

## **Thomas Cromwell: Secretary, Statesman and Lord Privy Seal**

Author : †Professor Sir Geoffrey Elton 1<sup>st</sup> edition 1991  
(2<sup>nd</sup>. Edition, with a new introduction by Professor David Loades (pupil of Elton))

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Geoffrey R. Elton arrived in this country as a child from Prague, and attended Rydal School in North Wales. From there he proceeded under wartime regulations to University College London, then evacuated to Bangor. After the war he studied for a Ph.D under the supervision of Professor J.E. Neale, and was briefly an Assistant Lecturer at the University of Glasgow. From there he moved to Cambridge in 1949, becoming a Fellow of Clare College. He was awarded a personal chair in 1968, and appointed Regius Professor in 1981. He retired from that chair in 1987, and died in 1994. He was a prolific writer about Tudor England and the German Reformation, his best known (and most controversial) book being *The Tudor Revolution in Government*, (CUP, 1953). He continued to return to Thomas Cromwell throughout his working life, and this short paperback represents his last, and somewhat modified, views on Henry VIII's great servant.

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Introduction the second edition

I Beginnings (Cromwell's birth and upbringing – in so far as it is known. His adventurous youth, and entry into Wolsey's service)

II. A new career, 1529-1532. (How Cromwell transferred his service from Wolsey to the King. The reasons for his advancement.)

III. The responsible minister. (Cromwell's years in power. His progress from Master of the Jewel House, via Secretary to Lord Privy Seal. His talent for making enemies, and using dependants)

IV The achievement. (Cromwell's use of parliament, and its consequences. The break with Rome. Reforms of finance and the Council)

V Faith and attainder. Was Cromwell a Sacramentary? How his enemies used the king's conscience against him. The circumstances of his fall.

Thomas Cromwell was born into humble, not to say obscure circumstances, and seems to have been largely self taught. In his youth he served as a merchant's factor and (probably) as a soldier before turning to the law. In that field his quick wits and aptitude to learn brought him success, and place on the Council of the king's chief minister, Cardinal Wolsey. On the latter's fall from favour, without in any sense betraying his former employer, he moved himself adroitly into the king's service. It was probably his pragmatism, and his willingness to serve his master's purposes which first attracted Henry's attention to his new recruit. Cromwell was a man

unfettered by tradition, and willing to take political events as he found them. In 1532 Henry needed to annul his marriage, and did not know how to do it. It was probably Cromwell who identified parliament, and particularly in statute, a means by which to break the deadlock. It was he who drafted the relevant bills, and the device, which though deeply controversial, was successful. Thereafter, until his fall, he remained the master of parliamentary tactics, and the jurisdiction of parliament was transformed. Cromwell used the ascendancy which this success gave him in the King's Council to bring about various other administrative changes. New financial courts were created, the monasteries were dissolved, the Council itself reformed and the office of secretary transformed into a great clearing house of business. Not all these changes were Cromwell's ideas – some may have originated with the king himself – but Cromwell was the 'ways and means' man – the man who could transform ideas into practice. He also tried, in the interest of the Royal Supremacy, to steer the king in the direction of religious change, and there he eventually overreached himself. It is by no means certain that he was a sacramentary ( a Eucharistic heresy which horrified the king) but his enemies, of whom he had many and powerful, were able to use his patronage of radical preachers against him, to convince Henry. In the aftermath of the Cleves marriage in 1540, which he was widely believed to have arranged to suit himself, he fell from favour and was executed by an Act of Attainder – ironically the very device which he had himself developed to by-pass the courts..