Historical fact and fiction

All the king’s men

A scrupulous biography offers an alternative version of Hilary Mantel’s hero

W

alter cromwell, father of Henry

VIII’s right-hand man Thomas,

lurches drunkenly through the early

scenesofHilaryMantel’s“WolfHall”,deal-

ing out kicks, punches and curses to his

put-upon son. He bursts a boot on Thom-

as’s head and then chastises him for vomit-

ing. Walter is a Putney brewer who waters

down his beer; he is also a farrier and a

blacksmith (although, because of his “sour

breath, or his loud voice, or his general way

of going on,” the horses are afraid of him).

In Ms Mantel’s telling, young Thomas is

energised by the pressing need to escape

his domineering dad. Played with brutal

panache by Christopher Fairbank in the re-

cent television adaptation, Walter is firmly

established in the minds of the millions

who have encountered him on the page or

the screen as one of history’s villains.

In fact, as Diarmaid MacCulloch’s defin-

itive biography of Thomas Cromwell dem-

onstrates, this ferocious image is largely

bunkum. Walter was certainly a brewer in

Putney, but the rest is either the stuff of Ms

Mantel’s imagination, or of what Mr Mac-

Culloch terms the “wildly untrustworthy

research” of John Phillips, a sensationalist

Victorian historian. In his lucid, forensic

style, Mr MacCulloch shows that the 48

charges apparently filed against Walter

Cromwell-Smith in the court rolls of the

Manor of Wimbledon are not testimony to

his infamy, nor to his beer-watering, but

rather to the way licences to sell ale were is-

sued. The “Smith” in his surname in the pa-

perwork is, incidentally, the only evidence

for his career as a blacksmith.

Walter’s character is a detail in the

sweep of his son’s life, but it illustrates the

challenge that Mr MacCulloch’s book faces

and the calm, quietly impressive manner

in which he deals with it. The problem, of

course, is Ms Mantel, and the wildfire suc-

cess of both “Wolf Hall” and “Bring Up the

Bodies”; the third novel in her trilogy is due

to be published next year. As with the de-

monic Richard III of Shakespeare’s play,

these books have fixed in the contempo-

rary consciousness an image of Thomas

Cromwell and his milieu that, like a domi-

nant plant, has displaced all others. It has

come to be seen not just as the real story of

Cromwell’s life, but the only story.

Mr MacCulloch writes of the “mounting

weariness” with which Ms Mantel, a friend

of his, responds to those seeking in her

portrayal of Cromwell a representation of

historical fact rather than an act of imagi-

nation.Hesayshisbookisdifferent, in that

it “invites you, the reader, to find the true

Thomas Cromwell of history, by guiding

you through the maze of his surviving pa-

pers.” Considering the two exemplary au-

thors alongside one another extends a fur-

ther invitation to readers: to assess the

strengths and limitations of their crafts,

andcomparethekindsofinsights at which

thenovelistandthehistorianaim.

Cromwell(playedontelevision by Mark

Rylance, pictured above) is the right man

forthisjob.Hishasalwaysbeen a shifting,

multi-faceted reputation. In the centuries

since his rise and grisly fall, he has been re-

garded as a pragmatic arch-bureaucrat; a

Machiavellian eminence whose machina-

tions enabled Henry’s break with the

church of Rome and the king’s despotism; a

jumped-up thug bent on self-advance-

ment; or the principled architect of the par-

liamentary system. Quite possibly he was

all of these things and more, a complex po-

litical man keen to nurture the legend of

himself as an enigma. He lived in an era

when record-keeping was expanding expo-

nentially, partly because of his own mania

for documentation. Yet as Mr MacCulloch

points out, any effort to reconstruct his life

must contend with a “vast absence.”

When Cromwell was arrested in 1540,

his papers were seized. Owing either to the

alacrity of his staff or an oversight by his

enemies, only the correspondence he re-

ceived was taken; the copies he kept of his

own letters may have been burnt. Unlike

Thomas More, his canonised rival who pre-

ceded him to the scaffold, little in Crom-

well’s own hand survives.

This accounts for some of the lacunae in

Mr MacCulloch’s book, and the sometimes

dazzling feats of historical sleuthery he

employs to fill them. At one point he goes

in search of the “one letter” that will reveal

“the obscure end of a little Augustinian pri-

ory in north Wales” during the violent dis-

solution of the monasteries, which Crom-

well oversaw. The gap may partly explain

the manner in which Ms Mantel ventrilo-

quises her protagonist. She fashions an ee-

rie third-person voice for him, neither an-

tiquated nor gratingly modern, rather than

using the first person, so that her Cromwell

is above all an observer.

The absence also opens up the question

of moral judgment, and of sympathy. Natu-

rally, novels are often expansive in their

sympathies, and call upon the reader’s

imagination as well as the author’s. At the

same time, partiality is inherent in tradi-

tional storytelling, which pins down one

account of events to the exclusion of oth-

ers. As Ms Mantel said in a lecture in 2017,

readers of historical fiction are “actively re-

questing a subjective interpretation” of the

evidence. It was her job to settle on a single

narrative strand and follow it to its conclu-

sion. Conversely, as the tangents and en-

tertaining footnotes that Mr MacCulloch

provides for almost every detail and anec-

dote attest, non-fiction allows for multiple

versions of the past. Where the novelist’s

first loyalty is to the story, and then to her

perception of human nature, historians

must privilege the truth.

All seasons and none

Both authors share a common source in the

work of G.R. Elton, who recognised in “The

Tudor Revolution in Government” that

Cromwell was the key player of his political

age (Mr MacCulloch disagrees with Elton

on the extent to which Cromwell moder-

nised the bureaucracy of government). It is

easy to forget that the admiring portrait of

Cromwell offered by both Mr MacCulloch

and Ms Mantel is itself a revisionist view.

The Encyclopaedia Britannica of 1911

claimed Cromwell’s “power has been over-

rated”; pro-More partisans long contrasted

their saintly hero with the base, avaricious

Cromwell, most memorably in Robert

Bolt’s play “A Man for All Seasons”. “Thom-

as Cromwell: a Life” conducts an extended

dialogue both with Ms Mantel’s novels and

Elton’s scholarship.

An enthusiastic cover blurb by Ms Man-

tel declares that this is “the biography we

have been awaiting for 400 years.” She her-

self takes most of the credit for the Crom-

well vogue. Still, it says something about

both the inscrutability of the man and the

ultimate opacity of history that even with

Mr MacCulloch’s exhaustive research—to

add to more than a thousand pages that Ms

Mantel has penned so far—Cromwell, ever-

slippery, feels just out of reach.