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Dr. Patrick Little (History of Parliament)

Fashion at the Court of Oliver Cromwell

Two years ago Patrick Little spoke to the Society about music at Cromwell's court. This time he considered the subject of men's fashion in England in the 1650's and, once again, he was concerned to correct simplistic stereotypes about the 'Puritans' and their social attitudes. Recent work by historians of fashion, notably Aileen Ribeiro, has questioned the idea that dress in seventeenth-century Britain can be correlated to the wearer's political or religious allegiances. In the 1640's and 1650's there was no revolutionary style. Little made use of a number of personal accounts to show that a wide range of men continued to dress fashionably and expensively under the Protectorate. Some of those individuals were Royalists or Parliamentarians unreconciled to the new regime, but others were enthusiastic Cromwellians. Any differences had more to do with non-political factors. Older men still favoured costly black, with its connotations of gravitas, while their sons were as keen as young men had always been to dress conspicuously. Periwigs, more usually associated with the Restoration court, were already being worn by some men under the Cromwells. How far such fashions were being set by the protectoral court is more difficult to establish, but many of the leading courtiers, such as Cromwell's sons, Richard and Henry, Edward Montagu, Philip Jones, Oliver St. John, Charles Howard and Lord Broghill, kept up with the latest styles. The servants of the Protector's household may have worn grey liveries. The page shown in Pierre Lombart's officially-sponsored equestrian print of Cromwell gives some indication of just how modish those liveries might have been. But what of Cromwell himself? Other portraits of him as Lord Protector are exceptionally rare. Some contemporaries suggested that he cultivated a deliberately plain style of dress. Yet some of his outfits are known to have been more colourful. Dr. Little is inclined to think that Cromwell varied his style according to the particular occasion. He knew that there were times something more luxurious was required and, like his court as a whole, his tastes may have become increasingly lavish over time. Little however was keen to stress that none of this need be inconsistent with Cromwell's famously firm Protestant convictions. **AB**