by the very enthusiasm that the 19th century had for Cromwell.

The 19th century did make Cromwell into a hero. The erection of a statue to him outside the Houses of Parliament after 50 years of struggle was a great symbolic victory for the Cromwellian cause.

WW: But what about us? What is he to historians today?

BW: I don't think historians hero-worship or vilify Cromwell any more. Something's happened to historical study. It's become perhaps more sceptical, less susceptible to enthusiasms of that kind. Historians, like any other people, may have their private enthusiasms for or dislike of Cromwell, but I think they would regard it as a betrayal of their professional duty if they allowed that to colour their judgement.

WW: You say that each age looks back and finds their own Cromwell. How do you think our age finds Cromwell?

BW: He can still arouse passions. Ann Widdicombe has said that her teeth grind every time that she sees the statue of Cromwell outside the Houses of Parliament. According to her, he was a bigot so that he shouldn't be there.

But I don't think that he arouses passions in quite the same way that he used to. We don't need to see him as a villain in the way that, for about 150 years after his death, people needed to – he was still close to them. We also don't seem to feel the need to 'heroise' him as the 19th century did. The 19th century saw him as a kind of virtuous Napoleon, a great, heroic leader. We also don't feel the past quite as strongly as the Victorians did. Our political vocabulary has much less of the past about it than, say, the 18th or 19th century had.

WW: What is the most remarkable thing about Cromwell's life?

BW: There had been no one like Cromwell in English history. A man who rises not from the aristocracy but from provincial obscurity to control the country. A man who achieves extraordinary victories, who makes England great abroad when it had had so humble a role before the Civil Wars. A man who creates the union of Britain. A man who achieves liberty of conscience and of religious diversity in an age that was fundamentally so opposed to them.

At the time, people were staggered by these achievements, and they've been staggered by them ever since.

A poem written by Andrew Marvell in 1650, on Cromwell's return from Ireland, encapsulates the sense of awe, wonder, horror, revulsion, admiration and respect that Cromwell commanded. If he'd supported anybody in the Civil War, Marvell had supported the Royalists. He'd been very affronted by the Puritan seizure of power. He didn't like Puritanism, and yet he's profoundly awed by the man's achievements. In Marvell's later poems, you find praise of Cromwell's foreign policy, the way that he had made foreign powers tremble, something inconceivable under the early Stuarts or, come to that, under the later Stuarts, too.

Clarendon, the Royalist historian, thought that Cromwell was an instrument of the Devil, but he referred to his virtues and described him as a 'brave, bad man'. I think that, even in the most bitter Royalist and Tory criticism of Cromwell from the late 17th century through the 18th century, you find magnanimity and a recognition of the man's greatness.

So, yes, Cromwell awed and dazzled his contemporaries, even when they didn't like him.