

TRAVELS THROUGH TIME

Thomas Cromwell and Anne Boleyn – Diarmaid MacCulloch (1536)

[Intro music]

Hello, and welcome to *Travels Through Time*. In each episode of this podcast, we invite a special guest to take us on a tailored tour of the past. *Travels Through Time* is brought to you in partnership with *History Today*, Britain's best-loved, serious history magazine. You can read articles relating to this podcast and more about our guests at historytoday.com/travels. There is also a special subscription offer for *Travels Through Time* listeners - three issues for just £1 each.

Peter Moore: Hello, I'm Peter Moore and a warm welcome to this slightly different episode of *Travels Through Time*. In a moment you'll hear our very first live recording. It was made at the Buxton International Festival in Derbyshire last week, where early one morning I sat down with Professor Diarmaid MacCulloch. Our topic was one of the liveliest of all – Thomas Cromwell, King Henry VIII's chief minister. The year we visited was a tumultuous one, 1536.

Peter Moore: Hello

Diarmaid MacCulloch: Hello!

Peter Moore: So my name is Peter Moore and welcome to a live recording of our History Today podcast, *Travels Through Time*. Today I'm at the Buxton Festival in Derbyshire. We're hoping to have time spare later for a few questions, if you've got any, from our audience. But before then, as ever, I'm going to examine one year in history and three different scenes with an expert guest. Today we have a real treat for you, our guest is Professor Diarmaid MacCulloch, a decorated and hugely admired historian. Diarmaid is Professor of Church History at the University of Oxford where he's a fellow of St Cross College. Among Diarmaid's best-known works are his biography of Thomas Cramner, which won the Whitbread Biography Prize, the James Tait Black Prize and the Duff Cooper Prize. In 2004 he won the Wolfson History Prize for *Reformation: Europe's House Divided 1490–1700* and his latest book was released last year. It's a life of Thomas Cromwell, or maybe Crumwell I should say, Henry VIII's ruthless enforcer. Hilary Mantel called it 'the biography we have been awaiting for four hundred years.' Welcome to *Travels Through Time* Diarmaid.

Diarmaid MacCulloch: Thank you!

Peter Moore: So today we're going to be talking about Cromwell and the year 1536. We're going to be seeing Cromwell as a plotter, a fighter and a very vulnerable courtier, as everyone always was. Before we dive into this history I want to begin by asking you what it was that drew you towards this sixteenth-century world.

Diarmaid MacCulloch: Oh well that takes you back to my childhood. My dad was a country parson in Suffolk and had two beautiful medieval churches. And one of them was full of Tudor monuments, tombs, to a very particular family called Salyard who'd done very well in the late middle ages and they'd built part of the church and then at the Reformation they went on to be Roman Catholic recusants. In other words, by definition, they refused to go to church. Except, that they didn't because they went on burying in this family aisle, it was their aisle. And as a child I pondered over that paradox – what a monster little child I was, worrying about historical paradoxes when I was ten! – but it stuck with me. And when I went to university I did lots of different things as an undergraduate but the Tudors became more and more prominent. And so that's why Cromwell, in the end – because you meet Cromwell straight away under the Tudors

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and I met him in the fierce persona of my doctoral supervisor, Sir Geoffrey Elton, who knew more about Thomas Cromwell than possibly Thomas Cromwell knew about himself.

Peter Moore: Cromwell's whole reputation has undergone a complete rejuvenation in the last ten fifteen years, for various reasons. What was your first impression of Cromwell when you came across him as an undergraduate back then, or doctoral student?

Diarmaid MacCulloch: I got Sir Geoffrey's point of view which was the supreme man of business who changed everything. And I think that Geoffrey was right in the sense that what he said about the sixteenth century, you look at it in the 1520s, you look at it in the 1590s and it has been transformed. And the crucial era is the 1530s. So that stuck with me. Then I went through a life of history in which I encountered Robert Bolt's famous play – way back sixty, seventy years now – and that was such an effective piece of drama and with such an effective film attached to it, where everyone looked like their Holbein portraits – it's extraordinary! And it's not surprising that that play really cast Thomas More in the spotlight of the 'goodie' and if you're going to have a 'goodie' like Thomas More you were to have a 'baddie' and it's going to be Thomas Cromwell. And I felt that there was something wrong with that, it can't be that simple and Geoffrey, of course, loathed Robert Bolt, he loathed Thomas More actually. Then as I formulated my idea about twenty years ago of writing a biography, I suddenly heard that a novelist called Hilary Mantel was also going to write about Cromwell.

Peter Moore: [*sarcastically*] I've heard of her as well!

Diarmaid MacCulloch: Yeah yeah! And when I read Wolf Hall, the first of what is going to be a trilogy, I thought 'gosh she knows about Tudor England' and I wrote to her and said so, I was so impressed. And we became friends on that basis that she really knows her Tudor England. But I also felt – you may have felt this too – anyone reading Wolf Hall that he is a bit of a goodie, isn't he? You can imagine him reading The Guardian [*laughter*] He's thoughtful, liberal, detached guy – because he's always 'he' in those novels, isn't he? And then you read the second novel Bring Up the Bodies [*Peter Moore: Yeah...he's reading The Telegraph!*] you see there's an architecture to the trilogy, that she has planned it that way, she is revealing character and – spoiler alert – the third one will do more of that. It will be a far more rounded, it will be a complete marvellous Cathedral of a trilogy.

