

HEADS OF STATE

Virginius Hall

April 30, 2012

The morning was cold, bitterly cold. A skim of ice had formed on the river. Clearly, he must wear two shirts. Although the walk from St. James's to Whitehall was just a short one, he mustn't catch a chill. He mustn't shiver. The mob would think he was afraid - would think he was trembling. Yes, this morning, this last morning, as he walked to the scaffold, he would wear two shirts. He mustn't shiver. They would think he was afraid.

And, in fact, he didn't shiver. On that morning, January 30, 1649, he crossed St. James's Park with a resolute stride. Charles Stuart, a tiny figure, small-boned and only five foot four inches tall, could hardly be seen, surrounded, as he was, by the escort of tall soldiers. Yet this diminutive man, Charles the First, king England and Scotland, was responsible, so his enemies said, for a civil war and its disastrous aftermath - a period that had torn England apart and set family against family. Who governed the nation, King or Parliament? That was the central issue. It took civil war to resolve it, and then it wasn't really resolved. And let's not forget religion, then as now as explosive as TNT. The king, despite his having promised repeatedly to uphold the Church of England, was accused of playing footsy with the Roman Catholics, endangering, so it seemed, the future of Protestantism in England. And one couldn't overlook the fact that the queen, Henrietta Maria, was a French princess who was openly Catholic. In the minds of half the nation, Charles was getting ready to give England back to Rome.

The Royalists dismissed these fears as nonsense. The disastrous Civil War hadn't been the king's fault; it had been caused by an out of control Parliament supported by military types and Puritan fanatics. Parliament's army, led by tough soldiers such as Thomas Fairfax and Oliver Cromwell, had

prevailed on the field of battle; now they were taking over the government and turning the world upside down. Didn't they know that rulers ruled by divine right? Didn't they know that God had put Charles on the throne? By what authority were the Puritans attempting to replace the ruler God had chosen with one of *their* choosing? Not just *replacing!* There was even talk of putting God's Chosen One to death. As both Anglicans and Puritans were aware, the willful murder of someone sent to earth by God had frightening parallels with the central story of the Gospels. Everybody in Christendom knew that story, but in its modern, English context it seemed far more complicated. Englishmen were divided. They were jumpy, and with good reason.

During the course of a long war, Parliamentary forces had proved themselves superior to the Royalists. Over and over they had routed the king's men on the field of battle, and in June of 1647 they had captured the ultimate prisoner: the king himself. During the following eighteen months the royal prisoner was moved from place to place while Parliamentary leaders discussed the future of the nation: what its form of government was to be, what to do with the defeated yet still fervent Royalists, and still more important what to do with the king. At last they decided to try King Charles before a hand-picked Commission of the High Court of Justice. The trial took place in Westminster Hall in late January, 1649. The king, made no attempt to defend himself, maintaining that the Commission was not a legal court of law, and therefore it had no right to conduct a trial. The verdict was a foregone conclusion. On January 27, John Bradshaw, the presiding officer, delivered a lengthy tirade against the king's refusal to recognize the court, then called for the Clerk to read sentence. The clerk, after first reciting a list of the king's supposed crimes, continued with these words: "For all which treasons and crimes, this court doth adjudge that he, Charles Stuart, as a tyrant, traitor, murderer and public enemy to the good people of this nation, shall be put

to death by the severing of his head from his body.”
(Edwards, p. 153).

Beyond this sketchy summary of what led up to the king’s execution, it is not my purpose to discuss the events of 1642-49 or to examine the issues of the English Civil War. Instead, let me pick up the story where we began, with Charles I, the condemned man, on his way to his execution, then follow it up with another story, about the death and funeral of the man who sent him to the block: Charles’s successor, Oliver Cromwell. So let’s return to that cold January morning in 1649 when the diminutive king set out across the park to meet the God who had put him on the throne but had failed to keep him there.

