**W.C. Abbott and the historical reputation of Oliver Cromwell**

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Wilbur Cortez Abbott is best known for his edition of Oliver Cromwell’s writings and speeches published by Harvard University Press between 1937 and 1947.[[1]](#footnote-1) This edition comprises 3,639 pages in four volumes, but over the years since it appeared scholars have become ever more conscious of its shortcomings. The usefulness of the edition is greatly reduced by the lack of tables of contents or running heads, and although it contains roughly 1,250 ‘texts’ it privileges those that were available at Harvard. Above all, Abbott often blended the different variants of a text together to create a single composite version without adequate explanation of how he did this or why he preferred certain readings to others.[[2]](#footnote-2) Such failings are all the more regrettable given that Abbott undoubtedly intended his edition to be definitive; indeed when it was published reviewers such as David Ogg, Ernest Barker and Godfrey Davies applied this very adjective to it.[[3]](#footnote-3) For Abbott, the project was the culmination of an engagement with the personality and career of Oliver Cromwell that spanned many years. This article will explore how Abbott’s interpretation of Cromwell’s character, motives and significance developed during the course of a long scholarly career, how Abbott influenced Cromwell’s historiographical reputation, and where the edition fitted into what became an almost obsessive interest in the Lord Protector.

Abbott was born on 28 December 1869 in Komono, Indiana, and graduated from Wabash College in Crawfordsville, Indiana, in 1892. He then embarked on graduate studies at Cornell, and spent two years in England which led to a B.Litt. at Balliol College, Oxford in 1897. On his return to America, he became instructor in history at the University of Michigan before moving to be associate professor at Dartmouth in 1899 and then professor at the University of Kansas in 1902. Six years later he became professor at Yale where he remained until 1920 when he was appointed Francis Lee Higginson Professor of History at Harvard. He continued to teach at Harvard until his retirement in 1937, after which he was a visiting professor at Columbia (1939) and a research associate at Yale (1939-41). The first volume of his Cromwell edition was thus published in the year of his retirement – also the year that the Cromwell Association was founded – and the last appeared in 1947, the year of his death. Indeed, he completed proof-reading the fourth volume very shortly before he died on 3 February 1947.[[4]](#footnote-4)

During the course of his career, Abbott published several books including monographs on *Colonel Thomas Blood, Crown-Stealer, 1618-1680* (Yale University Press, 1911), *Colonel John Scott on Long Island, 1634(?)-1696* (Yale University Press, 1918) and *New York in the American Revolution* (New York, 1929), as well as a widely used textbook *The Expansion of Europe: A History of the Foundations of the Modern World* (2 volumes, New York, 1918). He also produced two collections of essays: *Conflicts with Oblivion* (Harvard University Press, 1924) and *Adventures in Reputation* (Harvard University Press, 1935), each of which reprinted an essay on Oliver Cromwell.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Abbott clearly regarded himself as a teacher as much as a researcher, and in 1941 a dozen of his former students contributed to a *festschrift*, *Essays in Modern English History in honor of Wilbur Cortez Abbott* (Harvard University Press). In the Foreword, Charles Seymour wrote that ‘a principle that has characterized both’ Abbott’s ‘writing and his teaching’ was ‘a preoccupation with the human aspect of history. For him it is vital that in studying the men of the past, in their various activities and relationships, we should appreciate them as men and not merely as pieces on a chessboard whose moves we record’. This emphasis on ‘the human aspect of history’ may well help to explain why two of Abbott’s monographs were biographies, why virtually all his collected essays were studies of individuals, and why he ultimately came to focus so much of his scholarly attention on one particular historical figure in the form of Oliver Cromwell. Seymour went on to note that Abbott’s ‘recipe for the production of historical students who would and could write was simple: broad reading and constant writing. He used to quote the remark of the Oxford don: “If we can only teach men to read and write we are satisfied”’.[[6]](#footnote-6) In reviewing this *festschrift*, one of Abbott’s most recent students who was not included in the volume, J.H. Hexter, had this to say: ‘The essays dedicated to Professor Abbott are random in subject and quality. Yet they are singularly appropriate to the man to whom they are inscribed. ... Professor Abbott has never had a group of disciples shining in the reflected glory of the master. There is no Abbott school of historians. Those who have worked with him stand on their own merit or fall by their own defects. Although there are no “Abbott men”, a student who has worked with Professor Abbott is – bad, mediocre, or good – his own man.’[[7]](#footnote-7) Certainly Hexter himself, throughout his career, was nothing if not his own man. Indeed, Hexter later claimed that it was Abbott who persuaded him that he needed a second initial and suggested that Hexter use Abbott’s own ‘spare’ middle initial ‘H’: one of Abbott’s less celebrated achievements was thus to contribute the ‘H’ to J.H. Hexter.[[8]](#footnote-8)