Peter Moore: Mmm, so we're talking about Cromwell here. The great figure of the age, of course, is Henry VIII, the King. Have you ever been similarly attracted by him or is it just that he's this great force at the centre of the period?

Diarmaid MacCulloch: He is there by the grace of God, as he would have thought. The more you know about Henry VIII, the more you dislike him. He was clearly enormously charismatic. He had the charisma that Stalin had and that is not to condemn him entirely because people wept when Stalin died and they wept when Henry VIII died. And it's difficult for us to feel that charisma. Holbein just about gives it to us in the great portraits but more often you feel irritated by this man staring out at you, big fat thing, and that clearly he could fascinate very clever people like Cromwell and very good people like Thomas Cranmer and make them do bad things.

Peter Moore: So, I think that's a good setup. Let's think about this year 1536 which is a superb choice in many ways because it's so poised in the middle of this decade of great administrative change, religious reform as well, and at the same time you've got some really fascinating interpersonal dynamics going on. So the year before, of course, we've had the executions, Sir Thomas More has lost his head, along with...

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Diarmaid MacCulloch: Bishop Fisher, the bishop of Rochester.

Peter Moore: We've got the anabaptists, haven't we, on the continent and they were causing great distress, almost a bit like an Isis today. The idea that people could be coming into the country and causing subversion, in a religious sense. You've got the king and Anne Boleyn, they've been on the progress in the Southwest, haven't they, through the latter part of 1535 and it's gone smashingly well. They've gone to this place called Wolf Hall, which is another story completely...

Diarmaid MacCulloch: Yeah let's not go there...

Peter Moore: But obviously the year starts with a few really tantalising chronological stepping stones. You have the death of Catherine of Aragon in January, don't you? And then, within a very short period of time, you have this moment when Henry VIII falls during a joust in the tilt yard. You have Anne Boleyn's miscarriage which sets, I think, a really powerful, dramatic backdrop to the events that we're going to talk about for our first scene, which I'm going to go to directly because we're going to do a lot of filling in the gaps as we go. The first scene you've chosen is on the 24th of May 1536, do you want to tell us what's happening on that day and why we want to go there for our first scene?

Diarmaid MacCulloch: 24th of May 1536. Here is a conversation between Thomas Cromwell and the Imperial ambassador Eustace Chapuys, a clever man from the Low Countries, french-speaking by birth and upbringing and what you might call a sparring partner for Thomas Cromwell. They know each other's worth. They are, in a sense, opposite side. Cromwell is the great minister of a king who was broken with the Pope, who has humiliated the aunt of the Holy Roman Emperor. Chapuys profoundly disapproves of that and yet he's got a sort of sneaking liking for Cromwell.

Peter Moore: You wouldn't describe this at all as a friendship?

Diarmaid MacCulloch: No, it's a working partnership of people who could have quite a good evening together despite the fact that they are servants of different masters. They're now converging on a particular project which unites them and it is to do with the queen.

Peter Moore: I think the most important thing we should say at this point is that by May 24th, Anne Boleyn is dead. And one of the great recurring conversations about this period is what happened during the fall of Anne Boleyn and what does Cromwell say to Chapuys?

Diarmaid MacCulloch: He says that he organised it and Chapuys takes this very much on board and reports it back to his master. He's a bit puzzled by the mechanics of this but perhaps I can explain the mechanics at this stage? Queen Anne Boleyn and Cromwell have always been seen as allies in history because they're both agents of the Protestant Reformation, there is no doubt about that. They are both convinced Protestants, enemies of Rome. And so, over the centuries, really from the 1560s, they have been seen as allies and then this extraordinary event that we're in the middle of in May 1536 happens in which it is patent, not only because he says so, that Cromwell actually engineered the Queen's downfall. He turned what had been a crisis between the monarch and his wife – a set of arguments, a gradual fading of love into destruction – and only Cromwell could have done that. And why? Why did he do it? And as I wrote the biography I had to puzzle that one out and I did it in parallel with the work of Hillary Mantel, because she had spotted what I had begun to spot which is that the key to this puzzle, this

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paradox, is Cromwell's previous employer – Cardinal Thomas Wolsey. Now Wolsey had been the great man in the 1520s, he'd employed Cromwell to do a particular job for him and he had fallen because he had not been able to do the job which Henry VIII wanted the Cardinal to do, which was to end a marriage of two decades to the queen, Catherine of Aragon, and replace her with Anne Boleyn. Now Cromwell had been involved in the mechanics of that, there is no doubt of that, and so it didn't seem to make sense why he should not be her ally. But the Wolsey connection is it. Anne hated Wolsey and was the chief agent of his downfall and destruction. Cromwell loathed that and you can see the execution as his act of revenge. Those in our readership, in our audience, will perhaps have read the second novel of Hilary Mantel, *Bring Up the Bodies*, in which you see that the whole thing is a series of acts of revenge on those who had humiliated the Cardinal and here is the chief one. Now that's what Chapuys was witnessing and hearing about in this conversation.