King Charles did in fact wear two shirts and his teeth did not chatter. He appeared calm and in possession of himself as he walked across the park. Much of the previous twenty-four hours he had spent at his desk putting his affairs in order, and on his knees in quiet prayer. He had written to his wife, safe in France, and to his two eldest sons, also safely beyond the reach of his enemies. His two younger children, aged nine and thirteen, had been brought to say their tearful good-byes. They, like their father, were being held captive by the new regime. That morning, the day of his execution, he had awakened at his accustomed time. He distributed keepsakes to those who had been with him during the days of his captivity, then, in his last private moments, he received the sacrament from the hands of the Bishop of London according to the rites of the Church of England. Composed and at peace, he was waiting when the summons came for the walk across the park to Whitehall, the place of execution. During the night, a platform had been constructed there, just outside the Banqueting House, a stage whereon a cast was assembling to play out the last brief act of the seven-year drama.

Arriving at Whitehall a few minutes before ten, the king was held in his former bedchamber while final preparations were made. Of these, the most troublesome had turned out to be finding an executioner. Those in charge had spent a busy day and night trying to find a competent professional willing to do the beheading. Normally, headsman were untroubled by their calling – a job's a job. But killing a king was another matter. Payments of increasing size had been offered and rejected, till at last, as the fatal hour approached, promises had given way to threats. Informed that if he did not do the deed he would himself be beheaded, a reluctant headsman and his no less reluctant assistant gathered their gear, and were frog-marched to the spot. Through the night and morning a crowd had been gathering outside the Banqueting House. Yet those staging the event didn't want the people to see too much. Armed guards kept the crowd well back from the raised stage, and the railings that surrounded it were hung in black cloth, thereby concealing all but the upper parts of the persons on it. The spectators, many of whom harbored Royalist sympathies, were to be kept at a distance so they couldn't hear the final words of their sovereign or to see the actual beheading.

At about 1:30 in the afternoon, when all was in readiness, an armed guard came to the royal apartments. King Charles and his attendants were escorted outside into the winter air, then entered the Banqueting House, which still stands, and some of you, I'm sure, have seen. It was designed by Inigo Jones for James I, and the ceiling in its beautiful central chamber was decorated by Rubens. On the day in question, Execution Day, it was packed with officials, foreign ambassadors, and of course, a multitude of armed soldiers, the backbone of the new regime. All fell silent as the king passed through, and in the silence could be heard the murmured prayers of many who had come to witness the event. A window had been removed, leaving an open space through which the king and those who attended him emerged directly onto the raised stage. Here Charles would

have seen the large crowd of spectators, and would have realized that, held back, as they were, by a cordon of soldiers, they were well beyond the reach of his voice. Clearly, he was to be denied the hallowed right of the condemned man to address the crowd.

So, too, the king remarked that the block on which he soon would lay his head, was not an ordinary block. This one was only six inches high, which meant he couldn't kneel in front of it, as was customary, but would be forced to lie prostrate on the floor. He remonstrated, but was told that nothing could be done. Nor could he have failed to notice the staples on either side of the block, installed to secure him should he resist or put up a fight. How little his enemies knew of Charles that they should imagine he would struggle or create a scene!

Although well aware that his words would be inaudible to the crowd, the king then delivered a speech in which he professed devotion to the nation and its people, adherence to the Church of England, and forgiveness for those who had condemned him to death. This concluded, he spoke a few words to the executioner and his assistant, both of whom wore the traditional masks, beards and wigs that concealed their identities. Charles then lay on the floor, his head on the block, and when he gave a sign the executioner, with one blow, severed his head from his body. The assistant executioner seized the head and raised it aloft for the people to see, but forgot (or deliberately omitted) the traditional cry: "Behold! The head of a Traitor!" On seeing the head, the crowd, silent during the moments leading up to the execution, uttered a deep groan. The high emotion of the moment was not to be prolonged. The deed was done. The king was dead. Parliamentary horse soldiers moved in smartly to clear the area.

On the stage the sudden release of tension brought about an unseemly collapse of discipline. Before the king's body could

be lifted from where it lay, soldiers and others close to the scene began scrambling to collect souvenirs. The king's shirt was ripped into small, then smaller, pieces, hair was cut from the severed head, some people even gathered the bloody sand from around the block and tried to pry up the blood-stained boards from the floor.