A further picture of Abbott in late career may be gleaned from an anonymous student article that appeared in the *Harvard Crimson* in October 1933. This began with the following image: ‘A short, squat, bowlegged manifestation of dignity is waddling up Mass. Avenue towards the Square. ... Pausing a moment, he will reach into his pocket, pick out the cigar he had not smoked during some faculty meeting and give it to the blind news dealer. Again the puff, the cane, and the bow legs swing into action, as their owner heads for home. Even the taxi men may smile. They know him. He is “the stout feller with the black stick who lives in the red house on Sparks St.”’. Abbott was ‘the Squire of Sparks St., the insatiable collector of this and that, the indefatigable narrator of faded stories, the here now admirer of Oliver Cromwell’. The article went on to give a glimpse of Abbott as a lecturer:

Professor Abbott is perfectly comfortable, perfectly at home on the lecture platform. He seats himself in a swivel chair, places his notes and his elbows on the desk, gives vent to a sigh, perhaps even a puff, and begins. Fifteen minutes contain a dignified, non-irritating drone, dedicated to the fact that Gladstone had gained a reputation as a great minister of finance. Then there may be an interruption. The professor will rub his eyes. He will give assurances that the following story is amusing. The story will consume five minutes. There will be renewed assurances that the story was amusing. The lecture will proceed.

The author of the article then observed that at his residence at 74 Sparks Street, ‘like Sir Christopher Wren, Wilbur Cortez Abbott has builded his own monument’. The house contained ‘all the evidence that one could need for an analysis of his mental processes’: ‘a beautiful collection of unused chessmen; sundry gargoyles stare out from his walls; there is a mug used at Nicky’s coronation [presumably a reference to the coronation of Tsar Nicholas II in May 1896]; framed on the wall hang a pair of European Court Fans; on a window seat, in the sun, sparkles a jewel handled Moorish Scimitar; and over there, in a glass case, is a death mask of Oliver Cromwell. Upstairs are the proud portraits of Cromwell and the collection of tools. In some dark closet hangs the Frock Coat, which the Professor will don each Sunday teatime.’ The author noted, finally, that ‘Professor Abbott’s interests also include Gilbert and Sullivan’s *Iolanthe*, the movies, Horticulture Exhibits, and Ping Pong’, and that ‘one is not startled when Professor Abbott attracts some student’s attention by planting the black stick firmly upon the latter’s abdomen.’[[9]](#footnote-9) Here, in short, we have a charming pen-portrait of Abbott as he appeared to a Harvard student writer some four years before the first volume of his Cromwell edition was published.

That edition was not by any means Abbott’s first publication on Cromwell. As early as 1913, he had published an article on ‘The Fame of Cromwell’ in the *Yale Review*. This was reprinted in 1924 in Abbott’s first collection of essays, *Conflicts with Oblivion*, a volume that was in turn reprinted in 1935. This essay is essentially a review of various assessments of Cromwell’s personality and career starting with his contemporaries and moving chronologically down to the early twentieth century. Abbott reprinted this essay again in 1947, at the end of the final volume of his edition (IV, 877-97), this time adding a new two-page concluding section that attempted to bring the essay up to date (IV, 897-9). These new pages were very much the product of a scholar writing in the mid-1940s. Abbott asserted that ‘however they differ from each other, all, or nearly all, of [the] latest evaluations of Cromwell have somewhere concealed within them the concept of dictatorship, whether “unwilling”, “reluctant”, “melancholy” or “sad” or whatever phrase is used to break the force of that unpleasant phrase which has become too common within the past two decades’ (IV, 897). Abbott went on to argue that ‘it is no mere accident that the past dozen years have seen an extraordinary number of books and articles about Cromwell in German. It is no mere accident that for perhaps the first time there have appeared contributions in Russian. It is no mere accident that comparisons have been made between Cromwell, Hitler and Mussolini’ (IV, 898). He elaborated on this general point in the following remarkable passage:

In the same fashion that Napoleon’s rise to power helped the people of the continent to understand Cromwell better, so the rise of an Austrian house-painter to the headship of the German Reich, of a newspaper editor-agitator to the leadership of Italy, and of a Georgian bandit to the domination of Russia, have modified our concept of Cromwell’s achievement, and perhaps our concept of his place in history. It may well be that, as in the past, another generation may see him in an even different light (IV, 898).

