



Thomas Rainborowe - Dangerous Radical

Stanley Slaughter

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Thomas Rainborowe is the forgotten hero of the 17th century English Civil Wars. As a soldier, he won fame in Parliament's New Model Army as a brilliant siegemaster and man of reckless courage. Only Oliver Cromwell, a cavalry leader of genius, stood above him in terms of military prowess. But it was as a radical politician that he challenged and unnerved the establishment. In 1647, at the Putney Debates, Rainborowe called for one man one vote. He was probably the first Englishman to do so. It would have turned England upside down. Such a measure was not implemented in the United Kingdom until 271 years later in 1918. But Rainborowe's grand vision also supported the revolutionary idea that the people should not only be sovereign but also protected by inalienable rights. For him, there was only a reduced role for a king. His views put him on a collision course with most of the country but specifically with his erstwhile friend, the innately conservative and cautious Cromwell. While Rainborowe sought to transform England, Cromwell wanted to re-instate the defeated and discredited Charles I. This and other clashes between the two men would lead to the death of one of them, Rainborowe warned. Within a year of the Debates, it was Rainborowe who was dead, killed by royalists in Doncaster with the help of disenchanted Parliamentarians. Some historians have accused Cromwell of complicity. Certainly it was Cromwell who gained most from the death of his rival. Rainborowe's demise happened just as the Army was backing his demand that the king be put on trial. With Cromwell undecided on the issue, the political leadership of the Army was within Rainborowe's grasp. His death left Cromwell with a clear run. Thomas Rainborowe Dangerous Radical is the story of an outstanding but largely neglected man who boldly challenged the entrenched hierarchical structure of 17th century England. In his vision of a brave new world, the Parliamentary soldiers, mainly volunteers, had risked their lives to defeat a tyrannical king. In return they deserved a say in how the country was subsequently run. It was not to be. With his death, the leaderless Army radicals were defeated within months of the king's execution and England reverted to its old ways.

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