When the king's attendants gained possession of the king's body they placed it in the pine coffin that had been provided, and carried it to a room in Whitehall. There the Army's Surgeon General, Thomas Trappan, took charge of embalming it and preparing it for burial. The procedure included sewing the head back onto the body. While this was taking place Oliver Cromwell stopped by to look at the corpse, and to inform those who were grieving over it that Parliament would let them know in due course where and how the body was to be buried.

The king lay for several days in a new, lead-lined coffin at St. James's Palace. Although many people sought permission to view the body – the coffin was open – Parliament refused virtually all such requests. Vigil was kept by a handful of sympathetic noblemen. At last instructions came down from Parliament. The new government refused to allow the king's body to be buried in Westminster Abbey, but authorized its removal to Windsor Castle. Because there was still the possibility of a public demonstration, the orders specified that the body be removed under cover of darkness. Thus, on a cold night early in February a hearse attended by a small retinue left St. James's Palace for the trip to Windsor. The next day at Windsor the king's attendants searched the royal chapel for a suitable burial place. A hollow sound in the floor of the choir, suggested there might be an empty space close to the coffins of Henry the Eighth and his third wife, Jane Seymour. When a section of the floor was taken up this proved to be the case, and workmen prepared the area to receive the king's coffin. The next day, around three o'clock in the afternoon, the coffin was borne out of the castle. It is

just a short distance to the chapel, but before the funeral procession reached it, snow began to fall. By the time they entered the chapel the pall covering the coffin was white. Because Parliament had forbidden the attending clergy to use the Anglican office for the burial of the dead, the funeral was conducted in complete silence. Perhaps some of you have been to Windsor Castle, and seen in St. George's Chapel a small inscription on the floor in front of the altar; all it says is: "King Charles. 1649."

Such were the emotions of many Royalists toward those who had murdered their king, that within weeks rumors began circulating that Cromwell's men had stolen the king's body, denying him Christian burial. The rumor proved a persistent one. In the early years of the 18th century, sixty years after the event, the antiquarian Thomas Hearne passed on this bit of hearsay: a friend of his

had received it from very good hands that K[ing] Charles I's body was never put into that coffin that was buried at Windsor, but that this coffin was filled with stones and other trumpery, and that the body was really buried under a dunghill [*The Remains of Thomas Hearne*. Carbondale, ILL, 1966. p. 162]

The rumor proved so durable that as late as 1813, more than 150 years after the king's death, it was decided to put the matter to rest once and for all. Investigators received permission to exhume the body, which was done in the presence of King George IV. When the coffin was raised and opened, the remains inside were confirmed as undoubtedly those of the executed king.

A short time after Charles's execution a book started circulating in Royalist circles. It was passed around with caution, for the new government had outlawed it. Purportedly written by the late king himself, it bore the title *Eikon Basilike; The Portraiture of his Sacred Majesty in His*

Solitudes and Sufferings. The book, popularly called "The King's Book," explained events from the king's perspective. It confirmed the Royalist position that Christian rulers ruled by God's will, and that those who opposed them risked divine retribution. Although the book was considered treasonable by the newly formed Puritan government, it went through no fewer than 39 editions in the months just after the king's execution. Of these editions, those printed in miniature were particularly popular for they could be easily hidden.

With its popularity and many re-printings, the King's Book, proved so influential that Cromwell's government decided to issue a rebuttal. It commissioned no less a scholar than John Milton, a fervent Parliamentarian, to undertake the work. The result, which bore the title *Eikonoclastes*, may have been a sound piece of scholarship, but it failed to match the emotional appeal of the book it was trying to discredit.

Royalists loyal to the memory of the Stuarts and to high-church Anglicanism, have kept the memory of the executed king alive over the centuries. A cult developed around the person of King Charles, and relics of his execution took on an almost religious significance. The objects gathered in that unseemly scramble on the scaffold, became objects of veneration, displayed in reliquaries. A day in his memory was long observed by the Church of England; it was not dropped from the Book of Common Prayer until 1859. And even today his death is remembered. As recently as two years ago an exhibition in London displayed relics of his martyrdom. The exhibits included wisps of the king's hair, the chalice from which he received the sacrament on the morning of his beheading, a fragment of the shirt he wore, and a piece of the black velvet pall that covered his coffin.

