A few honest men are better than numbers.
Oliver Cromwell, 1599–1658

O horse, O horse, O bully Graham
and pray do get thee far from me with speed,
and get thee out o’ this country quite,
that no one may know who has done the deed.

17th-century broadsheet.

The Puritan revolution was also the age of John Milton, its foremost poet and prophet. This was the time of the awakening of the human mind to a full consciousness of its rights to freedom of thought and freedom of imagination. The commotions of the Civil War were, as he perceived, the pains and agonies which accompanied the birth of a new society, although not quite of the type he desired and had hoped for. Milton’s writings, as expressed in his pamphlets, are the voice of liberty, religious, private and political, which would reconcile the conflicting force. His dictum: ‘Liberty . . . is the nurse of all great wits!’ certainly was an ideal to which Culpeper also subscribed. Milton’s age, however, became one of disintegration, when the weakening of accepted principles and the rise of new modes of thought resulted in an intellectual as well as social upheaval.¹

Culpeper can clearly be looked upon as part of this spiritual process of liberation, and it is therefore not surprising that he participated in the battlefield on the Parliamentarian side.

Politically, the Civil War was the result of a long conflict between the people’s Parliament and an estranged monarch and his religious

O. Thulesius, Nicholas Culpeper
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ambitions. The commotions of the Civil War were felt all over Britain. To Puritan protestants and the Calvinist Scots, both the monarch and his archbishop, Laud, were guilty of popish innovations which could be a prelude to a return to Rome. There was also the question of taxation: ship money horrified a great part of the English gentry. Londoners were discontent with the King, merchants saw their trade restricted and citizens were worried by rising prices. The reason was that Charles I granted monopolies to his favourites and courtiers, thereby increasing his influence and receiving extra revenues. When, in 1642, a confrontation became inevitable, King Charles left London. He moved from Hampton Court to York to find support for his cause. Parliament had taken over government in London and under their leader, the Earl of Essex, mobilised the people against monarchy.

Meanwhile the King also had enlisted an army in the north and raised his standard at Nottingham where he was met by his German nephews Prince Rupert, the 'mad cavalier', and his brother Maurice.

Essex left London in September and joined forces with a troop of horse led by captain Oliver Cromwell from Cambridge. The first battle in the Civil War between Parliament and King Charles I which eventually produced the Commonwealth and the Cromwellian Protectorate was that of Edgehill in 1642.2–5

The call for volunteers met Culpeper in London and he immediately replied by going to the recruitment centre near the Royal Exchange at Cornhill. There he offered his service to take part in the battle. When he was asked about his profession he explained that he was an apothecary and practitioner. The recruitment officer said: 'We do not need you at the battle front but you can come along as a field surgeon, since most of the barbers and physicians are royalist asses and we have use for someone to look after our wounded.'6

During the Civil War physicians, with the exception of a small number known by name, were not regularly appointed to the fighting services, but towards the middle of the seventeenth century apothecaries were recruited.

So it was decided, and Culpeper prepared himself for the journey north with the convoy of troops. He had always wanted to be a real physician, approved by the Royal College of Physicians, but he had never dreamt of becoming a surgeon. He was not much inclined towards bloody butchery and to him it was a barbarous but necessary trade. He had never had any clashes with members