

To what extent did
thomas cromwell
shape the english
reformation



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The nature of the English Reformation has generated fierce debate among scholars since writing began on the subject.

Assumptions have changed and opinions have varied, but from Elton and Dickens to the ‘revisionists’ the prominent historians of the 20th Century have all agreed that Thomas Cromwell played a significant role in the tumultuous events of the 1530’s. However, it is disputed whether it was King or Minister who orchestrated the reforms of the Reformation Parliament. Did Cromwell merely respond to the opportunities Henry VIII presented him with, or would events have differed considerably without Cromwell’s presence? Cromwell’s administrative genius made him a truly exceptional statesman; arguably as effective and capable as England has ever seen. It could be said that in just a decade of power he permanently changed the course of English history, laying the first steps of religious reform on which Protestantism climbed its way to state religion. This of course is the central dispute here, but what is clear is that as Chief Minister he was blessed with a logical and efficient mind in an age all too devoid of them. Cromwell was determined to empower the machinery of state and in the process made statute law the 16th century’s greatest weapon. He used Johann Gutenberg’s invention of printing press to spearhead propaganda campaigns that England had never yet experienced. G R Elton, one of the great historians of the 20th century, ranked him as “the most remarkable revolutionary in English History,”¹ quite a statement considering Cromwell’s namesake Oliver for one.

Yet it is not called the Henrician Reformation for nothing and after all it was Henry’s aggressive desire for clinical action to secure a male heir and dynastic stability that started the reforming ball rolling. The King was an

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opportunist who disliked papal authority and interference in his realm. He sought the vast wealth the English church possessed and often desperately short of money, it was near-blasphemy for his subjects to pay taxes directly to Rome. In any age and any land, war is the most expensive action a monarch can undertake. 16th century Europe rarely saw a year without military conflict and thus money was incessantly sought after at any cost. Professor Scarisbrick points out that in Henry “ the ancient ambition to recover at least part of a lost empire was probably still alive in the very core of the man.”² Scarisbrick suggests that the king’s rivalry with Francis I was perhaps his primary motivation, and that religious change did not come about as a result of a Lutheran minister, but a deeply motivated king who would stop at nothing to fulfill his ambitions. In order to analyse Cromwell’s significance, the central government of the 1530’s and the Reformation as an event must be appreciated and understood.

The explosion of Historical research after 1960 has given us unrivalled detail about the workings of Tudor administration and its politics. In the last decade Christopher Haigh for one has fore fronted revolutionary thinking into the state of the church declaring, “ there is nothing to indicate that we are on the eve of a Reformation, or that there was any decay of conventional piety.”³ The theory that there existed an anti-clerical populace has been renounced and we can now say with accuracy that the Church was not ripe for the picking (records of diocesan administration and parish life for example give substantial evidence to support the notion). The traditionalist view of the Reformation has been demolished and it is now general consensus that Protestantism never bubbled up in the countryside or the towns as a result of

a decaying church; change came directly from above. The reformation was a series of complex processes and manoeuvrings that asserted secular control over Catholicism by suppressing its institutions and breaking with papal authority. Crown and Parliament, king and minister, cut the spiritual, juridical and financial bonds which linked the English Church with the papacy.

England had been a “thoroughly papalist country, perhaps the most so in Western Europe”. 4 Changes were enforced by deliberate government action and the people were enticed and persuaded by propaganda and the honing of the treason law.

The power of statute law was being used to its optimum potential, proving it to be the formidable enforcer of the 16th century. Those who lived in Tudor England saw the Reformation on their part as obedience rather than conversion. As it moulded English religion, it was itself moulded by religious influences. The fall of Chief Minister Wolsey in 1529 left a striking void in the Tudor Government. For 15 years the Cardinal was arguably as powerful as the young king and it has been widely claimed he was effectively ruling the country. Henry listened to Wolsey above all others and up until 1529, took heed of the Cardinal's advice in almost every matter. Yet for all the political talent and ruthlessness Wolsey possessed, for all the time and effort that were put into his last task, he couldn't find an answer to his king's greatest dilemma; that of the 'great matter.' It seemed a divorce was not possible, that Henry would never have Anne Boleyn as Queen, that for the dynastic stability a male heir brought, an illegitimate son would be the only option.

There was but one mind in the land that saw a way out for the king; the mind of Thomas Cromwell. The first critical achievement was the realisation that <https://assignbuster.com/to-what-extent-did-thomas-cromwell-shape-the-english-reformation/>

parliament was not a rarely called upon commodity but a body of potential power that could install secular authority over Rome. By 1532 Thomas Cranmer had already risen to prominence as Archbishop of Canterbury and used this new found standing to champion the cause of a Royal Supremacy. Also the country's leading law theorist Christopher St. German provided the detailed theoretical justifications that were needed in undertaking this most ambitious of reforms, but both lacked the method and vision that was required. It was Cromwell who suggested that parliament be used to revolutionise the relationship between Church and State and it was Cromwell who persuaded Henry that in doing so he was the man to orchestrate the solution to the 'great matter'. Henry and Wolsey had busied themselves with the theological intricacies and contradictions of Leviticus and Deuteronomy, and while they had a substantial case, complex political stances in Rome at the time withstood calls for a divorce. Cromwell's radical proposal that finally gave the king hope was perhaps the sole reason for his ascent to prominence and shows that it really was his idea and his alone.