Peter Moore: Where is this conversation recorded in the archive?

Diarmaid MacCulloch: It's in Chapuys's diplomatic letters, it's in Chapuys's letters back to his master Charles V. So, all this correspondence is either in Vienna or Brussels which are the Habsburg archive repositories. And it's a marvellous treasure house, a window on Tudor England from someone who is a very intelligent observer of what is going on, a sort of Tudor Kremlinologist, if you like.

Peter Moore: Are these descriptive accounts or are they very analytical?

Diarmaid MacCulloch: Well they're both. They describe conversations and then they reflect, for the Emperor, on what it all means! An extraordinary luxury. Without it we'd be lost in all this because, very interestingly, the archive in the State Papers – that's in the English Royal Archive – thins out at this point and I think it thins out because it's being deliberately weeded, possibly more than once, first by the Seymours, who provided queen number three in Henry's life, and then at Thomas Cromwell's death I think some other weeding has taken place to disguise certain relationships which would now be embarrassing.

Peter Moore: So, what I was going to do is just a bit of gap-filling here because this event has happened very quickly. When we were talking about the chronology there was this miscarriage that happened late in January, at which point, to all intents and purposes, the royal marriage is continuing. There's maybe some whispers. There's a parliament which is about to begin which runs until the start of April. And you say, and you write in your book, that those who were attuned, those that had their ear to the ground and noticed such things, would have spotted that by the end of this Parliament all was not well. So this is around, maybe, the 10th of April. And there was another really interesting source for this period that you have written about at length in the book and maybe which is as a contrast to Chapuys, who's well-known, something which is a bit fresher.

Diarmaid MacCulloch: Yes, it's a source which has been in the public domain since the Victorian period but people haven't spotted it because it's slightly out of time. It is a letter written in 1559 to Queen Elizabeth, the new Queen Elizabeth, by a Scotsman who called himself Alexander Alesius (Alesius is 'the wanderer' in Greek, scholars did this in the sixteenth century). And it's a rather self-important, long, long letter saying how important Alesius was to Elizabeth's backstory because he'd been in England in the 1530s and witnessed things, particularly the atmosphere of the downfall of her mother. And so he's explaining to the new queen, presumably in hopes of reward, how it looked in 1536 and what he says is precisely that Thomas Cromwell was at the heart of this affair from January through to the death. And that's odd because Alesius

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is a Protestant, a self-proclaimed convinced Protestant from the 30s, so it wouldn't have been something he would invent, it wouldn't have been creditable to the Protestant hero to have destroyed the Protestant heroine, but that's what he's saying!

Peter Moore: He seems to have this ability – there's characters in history who have this uncanny ability, Samuel Pepys was another one – to just turn up at important moments.

Diarmaid MacCulloch: It's the Zelig factor, isn't it? Always there when something important is happening.

Peter Moore: Exactly, to be in to bear witness to the history and I thought it was an extraordinary scene when he seems to go down to Greenwich, Alesius, and he looks through the window and he sees the king and Anne Boleyn having a stand up argument, they're shouting at each other, pointing at each other! But he can't hear what they're saying! So this is the 2nd of May, I think that happens on, just before Anne is arrested and taken off to the tower.

Diarmaid MacCulloch: And she's holding the baby Elizabeth in her arms...

Peter Moore: Oh my goodness. I can see the historical artists getting excited by this vision now because it's completely arresting but one which also, I suppose, has an absence which is Thomas Cromwell again. And this idea of him, meanwhile, over in Stepney – is it Mark Smeaton who has fallen foul of his methods? Do you want to tell us what Cromwell's methods were?

Diarmaid MacCulloch: Well Cromwell's methods were intense, intelligence-gathering, knowing people very well – and therefore having lots of ears open for him and lots of mouths telling him things – and possibly, at the middle of it, interrogation. And that interrogation might have involved, in the case of this young musician at court, Mark Smeaton, torture, which might be thumb screws, it's unlikely to be really, sort of, heavy-duty machinery torture, if you see what I mean. But more likely, I think, it is psychological pressure. Here Thomas Cromwell is a man of intense strength and power, with a fierce temper and there is a young teenage musician. You don't really need much torture – in fact, torture may get in their way because you want to know things or other precise things.

Peter Moore: So would I be right to conclude that an outcome has been decided on, the case has to be constructed to support that outcome?

Diarmaid MacCulloch: Yes, the outcome must be that the Queen has indulged in treasonous sex with other people and, just to put the icing on this evil cake, incest with her own brother George Lord Rochford and that's the story which must be pinned down in a court to the satisfaction of a jury, chosen by Cromwell. And this is an intensely law-abiding society and an intensely law-observing society, but it is the Kings law and it is there, among other purposes, to defend the monarch against evil and harm. And, in a sense, Anne is a threat to the king by her very existence, now, and by her lack of buying into the myth of Henry VIII anymore, that's the thing. Here is an intensely thin-skinned monarch who loves being loved and loves to have the adulation of being a monarch and hates being sniggered at. And I think Anne's fatal mistake was to snigger at the king in the presence of handsome young men and I don't think she did anything more than that, in practice.