Less than a month after the king's death Parliament officially abolished both the monarchy and the House of Lords. Henceforth, it proclaimed, the nation would be governed as

a Commonwealth. In 1653 Oliver Cromwell assumed the mantle of authority, calling himself Lord Protector. Of course there was still much Royalist opposition, now driven underground, which believed the nation had replaced a ruler appointed by God with a ruler appointed by a not very savory Parliament. The new government drew its authority, in theory at least, from the tenets of Puritan Christianity. But the austerities imposed by a regime grounded in this restrictive creed did not find favor with everybody. Theaters were closed, public holidays outlawed, and churches were whipped into conformity. By invoking the inflammatory word "popery," Cromwell cleansed the Anglican Church: smashing stained glass, burning vestments and altar crosses and replacing Anglican liturgy with the impromptu devotions preferred by his followers. With the help of a network of government informers England was frozen for nine years in the grip of a state-run theocracy.

Then, on September 3, 1658, Oliver Cromwell died in his bed in Whitehall Palace.

With this formidable corpse on their hands the officers of the Commonwealth found themselves in a quandary. There had never before been a Lord Protector. There certainly had never before been a dead one. What was to be done? Who was to succeed him, and what kind of send-off was the nation to give a Head of State whom half the people loathed, and most of the other half had fallen out of love with? Custom decreed there be two funerals for a public figure: one private, the other public. The private one removed with all dispatch the decomposing body; the public one exalted the memory of the deceased at whatever length those in charge thought appropriate. Clearly, a corpse could not remain unburied for the weeks, perhaps months, needed to arrange a state funeral. It would take a long time for word to get to foreign capitals, and for foreign representatives to make the trip. In Cromwell's case, there was another, more practical, reason for a speedy burial.

When Cromwell's physician, Dr. George Bate, confirmed that the Lord Protector had, in fact, breathed his last, those who had kept vigil 'round his bed showed little reluctance in leaving the room. For it had been clear for some hours that something was badly amiss. Handkerchiefs that had been dabbing eyes, had shifted to cover noses. The autopsy revealed that Cromwell's death had been caused by a severely diseased, now putrefying, spleen. Dr. Bate performed a speedy embalming, then a death mask was made, for it was important to have a record of Cromwell's features. The corpse was placed inside two coffins, one lead, the other wood. But even so, the smell, or as Dr. Bate called it, "the filth" could not be contained, and (as he continued) "it was prudent to bury him immediately, which was done in as private a manner as possible." (Fraser, p. 681). The coffin was hustled from Whitehall to Westminster Abbey, where it was lowered into a vault in Henry the Seventh's Chapel and sealed tight. There, it was thought – mistakenly thought – the mortal remains of England's Lord Protector, would remain for eternity.

With the body out of the way, preparations could begin for the state funeral. But what kind of funeral was it to be? England had never before had a Lord Protector, so there was no precedent. Unaccountably, those in charge decided to model the funeral of the Puritan soldier who did away with kings, on the funeral of King James I. Could it have escaped anyone's notice that James I was the beloved father of the man Cromwell had sent to the block? Some people still remembered King James's funeral - it had taken place thirty-three years before – and all agreed it had been over the top. Inigo Jones had planned it, the same Inigo Jones who had designed the Banqueting Hall at Whitehall Palace and had staged the court festivals and revels that were the talk of Europe. His genius for spectacle was something akin to Cecil B deMille's. Could it be that Oliver Cromwell, the rough, Puritan soldier who had forced the nation into piety and plain

living – could it be that Cromwell was to have a cast-of-thousands funeral? Yes, apparently he was. The country was starved for pageantry, and even though scarlet was ruled out, at least there would be more magnificence than English eyes had seen for many a year.

The focal point of the ceremony was, of course, the deceased. Because the actual body had been disposed of, a life-sized effigy was made to take its place. Its waxen face was taken from the mask made just after Cromwell's death. Wax hands, shaped to hold the emblems of state, and a scarecrow body to support the magnificent robes, completed the illusion.