Abbott concluded that ‘such a man will always have his champions and his opponents. In him many and very different parties may see their ideal. But one thing seems certain: such a man contends not only with his own times but with succeeding generations; once he has entered his tomb he has only begun his struggle for his place in history’ (IV, 898-9).

We shall return to the development of Abbott’s view of Cromwell as a dictator a little later on when we examine more closely his edition of Cromwell’s *Writings and Speeches*. In the meantime, in 1929, Abbott produced his other major contribution to Cromwellian scholarship, namely his *Bibliography of Oliver Cromwell* (Harvard University Press). This was in many respects a more satisfactory intellectual achievement than his edition. It contains over 3,500 items, listed year by year since Cromwell’s lifetime, and the compilation of such a work, especially in the days long before internet search engines and electronic bibliographies, was a very significant accomplishment. In the preface to the *Bibliography*,[[10]](#footnote-10) Abbott asserted that ‘the stream of Cromwellian literature, which took its rise in the seventeenth century and then grew to such huge proportions, which dwindled somewhat during the eighteenth century and swelled again so greatly during the nineteenth, has shrunk so much in the past few years that it is perhaps fair to assume that the great bulk of such literature has appeared.’ The vast amount of work on Cromwell published since 1929 has given the lie to this statement, but at that date Abbott believed that Cromwell ‘offers a peculiarly good subject for the bibliographer at this time, as earlier he was a peculiarly good subject for the biographer’. He sought to bring to bibliography techniques that were analogous to those of the natural sciences and he hoped thereby ‘to make the knowledge of Oliver Cromwell at least as accessible as that of British lepidoptera or North American echinoderms, to neither of which’ he conceived it ‘to yield in importance or in interest’. We shall see that this analogy with scientific methods influenced Abbott’s approach to his edition of Cromwell’s *Writings and Speeches* as well. His *Bibliography* also contained, by way of introduction, an essay on ‘The Historic Cromwell’ which he subsequently reprinted in his 1935 collection *Adventures in Reputation* .[[11]](#footnote-11) This offered an overview of the various primary and secondary sources relating to Cromwell’s life, but as with his earlier essay on ‘The Fame of Cromwell’, also reprinted in that collection, Abbott’s discussion of how others had viewed Cromwell was combined with a curious reticence about his own opinions and interpretation.

It was only with publication of his edition of the *Writings and Speeches* that we can really chart the development of Abbott’s own views of Cromwell in detail. They were most clearly expressed in the prefaces to each of the four volumes and it is worth examining these in turn. It would be fair to say that many biographers, and some editors, fall into the trap of becoming too sympathetic towards – perhaps even too fond of – their subjects. In Abbott’s case this became less and less of a problem. Over time he came to regard Cromwell’s personality and career with growing distaste as he became ever more preoccupied with the parallels that he thought he discerned between Cromwell and the dictators of the 1930s and 1940s. Certainly he was far from alone in drawing such parallels.[[12]](#footnote-12) Writing in the *Saturday Review* in June 1934, Clive Rattigan described Cromwell as ‘a seventeenth-century Hitler-Mussolini rolled into one – the first exponent since classical times of a practical, all-absorbing dictatorship’.[[13]](#footnote-13) In December 1936, the Professor of Political Science in Cambridge, Ernest Barker delivered a lecture to a branch of the Deutsch-Englishe Gesellschaft in Berlin, which was published by Cambridge University Press the following year. Barker wrote that ‘the comparison between the German Führer and our English Protector is one which has been pressed on my attention not only in Germany, but also in England’, and his lecture concluded with an Epilogue in which he drew a series of comparisons between ‘the English Puritan Revolution and the German National Socialist Revolution’.[[14]](#footnote-14) That same year, 1937, saw not only the foundation of the Cromwell Association and the publication of the first volume of Abbott’s edition, but also the appearance of Maurice Ashley’s book *Oliver Cromwell: the Conservative Dictator*. Although Ashley insisted that ‘on the whole I have resisted the temptation to indulge in modern comparisons or analogies’, his interpretation of Cromwell was influenced by the contemporary category of ‘dictator’, as was evident both in the book’s sub-title and in the title that Ashley chose for his final chapter: ‘Death of a Dictator’.[[15]](#footnote-15)

