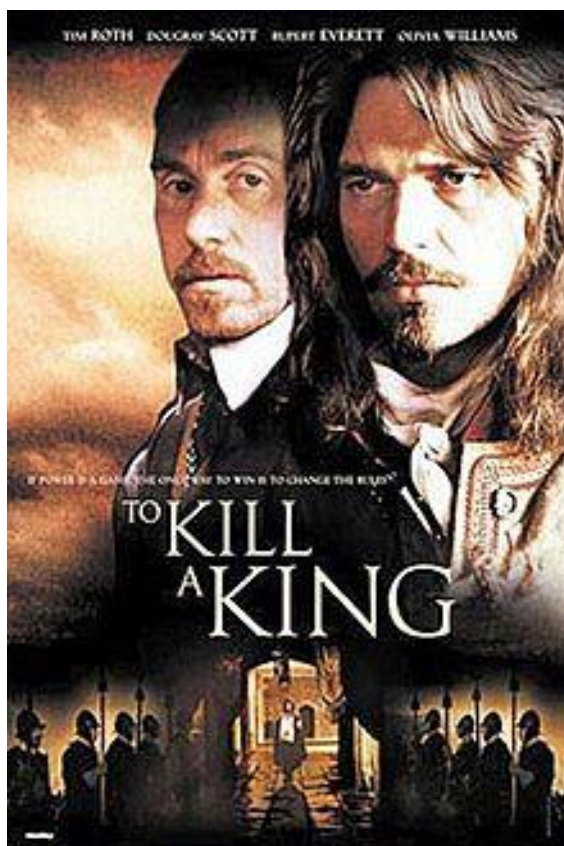


# To Kill a King



## Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill

Directed by Mike Barker. Produced by Kevin Loader. Screenplay by Jenny Mayhew. Production Design by Sophie Becher. Cinematography by Eigil Bryld. Set Decoration by Penny Craw. Music by Richard G. Mitchell. Edited by Guy Bensley. Costumes by John Bloomfield.

Cinematic length: 94 minutes (99 minutes on DVD). Distributed by Film Four Productions. Production Company: Natural Nylon. Cinematic release: May 2003. DVD release 2008. Check for ratings. Rating 75%.

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Written Without Prejudice

## Cast

- Tim Roth – MP / Lord Protector Oliver Cromwell
- Dougray Scott – Sir Thomas Fairfax
- Olivia Williams – Lady Anne Fairfax
- Rupert Everett – King Charles I
- James Bolam – Denzil Holles
- Corin Redgrave – Baron Vere
- Finbar Lynch – Henry Ireton
- Julian Rhind-Tutt – James
- Adrian Scarborough – Sgt. Joyce
- Jeremy Swift – Earl of Whitby
- Steven Webb – Boy at Naseby
- Jake Nightingale – Col. Thomas Pride
- Thomas L. Arnold – Messenger at Naseby
- Sam Spruell – King's guard
- Julian Rivett – Little
- Richard Bremmer – Abraham
- Melissa Knatchbull – Lady Margaret
- Patricia Kerrigan – Mrs. Elizabeth Cromwell
- John-Paul Macleod – Richard Cromwell
- Benedict Cumberbatch – Royalist

## Review

So much is effective in this film, but ultimately it fails in two crucial aspects, these being omissions and altering history. All of the acting is top notch. Tim Roth *is* Cromwell. As with the other cast members, the actor vanishes behind the character Roth plays him as a sharply observant, no nonsense, totally logical, incisive leader. Adept at leadership in war and politics, his incisiveness leads him into being as ruthless as he has to be without guilt or sadism. He aims to achieve a strong Christian republic in England that will be free of tyranny and gross inequality. Cromwell will achieve this by guaranteeing freedom of religion and equal legal rights for all. Cromwell's dilemma is that not many others share this vision. When

the film opens the parliamentarians led by Cromwell and Fairfax (Dougray Scott) have just won the first civil war – on the battlefield. In parliament disunity amongst the victors prevails. Some only want the king to be reasonable and they even differ in what they mean by that. Few seem to initially want a republic. Others have little idea of what they want.



*Tim Roth as Cromwell*



*Dougray Scott as Lord Thomas Fairfax*

Amongst those are Thomas Fairfax, who is everything puritanical Cromwell is not, in both the negative and positive senses. Popular, humane, given to pondering on complexities, he was a brilliant battlefield general, but as it was said of Hannibal he was brilliant at winning victories, but did not know what to do with them. Despising the king's tyranny, he fought against his class interests for a vaguely defined liberty and sense of fairness. This has cost him the enmity not only of King Charles, (Rupert Everett) who was once his friend and benefactor, but of his father in law Lord Vere (Corin Redgrave) and divided the loyalty of his confused and confusing wife, Lady Anne Fairfax (Olivia Williams).