It took six weeks to prepare the first act. Cromwell had died on September 3rd, and it was not until October 18th that the initial spectacle, the lying in state, was ready to be staged. Four great rooms in Somerset House had been prepared for the viewing. Each room, hung in velvet, became progressively more magnificent. Soldiers in mourning moved the crowds along until, finally, on entering the fourth room the spectators saw, raised on a magnificent catafalque, Cromwell's recumbent effigy. Dressed in black velvet with a purple and ermine robe, he held the symbols of kingly authority: a scepter in one hand, an orb in the other. A throne stood behind his head, whereupon rested a royal crown. Who knows where these symbols of majesty came from – perhaps from the costume trunk of an outlawed theater, for England's ancient regalia, had long since been melted down on his orders. Like a huge sleeping doll, the effigy lay on its back, its eyes closed, surrounded by candelabra, heraldic beasts, and massed banners and flags. The people, both those who had admired him and those who had not, pushed forward to see the man who had changed their lives so profoundly.

After three weeks the funeral moved into the next stage. The deceased apparently came to life. The recumbent,

sleeping effigy was stood up, its magnificent robes rearranged, its glass eyes opened, and the crown balanced on its head. This astonishing resurrection symbolized the passage of the soul from Purgatory to Heaven. How Cromwell would have hated it. Not only did he reject out of hand the doctrine of Purgatory, he condemned it, as Calvin had, as "a damnable invention of Satan." Still, there he stood for a further two weeks, gawped at by the crowds, some returning for a second time to witness the Protector in his newly revitalized attitude. It is not certain, but probably the public viewing was followed by a week or more reserved for the grandees: the ambassadors and their suites, the foreign envoys newly arrived from the Continent to pay their respects. These drawn-out weeks of public mourning bought time for the funeral's organizers to orchestrate and rehearse the final act of the drama: the great procession from Somerset House to Westminster Abbey.

At last, on November 23, almost three months after his death, Oliver Cromwell was to be laid to rest. The detailed planning paid off. Most of those who thought they should be present were, in fact, present; officials made sure that none but those wearing mourning lined the streets; and the soldiers who kept order had sewn black buttons on their uniforms and had learned the rudiments of crowd control. True, the procession was late starting because some of the ambassadors were pushing and shoving in a dispute over precedence. One of the diplomats, the Genoese envoy, described the departure from Somerset House as follows:

An hour after midday ...[the effigy] was laid on a bier richly adorned, and carried down under a canopy by twelve persons to where a coach was waiting, made for the purpose open on every side, in which it was laid. The head of the coach was adorned with many plumes and banners, covered with black velvet without and within ... All being in order the King-at Arms sent his heralds to bid those above [to] descend... [Richard

Davey; *The Pageant of London* (London, 1906) pp. 261-62.

The great diarist, John Evelyn, no friend of the deceased, summarized it more succinctly:

[I] saw the superb funeral of the protector. He was carried from Somerset House in a velvet bed of state drawn by six horses... Oliver lying in effigy in royal robes, and crowned with a crown, scepter and globe, like a king ... It was the most joyful funeral I ever saw. [*The Diary of John Evelyn*. Washington & London, M. Walter Dunne, 1901. v.1, p. 326.

And so the procession moved off, advancing through the streets at a snail's pace. The spectators stood in silence, or, as Evelyn further noted, "there were none that cried but dogs." It took seven hours to cover the two miles to Westminster Abbey, and by the time the funeral cortege got there darkness had fallen and the late November evening was turning cold. The magnificent carriage bearing Cromwell's effigy was maneuvered into Henry VII's Chapel, and without further ceremony everybody left and went home. With this spectacle, three months in the planning, England said good-bye to its one and only Lord Protector, the soldier of God who by austerity and boots-on-the-ground, tried to re-configure England into the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth.