In the prefaces to the four volumes of his edition, Abbott’s preoccupation with these contemporary parallels became steadily more dominant even though he claimed that he wished to remain as impartial as possible. In the preface to the first volume, covering the years 1599-1649, Abbott set out the overall aims of the edition (I, xiii-xx). ‘It is not the purpose of the compiler of these volumes’, he wrote, ‘to take sides in the long and acrimonious controversy which from the days of the great Protector to our own has raged about his motives, his aims, his character and his achievements; to traverse either the verdicts of Cromwell’s numerous admirers and apologists or those of any of his critics’ (I, xiii). Rather, the objective of the edition was ‘to set down as fully and as impartially as possible what Cromwell actually wrote and said, with such comments as may make those writings and sayings more intelligible in the light of their times and circumstances, and our own’ (I, xiv). Abbott’s aim was thus ‘to record, as fully, as dispassionately and as accurately as possible, what Oliver Cromwell wrote and said, set down the circumstances of those utterances, and draw from this and from a small infinity of other sources some explanation, however inadequate, of the Protector’s actions and his thoughts’ (I, xiv). Abbott explained that he was seeking ‘to make as nearly as possible a complete collection of Cromwell’s utterances, verbal and written’ (I, xv). In addition to the 225 letters and eighteen speeches in Thomas Carlyle’s 1845 edition, the 75 other documents subsequently added by Carlyle in revised editions, and the 185 letters which Mrs S.C. Lomas added for her 1904 edition, Abbott would include ‘more than seven hundred other items drawn from a great number of sources’ (I, xv). These new items consisted of ‘some five hundred and fifty documents previously printed but hitherto uncollected besides the material in Lomas-Carlyle; as well as some hundred and fifty not printed until now’. These included, ‘for the sake of completeness and continuity ... such lesser documents as warrants, commissions, passes and the like, of no great value in themselves but often contributing details of time or place or circumstance which have a certain measure of importance to the story as a whole’ (I, xvii). Abbott conceded that ‘it is impossible that such a collection should contain all the writings of Oliver Cromwell’, and that ‘there must have been many orders, notes, letters and commissions which have now disappeared’ (I, xviii).

The force of these statements has become ever more evident to subsequent scholars as well as to the editors of the new critical edition of Cromwell’s writings and speeches, currently in preparation for Oxford University Press. A major problem with the Abbott edition was that he attempted to make it appear as complete as possible whereas in fact it privileged those materials that he could access at Harvard: as John Morrill has written, ‘this is very much the Harvard libraries edition of Cromwell, with the advantages and disadvantages of that’.[[16]](#footnote-16) The political instability in Europe during the later 1930s and the approach of the Second World War can only have exacerbated this limitation which was in any case already apparent by 1937. Furthermore, in not setting out at all clearly his principles of selection or his criteria for inclusion and exclusion, Abbott created as many difficulties as he solved. This is especially true of categories such as warrants, commissions and passes where some appear because Abbott could set eyes on them, but they are only a fraction of those that survive. It was a valiant scholarly effort but it made for a problematic edition, and it is also clear from this preface that Abbott had completed all his proposed research for the whole edition by 1937. He gives total figures for the number of ‘texts’ that will be included and a further prefatory note explains that ‘owing to the circumstances of publication, it has seemed necessary to issue the first of these four volumes ... at this time rather than to await the conclusion of the entire work, which, it is hoped, will not be long delayed’ (I, xx).

If the preface to the first volume thus set out the general aims of the edition, the preface to the second volume, published in 1939, revealed much more about Abbott’s methodological assumptions. As with his *Bibliography*, he regarded the methods of natural scientists as a model. He wrote that the plan for the edition had been ‘first to gather all the evidence possible about its subject, then to set it down in chronological order, explaining, in so far as possible, the circumstances and events which might serve to make it more intelligible’ (II, xiii). Abbott asserted that ‘that is a method common enough among scientists, and there seems no reason why the phenomena of the life of a human being like Oliver Cromwell should not have at least as adequate a record as those of fauna generally reckoned far lower in the scale of animate nature, of which “life histories” the literature of biology is full’ (II, xiii). Following the nineteenth-century Germanic school of historical practice associated with Ranke, Abbott’s methods and epistemology were heavily influenced by the natural sciences. He admitted that ‘the scientific parallel is, of course, not complete as we know nothing of the emotional, ethical and moral qualities – if any – of molecules and protozoa’, but he nevertheless felt that ‘it may serve’ (II, xv). This premise in turn led him to accept the possibility of historical truth. Writing many decades before post-modernism, Abbott asked: ‘who can doubt that, imperfect as all human knowledge is, in history or in any other field, they represent, so far as may be, what we call the truth; or that truth in history is, in the last resolution, the product of what we call scholarship?’[[17]](#footnote-17) In reviewing this volume, Ernest Barker praised Abbott’s work as ‘likely to be, for many years, a mine for those who quarry to find the exact truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth’. Barker likewise lauded Abbott’s ‘singular objectivity’ that enabled him to speak ‘with the authentic voice of the scientific historian’. Likening him to Georges Cuvier, the early nineteenth-century French naturalist and zoologist, Barker welcomed Abbott’s ‘scientific method’ and the ‘*opus scientiae*’ that he had produced*.*[[18]](#footnote-18)