Peter Moore: We've done the analytical history, let's imagine for a moment ourselves on the 24th of May and go back to that. What would Cromwell think? You've spent a long time with

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Cromwell, looked at his letters, as a biographer and a subject you create a relationship. Do you think, in this conversation with Chapuys that we begun with, would Cromwell have half a smile on his face or was he a cooler character than that?

Diarmaid MacCulloch: A half smile and actually Chapuys frequently says he could hardly contain his grin about something or other. He had a great sense of humour, a dark sense of humour, Cromwell I think. And he knew that Chapuys had the same sort of sense of humour. And of course, they both got what they wanted which is the destruction of 'the woman', as Chapuys often called her, or 'the whore' which is how he addressed her in the letters to the Emperor, not to her, and so now there is a result. This is a debriefing scene, isn't it? They are very diplomatically, cautiously saying 'yeah we've got what we want now.'

Peter Moore: We're going to build the scene a tiny bit more. Where would they have met? I know we don't know necessarily but what would be a typical place for them to meet?

Diarmaid MacCulloch: It would probably be one of the many rooms in the King's new palace in Whitehall, less likely Cromwell's own private house in the east end of the city which is called Austin Friars. Or – there are loads of venues, that's part of the the skill of Tudor government, you can go to places – the other one is a house called the Rolls which is in Chancery Lane and you can still see a fragment of it in what used to be an old public record office. So it's a small room and probably there will be a servant hovering outside but no one else there, so this is a very private event.

Peter Moore: I think this can be characterised as a moment triumph for Cromwell because not a year before he had admitted himself that Anne would like to see his head off, so maybe it was a question of 'he goes or she goes' and now she's gone completely. So we're going to leave that for our second scene which is...

Diarmaid MacCulloch: 3rd of October 1536.

Peter Moore: We're going forward in time – five, six months or so – the summer's whizzed by. I was just thinking what I should add as an interval thing: Henry's illegitimate son, Fitzroy, the Earl of Richmond has died [*Diarmaid MacCulloch: everything's gone Cromwell's way, really*] and Mary has, I don't know, decided to go along with the idea that she's illegitimate.

Diarmaid MacCulloch: Yes, for the huge, huge price of being recognised as heir to the throne and that had been the whole point since January. Thomas Cromwell had been working with the Lady Mary, the daughter of Catherine of Aragon, to get her back in the succession because they both have a single enemy – Anne! And now it's all done, it's all done and dusted and, actually, Lady Mary gets on extraordinarily well with the new queen, Queen Jane Seymour, and her large family of Wolf Hall. This is a going concern, a Seymour-Lady Mary axis, with Cromwell as the broker.

Peter Moore: So three summer months has been a real change of tone. New marriage, of course – baby on the way?

Diarmaid MacCulloch: No, not quite yet.

Peter Moore: Well what happens on the 3rd of October? Because things have taken a bit of a bad turn for Cromwell after his recent victories.

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Diarmaid MacCulloch: Yeah well, trouble up north. First in Lincolnshire, news, absolutely catastrophic news, now from York. There had previously been unrest in Lincolnshire which would have looked very threatening, it looked as if it was petering out and suddenly there is this awful news. A real, real, rebellion from the north.

Peter Moore: Which begs the obvious question: why? What was the spark and what was the cause?

Diarmaid MacCulloch: Well the cause is Thomas Cromwell and the actions of Thomas Cromwell, as the public perceived them, of the destruction of very many small monasteries and this seems to be at the heart of the trouble. All over the Midlands, in Lincolnshire and the north of England, Yorkshire and all points north, monasteries had been closed by commissioners who were clearly identified with Thomas Cromwell, some of whom were his personal servants. And now, people were reopening the monasteries and rounding up the servants that they could get and it's all because of Thomas Cromwell and all this news pouring into a king who had not noticed! And now feels that his loyal subjects are not loyal subjects at all and who is he going to blame? The obvious man and, in the sense accurately, Thomas Cromwell.

Peter Moore: We have this understanding that Cromwell took over where his former boss, Cardinal Wolsey, had left off and Wolsey, famously, did the business whilst the King played, you know, that was the dynamic. Has this relationship just continued? So Henry doesn't really involve himself too much in the running of the country, that is farmed out to the chief minister who just has to keep things on an even keel.

Diarmaid MacCulloch: One thing which is different between Wolsey and Cromwell is that Wolsey had involved himself in foreign policy a great deal and Henry didn't allow Cromwell to do that, he kept it in his own hand. He was actually twenty years on the throne by now and he felt it was the prerogative of Kings. But yes, running the country: the tedious business of collecting taxes, putting policies in place and even suggesting policies domestically that had been the job first of Wolsey, now of Thomas Cromwell. And in many ways Thomas Cromwell was just carrying on Wolsey's policies, including dissolving monasteries.

Peter Moore: And there's a kind of link here before with what you were saying about Henry. The worst thing that could happen to Henry would be a loss of prestige, a loss of face. Of course, if your wife is having an affair with your brother-in-law, that's bad. I'm not sure in the scheme of things but probably equally bad to find out that your subjects are in rebellion and you don't know why – 'what's going on? I've given you this job.'