Having tried a theocratic form of government and found it distasteful, England turned again to monarchy. It didn't happen overnight, but it did happen – and without a shot fired. Late in the spring of 1660, nineteen months after Cromwell's death, Charles II, son the king whom Parliament had executed, rode into a London that was ready to welcome him and to celebrate. Tall, dark, not handsome but charming in a continental sort of way, the new king, Charles II, was thirty years old, easy-going, and very much the

ladies' man. From the beginning he made one thing clear: it was time for everybody to lighten up. Much to the nation's surprise, he showed little interest in punishing Puritans or run-of-the-mill supporters of the previous regime. His tolerance, however, had its limits. It did not extend to the members of Parliament who had condemned his father to death: the regicides. Those who were still living and had not fled to the Continent were hunted down and made to suffer the consequences of their treason. Samuel Pepys, writing in his diary on April 19, 1662, noted:

This morning ... I stood and did see Barkestead, Okey, and Corbet drawn toward the gallows at Tiburne, and there they were hanged and Quartered. They all looked very Cheerfully. But I hear they all die defending what they did to the King.

The punishment for treason, death by hanging and quartering was not for the faint-hearted. By contrast the headsman's axe was merciful. A traitor, at his sentencing, was left in no doubt as to how he would leave the world. It was spelled out in sickening detail.

"You shall be hanged by the neck, and being alive, shall be cut down and your privy members to be cut off, your entrails to be taken out of your body, and (you living) the same to be burnt before your eyes, and your head to be cut off, your body to be divided into four quarters, and your head and quarters to be disposed of ...!"

Barbarous executions served as both solemn warning and public entertainment. They attracted huge crowds. Hawkers peddled refreshments, children were held up to get a better view, and the deportment of the condemned discussed at length.

England's new Parliament, eager to please the restored monarch, supported him in his determination to rid the nation of those who had voted for his father's execution. It also called for the posthumous dishonoring of Oliver

Cromwell. Accordingly, what remained of Cromwell's body was turned out of its vault in Westminster Abbey; so, too, were the remains of two of his closest associates, his son-in-law Henry Ireton and John Bradshaw. This was done on January 30, 1661, a significant date: the twelfth anniversary of the execution of Charles I.

After the three corpses were removed from the Abbey, they were dragged through the streets of London to Tyburn, the place where common criminals were executed. At Tyburn, familiar to modern tourists as Marble Arch, the corpses were suspended from the gallows. The mob had a good time hurling refuse and abuse at them till late afternoon when what little was left was cut down and, as one further indignity, beheaded. The bits and pieces that remained were thrown into a near-by pit that served as a common grave. The heads, however, did not go into the pit. Secured to poles, they were paraded back through the streets to Westminster Hall where they were mounted on the roof for all to see. Silhouetted against the sky, Cromwell's skull remained there for more than twenty years, a grisly reminder of civil war and the years of theocratic rule.

But there is a brief postlude. Sometime in the early 1680s a strong wind blew Cromwell's skull off the roof. A soldier on duty nearby retrieved it, and knowing what it was and thinking it had some value, he took it home and hid it. Thereafter, the record of its successive owners is fairly well known, though far too involved to recite here. Suffice it to say that in 1814 one Joseph Henry Wilkinson bought it and thereafter it remained the property of the Wilkinson family for nearly 150 years. In the 1930s the then owner, the Rev. Horace Wilkinson, allowed it to be examined by a panel of experts to determine if it were really what it purported to be. The findings, published in a 100 page paper, concluded that the relic did indeed appear to be authentic. One of the convincing factors was its unusually large size, something that Dr. Bate had noted years earlier when he had written

up his autopsy. The cranial capacity was almost 3,000 milliliters, far more than the average head,

By 1660 the Wilkinsons were no longer happy with the gruesome object, which they kept, we are told, in a hat box under the bed. Seeking a more suitable resting place, they approached Cromwell's Cambridge college, Sidney Sussex. The college accepted it, and the Lord Protector's much traveled head was buried somewhere close to the college chapel – the exact location kept secret to assure that it would remain undisturbed.

Charles I and Oliver Cromwell, two Heads of State, each convinced he was chosen by God for the job.

Charles I and Oliver Cromwell, both of them caught up in the debate surrounding Separation of Church and State. That debate is still with us 350 years later

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Sources.

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3. Samuel Pepys. *The Diary of ...* London, G. Bell, 1973. v.3, pp. 66-67.

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7. Antonia Fraser; *Cromwell, the Lord Protector* N.Y. Knopf, 1973, pp. 680-699.