This second volume closed with Cromwell’s expulsion of the Rump Parliament in April 1653. As Abbott took stock at that point his increasingly negative view of Cromwell was evident: ‘The circle had come round at last to arbitrary power again, more arbitrary than before. Louis XVI to Napoleon, Louis Philippe to Napoleon III, Nicholas II to Stalin, Charles I to Oliver Cromwell, the tale is always the same. The dissolution of [the Rump] Parliament broke down the last pretence that England was a free Commonwealth ruled by a Parliament and a Council of State, more or less in accord with the people’ (II, 654-5). Abbott was dismissive of Cromwell’s own self-justifications and of subsequent attempts to exculpate him: ‘That he was merely an instrument in all of this, that he had no desire to play the part of dictator, that he was driven on by circumstances to this hard decision, that he had no other alternative, would have seemed absurd to many, if not most, of his contemporaries, friends and followers as well as enemies’ (II, 655). The uncertainty over Cromwell’s motives did not change the outcome of his actions. Abbott found it ‘difficult to believe that he was wholly devoid of that last infirmity of noble minds, ambition’, and insisted that ‘whether or not his motives were selfish, whether he sought power for himself merely for the sake of power; whether he was wholly unselfish and sought it as a means to further the divine will as it revealed itself to him; whether the vision came to him at the beginning or just as he neared the goal, in the long resolution of events the result was the same’ (II, 655). Abbott acknowledged the complex and at times contradictory nature of Cromwell’s personality: he ‘had in him qualities of both Prince and Pilgrim. It is not possible to believe that he was wholly black; it is difficult to believe, in the face of the evidence, that he was wholly white. Least of all is it possible to conceive of him as gray. ... He was, in short, a complex and elusive character, prince or pilgrim as the case might be, depending, in no small measure, on whether one takes his words or acts as the clue to his real character’ (II, 657). It seems that by 1939, as the world descended into war, Abbott was finding less and less to admire in Cromwell.

If volume II appeared in the year the Second World War began, the publication of volume III had to wait until the year it ended. In 1945, Abbott’s next preface adopted a more lugubrious tone. He had come to regard the Protectorate as the ‘earliest of modern experiments in dictatorship’ and he described England in that period as ‘a nation ... transformed from parliamentary monarchy to dictatorship’ (III, xiii). He felt that his edition, ‘far from painting the portrait of a hero’, might ‘even serve in some measure as a disillusionment’, for it tended to reveal ‘in the main, often a seemingly dull round of essential if insignificant detail’, and to show that Cromwell was ‘no less anxious to maintain his own position than to save his country or the world’ (III, xiv). In short, ‘even a hero cannot be heroic all the time; he cannot always be saving the world’ (III, xv). In addition to this view of Cromwell as a dictator, a further theme emerged with increasing force in this third volume, covering the years 1653-5, namely ‘that of a tired man, old almost before his time; in poor health; not seldom in bad temper; fighting what even he must sometimes have recognized as a losing battle against the spirit of the people he governed; feared, indeed, but certainly not loved or even universally admired; respected but more often hated; a weary Titan struggling toward his goal ... a tired, ill and harassed old man’ (III, xv). Perhaps these last phrases reflect something of how Abbott himself felt by this stage of the project. In his review of this volume, Barker cited this passage and wrote: ‘one wonders whether Professor Abbott is not here looking at Oliver through spectacles – the spectacles of a contemporary age of dictatorships (now lying in ruins), the spectacles, perhaps, of his own personal disillusionment’.[[19]](#footnote-19)

As this third volume drew to a close in October 1655, Abbott reflected that Cromwell ‘had now held the “supreme power” for some two years and a half, but however he may have appeared to foreign contemporaries, or to posterity, all the evidence we have goes to show the great and increasing dissatisfaction with the situation in which the country found itself under his government. ... England did not like a dictatorship’ (III, 893). Abbott felt that during 1655, the year which saw the Western Design and the establishment of the Major-Generals, Cromwell ‘embarked on the last resource of dictatorship, military rule and foreign adventure. ... He had failed in his great dream of reconciling the country to the substitution of some other system in place of parliamentary monarchy, even Stuart monarchy. It remained to be seen...what could be done to maintain the power he had won, and what measures, if any, could be found to perpetuate it once he was gone’ (III, 893-4).