Diarmaid MacCulloch: Precisely. 'My subjects love me, they all love me!' And they had loved him in the West country because they had seen him and he'd done his jolly King Hal bluff thing and it had gone down extremely well. And interestingly, the Reformation went down well because people saw the king being involved with Reformers and promoting reformed policies and in a, sort of, Reformation direction. The trouble about the north was that Henry VII had gone there a lot but Henry VIII had never bothered.

Peter Moore: This is something you wrote and it snagged – he never went to the north?

Diarmaid MacCulloch: Never gone north of Ampthill in Bedfordshire or Grafton, these are sort of South Midlands hunting places, that's just sheer laziness.

Peter Moore: Was it because of the distances and the inconvenience or did he have a

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dim opinion of the northern folk, would you say?

Diarmaid MacCulloch: I'm not sure about that – not until they rebelled, he certainly had a dim view then. But I just think he knows what he likes, he likes a good time on hunting grounds he knows well. The west country thing shows that he should have had the sense to do the same thing again but he kept putting it off.

Peter Moore: So of course Henry is culpable here as much as Cromwell but Cromwell is the person who is instigating a lot of the religious reforms which are causing deep unhappiness at a local level. So if you're having your local priory or monastery close down...

Diarmaid MacCulloch: Yes and when the Lincolnshire business broke out, what is fascinating is the first thing that the people of Louth did to express their fury was to go to the local nunnery, Legbourne, which had been closed, and this was the very first monastic house which Cromwell had himself taken into his own hands and it was his servants there whom they now rounded up and humiliated.

Peter Moore: You've got some quotes which just leap out of the page which really personally link the unrest with Cromwell himself and they talked about 'if we had him here we would crumb him and crumb him so he was never so crumb web' which is probably where we get the hint to the pronunciation of Cromwell, that's right isn't it?

Diarmaid MacCulloch: Yeah, that's how you know his name was pronounced 'krummel', otherwise the joke doesn't work.

Peter Moore: And so, this is a rebellion which later takes on a name...

Diarmaid MacCulloch: The Pilgrimage of Grace for the Commonwealth. People always forget that and what that means is that it's meant to be presented as a great procession beseeching the king for the whole of society, the Commonwealth. It is a sort of religious event but it sounds a bit too religious if you say the 'Pilgrimage of Grace'.

Peter Moore: It sounds like the gentlest rebellion you can imagine, doesn't it? The Pilgrimage of Grace.

Diarmaid MacCulloch: It's also a wonderful piece of spin doctoring because it is a rebellion.

Peter Moore: And they call themselves pilgrims, don't they? They're not rebels, they are pilgrims.

Diarmaid MacCulloch: Yeah, it's a wonderful way of giving their common ideology from all their different concerns and annoyances and angers, they can all be brought into this single: 'we are pilgrims!' It's, of course, a great thing to be in late medieval society, a pilgrim, what could be better? And the great thing about a pilgrim is that they move, they travel, and that's a great way of getting an army ideologically from one point to another.

Peter Moore: So around the 3rd of October, we can't be sure of the actual date because the records don't exist, there is a moment when the king learns of this. Is he absolutely incandescent?

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Diarmaid MacCulloch: I think that's rather likely, isn't it? He is another man with a very bad temper and who knows what Cromwell would have done at that point. The perhaps sensible thing would be say 'yes your majesty and I'm entirely to blame' and there is evidence that that's how Cromwell often coped with the king but another way would be to actually shout back, and these are two men with fierce tempers, to the extent that the king then slaps you across the face and then of course you have to say 'I'm very sorry, your majesty, I'm very sorry' and leave and for the King to win in this symbolic fight. And there is actually a record of a later occasion on which courtiers noticed that the shouting match –they could hear it through the door – they hear the slap and then Cromwell walked out of the door, rubbing his face and smiling.

Peter Moore: Isn't that tremendous set peice scene? Because I, you know from my position of ignorance down here, would never imagine anyone really talking in that way to the king but you have evidence to suggest that Cromwell did?

Diarmaid MacCulloch: Yes. That's part of Henry's psychology, a good argument but I have to win. It's like his tournaments, now he's actually good at tournaments but he has to win most of the time.

Peter Moore: It sounds like they're very coded in behavioural sense, these arguments, because the moment you lift your hand to your monarch, this is prohibited surely?

Diarmaid MacCulloch: Absolutely! There would never be any question of Cromwell hitting the king but the king can hit him. So it has to be verbal violence followed by the one person who can do the real violence.

Peter Moore: Well I think on the 3rd of October 1536 we can imagine something like this. Where did Cromwell and the King usually meet?

Diarmaid MacCulloch: Usually a court. Very, very rarely would the king condescend to go and see Cromwell. Only, actually, once we know of, when Cromwell was very ill, the King went to visit him in the Rolls in Chancery Lane. Those of you who know Westminster in London it's not much of a journey, it's about 20 minutes...

Peter Moore: It's massively symbolic.

Diarmaid MacCulloch: It is, but the point was that Cromwell could not get to court and transact business so the king would have to go to his sickbed and of course it is also a great affirmation – 'how are you doing? You alright? Right, let's get on with some business.'

