

Abstract

This thesis is a groundbreaking examination of the English Church under Oliver Cromwell. It provides the first detailed and comprehensive analysis of the work of his Commission of 'Triers', who were appointed to recruit clergy to a hard-pressed ministry and to enforce new standards of godliness. The thesis explains the origins of this initiative against the confusing political context of events in the 1640s, the abolition of the episcopalian Church of England, the work of the Westminster Assembly, the deep divisions resulting from fundamental ecclesiological arguments, and the collapse of former mechanisms for appointing ministers. More broadly, it demonstrates that the Triers were only one aspect of a religious programme developed to respond to the longstanding problems that faced the Cromwellians, when they took power in 1654, relating in particular to administrative breakdown, patronage, finance, the viability of livings, pluralities, and disagreements over the role of the state.

The Triers kept a series of Registers, which recorded all the ministers they approved for benefices between 1653 and 1659, together with the names of their patrons and referees. These Registers provide an astonishingly rich snapshot of clerical networks at this critical period, yielding some 24 000 names and accompanying details. It is an extensive and statistically robust archive but one that is also complex and difficult to interrogate, which accounts for its neglect hitherto. To enable this research, the contents have been entered into a relational database constructed for this study, which is the only means of handling the wealth of names, dates and relationships. It has facilitated a wide-ranging

investigation of the chronological and geographical patterns of clerical recruitment, an assessment of the radical changes to ecclesiastical patronage, and an analysis of the range of clergy permitted to hold positions in the Cromwellian Church. It has also exposed the previously hidden networks of men who knew and supported these clergy.

In particular, this thesis offers two major breakthroughs. In the first place, it argues that the Cromwellian religious programme has been misunderstood and it offers a new interpretation of their response to the problems they faced. It demonstrates that the importance of the Triers and Ejectors has been exaggerated in relation to other critical players, such as the Trustees for the Preaching Ministry. It also demonstrates that the whole programme was under-resourced and based on inadequate legislation, weaknesses which led, paradoxically, to a church that was more tolerant than that which operated before 1640 or was restored in 1660, and in which a broad diversity of religious opinion was able to flourish.

Secondly, it provides an important analysis of the results of the ecclesiastical reforms undertaken by the Cromwellians across the duration of the Protectorate, comparing the evidence of their achievements against the legislative intention. In doing so, it provides the first detailed understanding of the process and personnel involved in the creation of the Cromwellian ministry.

In addition, this thesis makes important contributions to several wider historiographical debates. It reveals the previously unrecognised breakdown of ecclesiastical administration in the early 1650s. It adds detailed information to

the imperfect understanding of the clerical profession in the mid-seventeenth-century. It provides new information on Cromwell's personal involvement in the creation of his church and his practice of ecclesiastical patronage. It contextualises and supplements recent work on underground episcopalianism during the 1650s. Finally, it argues that, far from being an aberration in the development of the Church of England in the seventeenth-century, the church of the 1650s both drew on existing practices and experimented with new initiatives that had a lasting impact on the Restoration church and the experience of nonconformity after 1660. By opening up the events and personnel of the church that preceded it and from which it drew a hitherto unknown number of serving ministers, this thesis offers the potential for a revision of aspects of the character of the Restoration church.