The fourth volume, covering 1655-8, appeared shortly after Abbott’s death in 1947. He had lived just long enough to finish correcting the proofs, and the volume ended with the forceful new pages on Cromwell as a dictator quoted earlier (IV, 897-9). Abbott advanced a similar view in the preface to this volume in which he described the Protectorate as a ‘military dictatorship’ (IV, xiii). He argued that Cromwell ‘was a military dictator whose rule was more distasteful to the men of his own time – even in his own party – than even the Stuart “tyranny” which it replaced’, and that ‘his immediate methods and results were not so different from those of the dictatorships of our own time as we should like to think’ (IV, xiv). Abbott reflected that it had ‘been generally assumed that Cromwell was in favour of Parliaments; but nothing seems more apparent than that, in fact, he did not like them, that he took every means to avoid them, and that, when he was more or less compelled to summon them, he used every device to keep out of them any who seemed likely to oppose him, and that he had no hesitation in dissolving them when they ran counter to his plans’ (IV, xiv). Abbott again noted Cromwell’s ‘ill health and his failing powers’ during the later years of the Protectorate, and suggested that he was ‘fortunate’ in dying ‘at the moment that his reputation was secure’: ‘had he lived some years longer, it seems that not only could he not have improved his position but that he was in some danger of losing what he had gained’ (IV, xv). These points sum up the essence of Abbott’s interpretation of Cromwell: that this was a military dictator, a hater of Parliaments, and an ill and ageing man. It would be fair to say that more recent scholarship has vigorously challenged all three of these claims, especially in relation to the Protectorate to which Abbott devoted the last two of his four volumes. Cromwell’s historical reputation has to some extent been rescued from the increasingly pessimistic stance that Abbott adopted towards it.[[20]](#footnote-20)

It seems both sad and touching that Abbott died just after completing the proofs of the fourth and final volume of his Cromwell edition. Barker wrote that ‘it would almost seem as if Professor Abbott, by dint of living so long with Cromwell, had become disillusioned’, and added that ‘it is somewhat sad that Professor Abbott should have ended on this note of doubt and melancholy’.[[21]](#footnote-21) Yet, unlike his subject, Abbott at least died in the knowledge that his great project was complete. Sadly, it appears that if Abbott could not live without Cromwell, his wife, Margaret Ellen Smith Abbott (1870-1947), could not live without him. Although Mrs Abbott otherwise remains a very shadowy figure about whom little can be retrieved, we do know that she died a few weeks after her husband in 1947 and was buried with him in Crown Hill Cemetery in Indianapolis.[[22]](#footnote-22)

In many of his assumptions about history as a discipline, Abbott, born in 1869, was a man of the nineteenth century. His historical method – no less than his cane and his frock-coat – belonged to that era. The Rankean influence on Abbott was very strong, and Barker praised him as ‘a balanced scholar who ... just seeks to record what [Cromwell] actually was’, a form of words that closely resembled Ranke’s ideal of reconstructing the past ‘wie es eigentlich gewesen’.[[23]](#footnote-23) It was therefore somehow fitting that Abbott’s supreme historical interest was in a figure once described by S.R. Gardiner as ‘the national hero of the nineteenth century’.[[24]](#footnote-24) It was also ironic that Abbott did so much to try to erode the image of Cromwell as a liberal icon and to replace it with a much less attractive picture of a dictator. Abbott was a product of the nineteenth century who came to regard Cromwell as a forerunner of the dictators of the early and mid-twentieth century. Abbott thus presents an interesting illustration of the idea that every age rewrites the past in its own image. His dreams of creating a definitive Cromwell edition proved illusory, and the limitations of that edition suggest that a fresh examination of the relevant sources is both timely and necessary.