Peter Moore: Yeah, Pilgrimage of Grace – it belies its name, doesn't it? – was a very serious business and, at this point in October, I don't think it was controllable, in a very short-term sense. There was a plan that was needed, there was no plan available. There was a sense of overreach in a political sense...

Diarmaid MacCulloch: A lot of people say, 'I told you so', to the king about Cromwell. So there are lots of noblemen who are not that displeased.

Peter Moore: So let's imagine Norfolk as well because he's the the archenemy of the first...

Diarmaid MacCulloch: Thomas Howard, 3rd Duke of Norfolk...

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Peter Moore: It's a tightrope, isn't it? This whole business, metaphorically, over the Tudor course. Keeping your balance. Was this one of the moments in Cromwell's career, before his big fall four years later, when he nearly fell down?

Diarmaid MacCulloch: Oh very much so, because waiting all the time were the noblemen, particularly the Duke of Norfolk, who had expected on the fall of Cardinal Wolsey to achieve their rightful place as the King's chief servants. God had given them the place as much as God had made Henry the monarch. And these upstarts, first the Cardinal and now this boy from Putney, taking over their power and now he's made a big mistake and Thomas Howard, who'd actually sort of left court in a sulk over the previous two or three years, was thinking, 'what am I going to do? what am I going to do? Now is my chance! Now is my chance!' But how can he do that? And he is still in Norfolk, in Kenninghall Palace and he's wondering 'what is the king thinking? Is he thinking that the Duke could be a good chief minister now? But I haven't heard! I haven't heard!' And you get these angry letters, these anxious letters, to the king: 'what's going on? I want to come and help! Please, your Grace, let me come and help.'

Peter Moore: One of the joys of your biography is actually reading, not just these goings-on and machinations at court, but going out into the country and seeing the disputes between Cromwell's agents in the parishes or people who were transient or there might be a murder case in one Yorkshire village which kind of goes wrong and it seems that this is a moment when, right across England, you have all sorts of different grievances coalescing, okay. They might not all be to do with religion, it might be local power battles being played out. And I think that's why we should leave that second scene and go to the third because something quite interesting happens between this one and the next, so what's your third scene please?

Diarmaid MacCulloch: We've arrived at 22nd of December 1536 and the scene now is definitely in a room in the Rolls, just off Chancery Lane, and that's within earshot of Fleet Street and Fleet Street is the main processional route from the City of London out to Westminster and a magnificent procession is passing with all the clergy you can possibly think of, followed by all the great secular people you can possibly think of, the Lord Mayor and the corporation, any passing nobility and the king. And they're all going off in this magnificent procession to Greenwich from Whitehall and Cromwell is not in it. He's sitting in his study, his parlour, in the Rolls, thinking and probably smiling: 'I've made it, I've made it through! And the King's made it through, of course, his Grace has made it through and the pilgrims are happy because they've all gone home and they've been promised the earth and the one thing they haven't been promised is me! They are not going to get me.' And that had been their aim, right from the start, 'we must destroy Thomas Cromwell! We must crumb and crumb him until he was never so crumbed' and he is not being crumbed at all.

Peter Moore: It's a tremendously vivid scene this, I'm going to use a bit of description from your book which talks about this procession going down Fleet Street. It says: "the streets richly behanged with rich gold and arras; the four Orders of friars standing in Fleet Street in copes of gold with crosses and candlesticks and censers", and so on through City streets: Bishop of London and abbots and cathedral choir and two priests from every City church, gildsmen, noise, triumphal cheers.' Like this is one of the great moments of spectacle that we so often think of when we think of a Tudor England. These were important, weren't they, these moments? And the symbolic uniting of the two ancient cities of Westminster and the city with the king.

Diarmaid MacCulloch: Politics as theatre. Very, very important in an age where people are

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symbols of power, the king is a symbol of power, and yet Thomas Cromwell never, until his last years when things began to get out of hand, I don't think he really enjoyed that so much, or at least saw that it might be best if he'd kept out of the limelight in order to be the stage manager of it all. Undoubtedly, he'd organised all this, he'd told the City authority to get it sorted and yet there he is in his study, with his pile of correspondence, keeping ears open to Wales and the north and the west and Ireland and just thinking 'right, I think I've got it, I think I've got my hands on this.'

Peter Moore: 'After a terrifying moment of peril Cromwell was safe. The Royal armies were still dangerously weak in relation to the thousands of insurgents across a swathe of the north but something had changed.' This is from the book. And I'm going to ask you how, from the moment of real danger in October and when they having this argument, the king and Cromwell, what did he do to ameliorate his situation so that he could metaphorically rest back in his chair, enjoy the sounds of the music and – tobacco hadn't arrived I'm sure in Tudor England but if it had he would've lit a cigarette...