The Act in Restraint of Annates banned all but 5% of income paid to the Pope (income that had been the papacy's largest financial source from Henry's kingdom). The Pope's right for confirmation on the marriage was effectively ended in March 1533 with the Act in Restraint of Appeals declaring that authority in all lay and clerical matters rested with the monarch. An appeal to Rome as the final court of appeal concerning canon law and legal rulings now had no jurisdiction. Parliament had played a minor part in the first 20 years of Henry's reign as it had done with previous monarchs, so it can be said Cromwell's vision was truly innovative. Had there been no Cromwell and

no such suggestion, the course of English History may well have taken a vividly different path. Anne Boleyn may perhaps have buckled and accepted a role as Henry's mistress and nothing more. One last pregnancy may have given a male heir and the dynastic stability Henry so desired and no need for a divorce would surely have prevented the Reformation's beginnings. Thus the significance of Cromwell's vision and execution in extirpating the Pope cannot be underestimated or denied.

With the Act of Supremacy Cromwell attempted to develop a permanent interdependent relationship between King and Parliament, but this time Henry stopped his minister's ambitious nature and cunning from eroding his power as King. The precise wording of this act (no doubt much against Cromwell's private wishes) effectively made Henry a dictator and even the Church could now not escape his hand. The Royal Supremacy's primary consequence was in making the secular arm of power dominant over its ecclesiastical rival. For the first time in centuries the Church in England could not be seen as a legitimate challenger to the monarchy or an alternative source of power. It must be noted though that Cromwell failed to pass this act as he wholly intended. It shows that Henry was not blindly led through the break with Rome and that he was astute enough to recognise what would be in his best interests (he himself was a 'theologian' after all). Whether Henry knew it or not, both were working towards different objectives, but it was Cromwell who had to on occasions compromise, not Henry. Cromwell had to at the same time please and appease his King – not the other way around.

For all Cromwell's cunning, Henry could still see what was best for him rather than his minister. Wolsey had often been left to work alone but Cromwell always had the king's eye never far away. However Cromwell got his own back so to speak when he was appointed vicegerent (the lay equivalent of a papal legate). What legal powers belonged to the King he now also exercised. Within days Cromwell was using this newly found authority to lay the preparations for a campaign that would change the face of the English countryside and "destroy the last possible refuge of papalism." 5Although Henry often told of his desires to clean up the church, gaining the wealth of England's monastic order was surely the primary incentive. The act of Supremacy allowed him to 'visit, extirp and redress.' In his name all three were done but it was the hand of Thomas Cromwell that dissolved the monasteries.

In 1535 Cromwell ordered his most trusted servants, among them Thomas Legh and Richard Layton, to compile information on and 'assess' England's monastic houses. The manner in which they undertook this mammoth task became infamous in its cynicism of the monasteries and the bullying of its nuns and monks. The tax-book that was eventually assembled became one of Cromwell's finest administrative achievements: the Valor Ecclesiasticus. However the traditional view that there were scandals and abuses to be found up and down the land has been proved to be an exaggerated claim with new evidence suggesting the majority of monasteries were honest and genuine in their work. To maximise the feeling of anticlericalism, Cromwell needed to use a line of attack that few before him were skilful enough to use let alone think of. The art of propaganda had rarely been used as

successfully; every major conceivable abuse was not only highlighted but exaggerated. In March 1536 an act was passed which resulted in the ordered dissolution of more than 200 smaller houses. With the uncompromising execution of this act, rumours began to circulate in the “backward and barbarous north” of exaggerated secular actions to iconoclast the church and impose taxes on services such as marriage and baptism.

Religious change was by no means the only cause of the notorious rebellion known as the Pilgrimage of Grace, but by the autumn of that year almost the entire north had sided with the rebels and were under arms. General consensus ever since Madeleine and Ruth Dodds’ two volume history of the rebellion has been that the majority of those who marched with Robert Aske under the five wounds of Christ, felt that their fundamental beliefs were being undermined by the fulfilment of this wicked policy. The oath of the honourable man, in which the rebels swore their allegiance to the King and indicated that the ‘men of low birth’ pay for their actions, shows that the dissolution was seen in the pew, as well as by many magnates of the north, as Cromwell’s doing rather than Henry’s. They demanded the King’s minister be handed over to the people and they infamously said of him, ‘we shall crumb him and crumb him till he is ever so crumbed.’ This cannot be treated as hard evidence for showing that Cromwell single handedly dissolved the monasteries but it shows the feelings of the time. Retribution after the rebellion eventually crumbled totalled almost 200 executions and it was said every village of the north was left with a hanging body as reminder of their folly. The question would there have been a rebellion on this scale without the dissolution of the monasteries is a straightforward no. Disorder as a

result of taxation and general economic hardship was rife throughout the turbulent dynasty, but at one point Aske had 30, 000 armed men just at Doncaster.

It was anarchism on a scale not seen in centuries, with most of it directed at Thomas Cromwell. The Pilgrimage of Grace and its ultimate collapse were defining points of the Reformation. The actual uprising showed the point when King and minister had effectively gone too far with the northern populace abandoning toleration to religious change. Its failings showed the population not to stand in the way of the ‘ rehabilitation’ of church and possibly paved the way for further reforms to meet less opposition. In March 1540, Waltham monastery surrendered and just four years after the first had done, England’s monasteries were gone. Cromwell’s achievement replenished the King’s financial resources and took the country that step further to Protestantism as a whole form of religion was smothered out with no opportunity to return. Monasteries are not essential components of Catholicism in general but for many at the time they were important aspects of their religion. Catholicism was further attacked with the publication of the Ten Articles in 1536 stating the ‘ new’ Church’s beliefs.

In common with early orthodox Lutheranism, it excluded four of the seven sacraments practised by the Catholic Church. Ardent Catholics understandably feared for the survival of their religion as legislation increasingly took just one direction: toward Protestantism. Parallels between northern Europe were all too easy to see.