Indeed, when Oxford University Press a few years ago consulted twelve leading scholars about whether a new edition of Cromwell’s writings and speeches was needed, the scholars unanimously replied that it was a high priority. This led O.U.P. to commission a fresh edition in five volumes: the first three will contain the texts of Cromwell’s surviving writings and speeches in chronological order with contextual information and scholarly annotation, while the fourth and fifth volumes will be companion volumes offering a range of essays, a chronology of Cromwell’s life, maps, genealogies, and other appendices. It is expected that the edition will also be published on-line in O.U.P.’s Oxford Scholarly Editions Online. The Press invited John Morrill to be the general editor, and he assembled a team of volume editors – two per volume – comprising, in addition to himself, Andrew Barclay, Peter Gaunt, Laura Knoppers, Patrick Little, Micheál Ó Siochru, Jason Peacey and myself. A major grant from the Leverhulme Trust funded the appointment of Joel Halcomb, Elaine Murphy and Tim Wales, initially as Research Associates and now as editors. Each of them is associated with one of the first three volumes and works with the other two editors in preparing the texts for their respective volume. As well as this core editorial team, there is an advisory board of other specialists in the field, including Martyn Bennett, Jan Broadway, Colin Davis, Clive Holmes, Ann Hughes, Pádraig Lenihan and Blair Worden. Since the summer of 2011, the Project has had a designated office in the Cambridge History Faculty as well as its own website (<http://www.cromwell.hist.cam.ac.uk>).[[25]](#footnote-25)

This new edition is intended to present, with modern scholarly apparatus, all the surviving material that offers evidence of Cromwell’s ‘voice’. This in itself presents the editorial team with formidable challenges as to what to include and what to exclude. For example, it is not intended to give the full text of all the routine documents that Cromwell signed but did not himself write, or pro-forma documents such as warrants, although it may be possible to summarise the key information from such sources in calendar or tabular form. Wherever possible throughout the edition, we will be trying to establish the ‘best’ text of each letter or speech and then identify the variations with other versions. Sometimes, however, there are massive discrepancies and no way of determining the more ‘reliable’ version: Cromwell’s opening speech to Barebone’s Parliament on 4 July 1653 is a good example of this, and in such – hopefully not too numerous – cases we will have no alternative but to publish all the extant versions in full.

The exact nature of the problems facing the editors varies during the course of Cromwell’s career. The first volume, covering the period up to 1649, has to address the issue that many of Cromwell’s early letters exist only in later copies, the accuracy of which is often very difficult to establish. There are also complex problems surrounding what to do with the fragmentary summaries of speeches that Cromwell ostensibly delivered in the Long Parliament, especially in 1640-2, and the much fuller accounts of his contributions to the Army Debates of 1647, particularly those at Putney. For the second volume, spanning the years 1649-1653, the principal difficulty lies in the fact that Cromwell’s official campaign letters from Scotland and Ireland often only survive in multiple printed forms, such as pamphlets and newspapers, with sometimes as many as seven or eight variants. Then in the third volume, covering 1653-1658, we face the issue of what to do with the hundreds of letters and other documents that Cromwell signed as Lord Protector but did not actually compose.

In addressing these complex and intractable problems, we do at least have a number of very considerable advantages over Abbott. We can make full use of modern electronic aids for retrieving and comparing texts; we can work with a specially designed virtual forum for assembling, editing and discussing our documents; and we can harness our website to publicize the project, to appeal for help in finding material, and to set regular puzzles for interested readers. There is still a mountain to climb, but at least we are approaching it as a team effort, aided by modern technology, rather than in the Sisyphean fashion of Abbott’s labours.

Those labours, though flawed, were certainly not in vain, and there is still much of interest to be gleaned from reading Abbott’s edition and from locating it within its historiographical and political contexts, even if it was very far from being the definitive edition that he yearned to produce. One wonders, with a mixture of fascination and apprehension, what will be written about the present edition in seventy or eighty years’ time. If a study day is organised to mark the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the foundation of the Cromwell Association, in 2087, perhaps it will contain some critical reflections on our own current efforts. Maybe in retrospect they will come to seem as much a product of the early twenty-first century as Abbott’s edition was of the 1930s and 1940s.