Diarmaid MacCulloch: Yeah first thing would be, frantically, to do all the organisation to get that royal army, I mean get enough finance – where's the money going to come from for this royal army? And that meant scrabbling around all his City friends. So that's the job in October, keeping an ear open for what the old royal armies are doing, making a decision, 'okay we've got to involve the Duke of Norfolk, send him up to the north, he's got a bit of clout there, let's use that'. But all the time if you do that, if you let the Duke loose, what's he going to do? Is he going to ally with the pilgrims? And what is Henry's balance going to be in all this? Because the king can now choose: the Duke? Pilgrims? Cromwell? And there was clearly a moment in November where he was about to sacrifice Cromwell and we know this because there is a draft of the appeal he made to his northern subjects, it's a sort of angry rambling self-justifying letter to the whole of the north of England. He's saying: 'well I've been a good monarch and my counsellors have been absolutely splendid and noble and here's the list of the names', without the name of Thomas Cromwell or, actually, the name of Archbishop Cranmer either. It looks as if, in a first week of November, the king's thought is 'yeah I'll sacrifice them, let me put them on the table anyway'. And it's clear, I think, that this is done at Windsor Castle where the King can hold up, a safe place. Cromwell is in the Thames Valley, around that area between Hampton Court and London, the various places you can be, frantically keeping in touch via one plant in the king's private departments, Sir Ralph Sadler, who had been his own servant. And I think Ralph is keeping an ear open all the time, in fact this draft of which I've spoken is actually in Ralph Sadler's hand, it survives in the state papers in the National Archive. So Sadler, having written this for the King, goes straight back to Cromwell, says, 'look you can see the implications of this'. And the next thing that happened was that the King did something very unusual: he moved from Windsor Castle down to one of his old palaces at Richmond Palace, where he'd actually been born, and at this time Richmond was semi-derelict, it was not the sort of hotel you go and stay in, frankly, yet the king went there. Now point, geographically, about Richmond, and many of you'll realise this, is that it is very near Cromwell's then-chief country home, Mortlake. They're about a mile apart. So now the king can be very near Thomas Cromwell and Cromwell can be very near the king. And in the reign of Henry VIII that's vital, the way you manipulate the king is to look straight in his eyes. Henry doesn't like that. The foreign ambassador – not Chapuys – said 'well the funny thing is about this man, he won't look you in the face'. But if you did, you'd keep him, you'd get him. And I think that's what Cromwell had done and so the next draft of the letter to the north names Thomas Cromwell and Thomas Cranmer as good guys, splendid guys. The moment of peril had passed.

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Peter Moore: What a tantalising omission in an archive. Is this something that people have looked into before or is this something that, during your research process, rose out as a really important fact to you.

Diarmaid MacCulloch: It rose out, because both the draft is in print and the final appeal was put in print at the time to be distributed in the north by the official royal printer Bartlett. So we've had these, but no one's actually put them side-by-side and notice they're the same document only different! And once you do that...

Peter Moore: You see the difference between life and death.

Diarmaid MacCulloch: That deafening silence shouting out at you from the first one.

Peter Moore: The thing that strikes me about this December scene, for all its splendour, is the unlikeliness of it and, I think, that's the attraction of it. Because by this point if the natural course of Henry's emotion should be followed it seems that Cromwell, by logic, would be dead but he wasn't. Was there an affection between the two or is that taking it too far?

Diarmaid MacCulloch: Oh I think affection. Henry loved people who delivered the goods for him and so, far apart from the appalling mistake of the Pilgrimage, he'd delivered the goods. And I think there is a personal rapport, Cromwell had charm, a dark sense of humour, he could be funny, he was clearly clever but concealed it enough to make the king feel he wasn't cleverer than the king. So all that is a pretty good basis until someone else tries the same trick and there were always people who wanted to destroy Thomas Cromwell, chiefly the Duke of Norfolk.

Peter Moore: So he lived to fight another four years, Cromwell, in this moment. One question has always fascinated me and I'm not going to miss the opportunity to ask you this. One of these big historical theories which takes us back from the end of the year to January when Henry had that fall, did that change his personality? Did he become more erratic and angry as a monarch after the fall in January in 1536, do you think?

Diarmaid MacCulloch: Well he did but I don't think that that's the sort of argument one can make because, if you phrased it slightly differently, did he become more cruel, more vindictive, more brutal? No, I think it's right there from the beginning of the reign. The first thing that Henry VIII did was to execute two of his father's ministers as part of a noble plot but he went along with it and perfectly happy with it. You know, he liked executing people whom he regarded as the enemies of God, who are his enemies. There happened to be more of them towards the end of his reign.

Peter Moore: Okay, to me when we're talking about one year it was that fact which I wanted to clarify because it happens at the start and kind of colours of the history that happens afterwards. But what you've given us, in microcosm, is the whole fascination of the 1530s in this one year because we have the king's marriage, the great matter which which is then come to a very strange conclusion with Anne's death in the tower, then you have the business of the Reformation which was always – I mean, you've described it elsewhere, I think, as a great car crash of history, in a way – this was another moment when things nearly went off the road. Great changes across British – sorry, English society, I should say – sorry got an Oxford Don here, I'll get my terms right! But then this great question of 'are you going to survive or are you going to fall?' And here we see Cromwell, who's a survivor, isn't he? He survives longer than he should do and he does more than anyone would

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imagine one person could. Because the span of his life is one of great progress, great change, which lives with us today. I'm going to ask you one supplementary question before I, hopefully, can elicit one or two from you, so please think about what you want to say, but at the end of these travels I want to see if there's one tangible object that you could bring back to your office in Oxford from 1536. If you could bring one thing back what would it be to remind you of that time?

