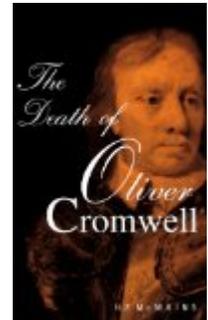


H.F. McMains. *The Death of Oliver Cromwell.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2000. xi + 252 pp. \$25.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8131-2133-8.



Reviewed by Stephen K. Roberts

Published on H-Albion (February, 2000)

The final fate of the constituent body parts of Oliver Cromwell has exercised many historians since the seventeenth century. H. F. McMains is the latest to join the ranks of those seeking to identify the Lord Protector's final resting-place, and on the way introduces a theory that Cromwell died as a result of poisoning administered by George Bate, who was his physician and a closet Royalist in touch with others plotting for the restoration of Charles II. It is an absorbing book, engagingly written; it certainly succeeds as a historical whodunnit, and there is plenty in the book to command the attention of the professional historian, as well as the general reader. The author handles his evidence well, deploys it to telling effect, and has an eye for a good quotation and an apt turn of phrase. At the heart of the book is the theory that Cromwell was poisoned, but there is inevitably much on the wider context, including the executions of the regicides in 1660, and the most detailed account I have read of the disinterment from Westminster Abbey of the bodies of the deceased regicides. The account the author provides of the execution of Col. Thomas Harrison, despite its being a frequently-narrated event,

made this reviewer feel distinctly queasy, which has to be some sort of tribute.

The three main 'findings' of this account are that the corpse of Henry Ireton, Cromwell's son-in-law and Lord Deputy of Ireland, was interred in Ireland and not transported to Westminster Abbey, as commonly believed; that the Lord Protector was poisoned in a Royalist conspiracy; and that Cromwell's corpse was buried in the yard of the Red Lion Inn, rather than flung into the common pit at Tyburn. Historians and readers of history love conspiracy theories, and here there are at least four in play. First there was a conspiracy to conceal from the public the true nature of the procession supposedly carrying Ireton's body through western and southern England in 1651. Then there were: the royalist conspiracy to poison Cromwell, the conspiracy to procure a body to 'impersonate' that of Ireton when it was disinterred, and the conspiracy to protect Cromwell's corpse from its final indignities. The first theory is implausible, not least because no convincing evidence is marshaled by the author to support it. The regicide, Edmund Ludlow, who was in a posi-

tion to know the truth, even if he was not present at Ireton's death, recorded in his memoirs the disgust he and fellow religious radicals felt at the pomp of Ireton's funeral. Ludlow's comment that Ireton might have given explicit directions about his own funeral, and ordered for himself a burial in Ireland had he known the intentions of those who undertook it, is here made to read like some kind of code for an indication that Ireton was actually buried in Ireland. As is well-known, there are problems surrounding the text of Ludlow's memoirs, but without further evidence it is unwarranted to infer from them that Ludlow was party to a conspiratorial burial to defy Cromwell's grandiose funeral plans for his son-in-law. Mr. McMains suggests at one point (p. 55) that Ludlow 'suspected' a plot; by p. 149, Ludlow 'knew about the secret burial'. The author contends that those who went to disinter Ireton's corpse from the Abbey kept the non-existence of his coffin secret, then procured a body from some (unidentified) 'resurrection men' to act the part. There is no evidence whatever for the existence of the 'resurrectionists', and the author provides no motive for the suggested conspiracy by the serjeant-at-arms of the House of Commons to procure a corpse, beyond the gnomic comment (p. 150) that his 'not to have done so would have raised questions that no one in 1661 was prepared to answer.'

Neither the theory that Ireton was buried secretly in Ireland, nor the corresponding contention that his corpse was absent from the 1661 disinterments is new. Both were aired by F. J. Varley in a book of 1939 (not 1936, as it appears in Mr McMains's bibliography). The notion that Cromwell's corpse, plus or minus its head, was buried somewhere other than Westminster Abbey goes back to the time of the events themselves. For a short overview of all these tales, readers should consult Peter Gaunt, 'Tyburn and beyond: the mortal remains of Oliver Cromwell', *Cromwelliana* (1986-7), a piece apparently not seen by Mr McMains. He is also unaware of some

previous informed speculation about Cromwell's final illness and death, by Dr. (medical doctor) C. H. Davidson, first published in the *Proceedings of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh* (1988). Dr. Davidson's view was that Oliver died of 'a gram negative septicaemia secondary to urinary tract infection'. This is a more prosaic diagnosis than Mr McMains's poisoning by George Bates. The problem with the latter suggestion is a political, rather than a medical one. There were various Royalist networks on the continent of Europe, keeping in touch with plotters in England. None of them seems to have known about the poisoning, and if they did, they were incredibly slow to take advantage of it. If there was a poisoning, surely it was by a single poisoner, acting alone. This resonance with the most famous conspiracy of modern history will suggest why this book is intriguing and worth reading. But as Peter Gaunt concluded, in his shorter survey of the same ground, Cromwell himself would not have worried overmuch about his own remains; his chaplain thought he 'never had so poor a low thought in him to trouble himself about [it]'.

Copyright (c) 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion>

Citation: Stephen K. Roberts. Review of McMains, H.F. *The Death of Oliver Cromwell*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. February, 2000.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3793>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.