1. W.C. Abbott (ed.), *The Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell* (4 vols., Cambridge, Mass., 1937-47; reprinted Oxford, 1988) [hereafter cited as Abbott, *WSOC*]. Throughout this article, page references to this edition will be given in parentheses in the body of the text. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. John Morrill, ‘Textualizing and Contextualizing Cromwell’, *Historical Journal*, 33 (1990), 629-39. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See the reviews of Abbott, *WSOC*, I, by David Ogg in *English Historical Review*, 53 (1938), 309-11, at 309; and by Ernest Barker in *American Historical Review* [hereafter cited as *AHR*], 43 (1938), 372-5, at 373; and Godfrey Davies’s review of Abbott, *WSOC*, II in *Journal of Modern History*, 13 (1941), 241-3, at 241, 243. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This biographical outline of Abbott’s career is based on the obituary in *AHR*, 52 (1947), 648-50, and on an anonymous article ‘Portraits of Harvard Figures: Wilbur C. Abbott, Francis Lee Higginson Professor of History’, *The Harvard Crimson* (19 October 1933). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Bibliography of British and Irish History, accessed on-line, 04/01/2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Essays in Modern English History in honor of Wilbur Cortez Abbott* (Harvard University Press, 1941), pp. ix, xii. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. J.H. Hexter, review of *Essays in Modern English History in honor of Wilbur Cortez Abbott*, in *AHR*, 47 (1942), 329-30, at 330. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. J.H. Hexter, ‘Call me Ishmael: Or a Rose by Any Other Name’, in *The American Scholar*, 52 (Summer 1983), 339-53, at 342-4. I am grateful to Clive Holmes for telling me that Hexter also recounted this story to him in person. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. ‘Portraits of Harvard Figures: Wilbur C. Abbott, Francis Lee Higginson Professor of History’, *The Harvard Crimson* (19 October 1933). Abbott’s collection of Cromwelliana, including the copy of the death-mask, is now in the Special Collections Department of the University of Virginia Library where it was deposited by his son, Charles C. Abbott, between 1973 and 1980: <http://ead.lib.virginia.edu/vivaxtf/view?docId=uva-sc/viu02896.xml>. I am grateful to Joel Halcomb for drawing this collection to my attention. Abbott’s teaching notes – mainly relating to British, European and American history from the late fifteenth century to the early twentieth – can also be found there, as can research notes and drafts for his monographs. I am grateful to Blair Worden for sending me a microfilm of this material. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. W.C. Abbott (ed.), *A Bibliography of Oliver Cromwell* (Cambridge, Mass., 1929), pp. vii-xi, from which the following quotations are taken. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Abbott (ed.), *Bibliography*, pp. xiii-xxviii; reprinted in Abbott, *Adventures in Reputation*, pp. 94-117. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See R.C. Richardson’s very helpful essay on ‘Cromwell and the inter-war European dictators’, in R.C. Richardson (ed.), *Images of Oliver Cromwell: Essays for and by Roger Howell, Jr* (Manchester, 1993), pp. 108-23. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Clive Rattigan, ‘The great Lord Protector’, *Saturday Review* (16 June 1934), p. 698; quoted in Abbott, *WSOC*, IV, 966. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ernest Barker, *Oliver Cromwell and the English People* (Cambridge, 1937), pp. 8, 71-96. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Maurice Ashley, *Oliver Cromwell: the Conservative Dictator* (London, 1937), pp. 7, 311. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Morrill, ‘Textualizing’, 630, n. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Abbott, *Adventures in Reputation*, p. 117. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ernest Barker, review of Abbott, *WSOC*, II, in *AHR*, 45 (1940), 859-60. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ernest Barker, review of Abbott, *WSOC*, III, in *AHR*, 51 (1945), 109-11, at 110. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. For a cross-section of recent work, see especially Barry Coward, *The Cromwellian Protectorate* (Manchester, 2002); Patrick Little (ed.), *The Cromwellian Protectorate* (Woodbridge, 2007); Patrick Little and David L. Smith, *Parliaments and Politics in the Cromwellian Protectorate* (Cambridge, 2007); Austin Woolrych, ‘The Cromwellian Protectorate: A Military Dictatorship?’, *History*, 75 (1990), 207-31, reprinted in David L. Smith (ed.), *Cromwell and the Interregnum* (Oxford, 2003), pp. 63-89; and Jason Peacey, ‘Cromwellian England: A Propaganda State?’, *History*, 91 (2006), 176-99. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ernest Barker, review of Abbott, *WSOC*, IV, in *AHR*, 53 (1948), 530-1, at 531. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=16258907. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Ernest Barker, review of Abbott, *WSOC*, I, in *AHR*, 43 (1938), 372-5, at 374. On Ranke’s phrase, see Richard J. Evans, *In Defence of History* (2nd edition, London, 2000), p. 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. S.R. Gardiner, *History of the Commonwealth and Protectorate, 1649-1656* (4 vols., London, 1903; reprinted Adlestrop, 1988), II, 151. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. This and the following paragraphs draw extensively on the descriptions of the aims and organisation of the new edition posted on this website. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)