Diarmaid MacCulloch: Oh my Tudor *Desert Island Discs* moment! I think I would like the keyboard which Mark Smeaton plays for Anne Boleyn. It'd be a beautiful object but you think of those fingers touching it and to be able to touch the same keys.

Peter Moore: I'm imagining walking down one of these small Oxford streets and then, in the distance, hearing Mark Smeaton's keyboard tinkling away in the background which is the kind of thing to give one a shiver [*laughter*], if it wasn't quite so pretty. Thank you very much. Have you got any questions?

Audience member 1: Thanks very much. From an over arching point of view, what two or three characteristics or attributes do you think made Cromwell the man he was?

Diarmaid MacCulloch: I think one of them is that ability which Hilary Mantel was so good at spotting: the detachment, the observation, that tick, the literary tick, in her novel which is so irritating when you start reading is that 'he' is always Cromwell and that's a wonderfully distancing thing. Coming out of that, his incredible cosmopolitan outlook. He knew Italy, he spoke Italian, he spoke French, he spoke Latin, he spoke a bit of German, bit of Spanish. He was just much more broad in his view than most Tudor English people of his time. He knew that Tudor England was marginal and second-rate and it could be better and his role in life was to make it more powerful, more wealthy. So there's that. And also, I think, that the final thing which I would say almost endears him to me is his amazing ability to improvise to take a situation which could have been disastrous and make it his own. The dissolution of the monasteries, the way it was done, that awful, disastrous policy of dissolving small monasteries which triggered the Pilgrimage of Grace was not actually originally his policy and he advised against it but he took it on. And again and again what Geoffrey Elton thought was the creation of a bureaucracy to take power out of the hands of monarchy, it wasn't that at all, it was just one way of placing his people on the chessboard, as he wanted. So improvisation, it was brilliant.

Audience member 2: Yesterday you highlighted the importance of the printing press and the growth of books published. I was going to ask you in the period of the latter part of the 1530s you have a number of translations of the Bible into English – Coverdale, the Matthew Bible and the Great Bible – to what extent do you think that Cromwell was a pivotal figure in, as it were, promoting these English translations?

Diarmaid MacCulloch: Hugely central to it, absolutely central to promoting the translations. He knew them all. Coverdale had been a friend at least from the 1520s because we got letters from the 1520s from Coverdale to Cromwell and they're very intimate. Tyndale we don't have the evidence so much but clearly Cromwell was terribly concerned to try and get him saved from destruction in the Low Countries. And then, Cromwell was actually financing the printing of English translations in Paris which actually contravened one of the the laws he'd already promulgated himself in England and he rescued these sheets of the Bible in the French Inquisition, tried to confiscate them, and brought them down to Southwark where the Bible was completed. So you can hardly imagine the Bible without Thomas Cromwell and he fooled the king into making it official when, in fact, most of the texts had been written by the king's enemy

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William Tyndale whom the king had cheerfully seen remain in a cell in the Low Countries and executed without doing anything about it and that's a wonderful confidence trick on the king. That's probably one of the reasons why the king listened to Cromwell's enemies – 'he's a heretic, he's deceived you your Majesty!' – when he had.

Audience member 3: You talked of Cromwell's 'eyes and ears'. Who were these agents? How did he recruit them? From what strata of society? And how were they recompensed?

Diarmaid MacCulloch: Friendship. So, gentry all over the country. Particularly from the during the Wolsey years which meant that as he moved around the Midlands and southern England dissolving smaller monasteries he developed friendships with local gentry which lasted and, interestingly, very often with gentry who, when the Reformation started happening did not choose the Protestant route which meant that through the 1530s he had a network of contacts which weren't just a small and unpopular religious party – evangelicals or Protestants – they were right across the board. So gentry are important. He clearly had an eye for bright young men, didn't always get it right. In the book I said he had a great affection for wild young men that the rest of the world deplored. I think they reminded him of himself when he was their age and some of them were really talented. I mentioned Ralph Sadler who was in his household in the twenties, whom he got into the king's private departments, the Privy chamber, in 1536 and from then on was absolutely invaluable. So it's a mixture and there are people who have come up from very little like himself, he will identify people of talent like Thomas Risley, who had been Bishop Gardiner's servant and he sort of poached Risley in 1536. It's a mixture but talent is all and there are talented people among the nobility and the gentry and that's not a problem for him, these are not all new men. The City of London, terribly important, because that's what he knew from his thirties and twenties, he knew lots of friends who, very often, also became Protestants and rich London merchants. So really important to have the city there as a source of gossip intelligence of all sorts.

Peter Moore: Well, all that remains for me to do now is to thank you very, very much today for talking, sharing your expertise and traveling through time and, for you, getting up for the nine o'clock slot at Buxton, well done! Round of applause in your way – can we join together say thanks very much?

Diarmaid MacCulloch: Thank you, thank you very much Peter.

Peter Moore: Well I hope you enjoyed that conversation between me, Peter Moore, and Professor Diarmaid McCulloch. His groundbreaking biography of Thomas Cromwell is just out in paperback and it's a great Tudor feast of a biography. The Sunday Times has called it 'a masterpiece of documentary detective work which buzzes with the excitement of a great historian immersed in archives'.

[Sound of ticking clock]