*The two winning commanders of the Civil War ride into London*

Cromwell and Fairfax opposite in so many ways, find what united them starts dissipating in the intrigues that follow victory. This conflict in itself would make for fine drama, but gains strength when the king becomes a player, for that is exactly what he is. Beneath the elegance, the charm, the immaculate good manners, the seeming calm and the restraint, all so well conveyed by Rupert Everett, King Charles intrigues and really has the incisiveness and ruthlessness that Cromwell so obviously displays: he is Fairfax's reverse. Dismally losing a war he

should have easily won, he comes close to winning the peace and as the film shows, would have - except for Cromwell. If you miss the early scenes you would think that Charles was the victor and Fairfax the defeated from what they do, how they bear themselves and how they relate to each other. King Charles sees himself as appointed by God to rule. Therefore whatever he does is right and all these other people who militarily defeated him and hold him prisoner are forces for chaos, which in his mind he never is, no matter what he does, even to the point of causing civil wars. Even when he escapes and plunges England into a second civil war after seeing the death, chaos and misery caused by the first and then goes on trial for it he remains unperturbed. A flatterer, an emotional blackmailer and a briber of many in parliament he knows how to play politics and people. He plays on Fairfax's decency, recalling how much he has done for him. When that does not work he focuses on Lady Fairfax, mixing charm, flattery and reminders of class loyalty. He seems to sense how much control she has over her husband, as does Cromwell, who when visiting the Fairfax home, tells Fairfax that there are two generals in the house. With the parliamentary leader Denzil Holles (James Bolam) Charles knows that here is a man who can be bribed with positions and riches, as can many in parliament. Nobody could say that about Cromwell and Charles knows it; he does not even try his tricks with him when they meet: each of them understands how his enemy operates.

When parliament assembles to bring in egalitarian reforms Charles outwits Cromwell, who finds that by secretly awarding positions and land titles, the king has bribed enough parliamentarians to stop the reforms. Playing such a royal character without making him seem a modern megalomaniac, depicting him in the seventeenth century royal world where his behaviour would be a normal expectation, is a major achievement: and Rupert Everett achieves that.

The filmmakers have achieved a great deal in recreating seventeenth century England. As with the acting, sets, costumes, locales, sound and music and dialogue are all on a high level. Technically the screenplay and the editing are well done, but in terms of historical accuracy and narrative clarity they ultimately fail.

The cinematic release was 94 minutes long, the DVD version, slightly better, was 99 minutes. This short length for a film that in its production values, historic setting, complex themes and clash of personalities has an epic feel, without an epic length seems a crucial mistake. The probable problem was financial as the filming process was continually hit by financial difficulties to the extent that filming was just barely able to be finished. This probably led to the screenplay omitting much that happened. It needs to depict more to give a clearer narrative. The film may

have been edited down, but given the budget constraints it is likely that some scenes were not filmed so this film could be released. While it was better to release the film rather than withhold it, the omissions are obvious to history students studying the period and to audiences wondering what is happening.

Although the film starts just after Naseby in June 1645 and depicts events up to Cromwell's death in September 1658, little sense of passing time emerges. Some events are hours or days apart, others develop over months or years, yet few things in the film indicate these differences. Historic events are too compressed, understated or even left out. We get a mention that a second civil war will happen because the king has escaped and is rallying foreign troops, but hardly any sense of that war, the king's second defeat or of his recapture emerge. These omissions make it seem that his treason trial must be as much or more about bribing parliamentarians than about igniting a second civil war and aligning with foreigners against an English government. The depiction of Cromwell as a great egalitarian and Fairfax as a decent defender of English rights in this film are overdrawn because *To Kill A King* omits how both men called in troops to disperse the dispossessed who collectivized the commons. They were trying to establish what we now would call an anarchist-communist society. What Cromwell and his supporters wanted was more liberty, more political power and advantages for their group, the middle class, not the abolition of classes.

The very brief trial scenes are historically correct. Cromwell did very forcibly push for the treason charges and the signatures of parliamentarians on the death warrant and Fairfax did walk out of the trial. Even Lady Fairfax's dramatic outburst in court really happened. However in a film entitled *To Kill a King* surely when the king is on trial for his life, showing the indictment being read, some crucial evidence and the verdict should all be shown. Even what is here in the trial scenes is apparently only because Rupert Everett wisely insisted that the trial be depicted. His execution scene has one great historical error: Cromwell was not on the platform standing beside the executioner. He did not give a speech to the audience at the execution, reassuring people that without a king they would not have any tyrant and would be free to advance themselves. As cinema it works, intensifying the dramatic conflict between Charles and Cromwell and clarifying Cromwell's ideals. By showing a sullen, distrustful audience, the scene shows that Cromwell is a man with ideas ahead of his society and where his ideals will go when he no longer rules.



*Top: Lady Anne Fairfax (Olivia Williams) interrupts the king's trial. In reality she said much more and with more dramatics. Vexed Cromwell stands to the side Bottom: King Charles I (Rupert Everett) Imperturbable as ever, even when clearly on trial for his life amidst his enemies, the king refused to accept the authority of the court and repeatedly told them so.*

Such depictions may have been necessary compressions to ensure that the film reached the screen. However this pattern of showing attitudes, massive events and national developments by dramatized fiction creates dramatic success at the cost of historical accuracy. This frequently occurs. Fairfax was deeply and rightfully worried about Cromwell's ascension to being Lord Protector, seeing him as becoming king in all but name, but did he really arrive at the investiture with a

pistol intending to kill Cromwell? Ireton was much more than Cromwell's messenger he was his political second. Did Cromwell and Fairfax really shoot a heretic dead in the street for preaching? Is this scene included to give an idea of the authoritarian ways of the two men?

Their last meeting was not like what the filmmakers depict; Fairfax saw Cromwell in a futile and angry attempt to get his future son in law out of jail. No philosophizing or fond reconciliations took place.



*Even here he had to seem to be in command, telling the executioner when to strike.*

Dating and locating scenes and replacing inaccuracies with true accounts could have saved this film. Another twenty to forty minutes should have been included. The many previously mentioned omissions, showing the devastation caused by the king and the process of his trial and why he deserved execution, were all necessary for this film to reach the great potential shown in the version we have. Hopefully a director's cut will appear.

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