**Does Oliver Cromwell merit a statue outside the Houses of Parliament?**

*“Necessity hath no law” – Oliver Cromwell 1654*

Cromwell has always stood out as a controversial figure – some people love him, some people loathe him. John Milton thought he was a hero “our chief of men,” Winston Churchill thought he was a military dictator. There was much controversy when the statue of Cromwell was erected outside the House of Commons in 1899 in the teeth of opposition from Irish and Scottish MPs. In 2004 Tony Banks campaigned to have it torn down. Even more recently a petition submitted during the 2010 -2015 parliament claimed that the statue *“does not sit happily in a democratic vision of a modern inclusive democracy. It is also most offensive to the people of the Republic of Ireland and Scotland.”*

The slaughter of 3,000 soldiers and unarmed civilians following the siege of Drogheda is a hard case to answer, and it’s the nub of the issue for anti Cromwellians. Why should we celebrate a genocidist and war criminal, by having a statue to his memory lowering over us as we walk by the Houses of Parliament? Even by the tenets of his own day, Cromwell’s ruthless actions were not justified, and gave rise to the legend of a cruel and merciless tyrant that has survived to the modern day, exacerbated by the rancorous relationship between Ireland and Westminster that played out during the twentieth century.

The case against Cromwell extends into failings in his political career too. The Nominated Assembly, the First and Second Protectorate Parliaments and the Rule of the Major Generals, all of which Cromwell had a significant role in establishing, failed to function effectively. It only got worse when upon Cromwell’s death in 1658 he left his Protectorate in the hands of his incompetent son, Richard Cromwell. The country was only too glad, on May 14th 1660, to welcome back to the throne the son of the monarch it had beheaded eleven years earlier.

And yet there is a case to be put in his favour. Despite operating in a time of extreme turbulence, Cromwell brought to bear a rigorous, moral conscience. Similarly to Robespierre “the incorruptible” 130 years later, no one ever accused Cromwell of dishonesty or of lining his own pockets. Having rejected the centuries old doctrine of the divine right of kings, he wasn’t going to set himself up as an alternative tyrant, which is why he refused to accept the crown when it was offered to him. He was in fact an extremely virtuous leader and his proposition of radical changes to politics and religion were aimed at creating a just and prosperous society. He helped to establish a more meritocratic system, which helped to bridge the vast gap in class; social status no longer completely dictated economic success, due to the fact that more people began to work in the jobs they were more suitable for. It helped to facilitate a rise in the merchant population thus significantly boosting success in trade and economic output. In addition, a more organised army improved England’s success in foreign policy, similarly founded on meritocratic principles. Cromwell himself said, “I had rather have a plain, russet-coated Captain, that knows what he fights for, and loves what he knows, than that which you call a Gentle-man and is nothing else”.

Ironically, the virtuous society that Cromwell would have ideally liked would still have had Charles I as a king as he had not been an anti-monarchist. When Charles surrendered to the Scots in 1646, Cromwell sought a compromise and the Heads of Proposal was offered to the king on the 2nd of August 1647, which he refused to accept. Cromwell only turned against the king after Charles had signed a secret Engagement with the Scots, in which he requested their military assistance, which started the brief Second Civil War from 1648-49. Only then was Cromwell convinced that the king was a liability if kept in custody and the only step forward was to have him executed.

Just as he was not a king slayer by nature nor was Cromwell religiously intolerant. Cromwell was a firm believer in a ‘Godly’ society whereby everyone lived in harmony with one another despite differences in religious beliefs (Catholics excepted, who he saw as a political threat). “All men that believe the remission of sins through the blood of Christ,” Cromwell once said “are members of Jesus Christ and are to him as the apple of his eye.” Furthermore, those who were discreet in their religious practice were allowed to meet outside the church without disturbance. This level of toleration extended to Independents who could serve as parish ministers whilst also meeting their own church members in a separate place. Presbyterian and moderate Anglican ministers found employment. Cromwell’s religious tolerance was specifically demonstrated by his intervention in the James Naylor case. Naylor re-enacted the arrival of Christ in Jerusalem, a crime of stupidity rather than heinous blasphemy in Cromwell’s eyes; he intervened to reject parliament’s right to execute the Quaker. This new level of toleration had never been seen before; it was a stepping-stone to a more tolerant and diverse society.

As Cromwell was a great political leader, so was he an excellent military leader as well. Although the atrocities in Ireland cannot be excused, Cromwell was an outstanding commander. He focused a lot of his attention on the training and discipline of his troops and was a brilliant tactician. This strong army that Cromwell had helped to manage enabled Britain to participate on the world stage and challenge prominent trading nations such as the Netherlands. The Dutch were destroyed in the first Anglo-Dutch war in 1654, paving the way for the City of London’s dominance as a financial powerhouse. Through the capture of Jamaica from the Spanish he seized control of the sugar trade, and established the basis for new colonies in the Caribbean and in India in the 1660s. Cromwell made it possible for the British Empire to grow and flourish.

Many people have adopted false mythologies about Cromwell. Perhaps the most enduring was that he was a sour-faced, doctrinaire Puritan. In reality, Cromwell was a lot livelier than people imagine. He was a practical joker who smeared toffee on the seats at his daughter’s wedding and who flicked ink at his fellow regicides when signing the king’s death warrant. He smoked, drank and it is a myth that he was personally responsible for abolishing Christmas.

So these are the cases in favour and against Cromwell. However, before coming to a conclusion about whether Cromwell’s statue merits its place outside the Houses of Parliament, we need broaden the debate in relation to the specifics of the question. Statues of famous people are put up, quite simply, to commemorate their lives and to honour the deeds they have accomplished – whether political, military, sporting or humanitarian. But how those deeds are viewed centuries later is another matter.

Maybe part of the reason why Cromwell’s statue is contentious is because of the recent debate about another “colonial oppressor” Cecil Rhodes. Student protestors at the University of Cape Town rejected the presence of the statue due to its inextricable link to the apartheid regime whose scars are still far from healed and for whom Rhodes was a founding father. Their campaign “Rhodes Must Fall” gained such traction that within weeks the statue was pulled down. These protests spread to other universities, including Oxford in England, where the students’ union voted to remove a statue of Rhodes that stood outside Oriel College. However the campaign was unsuccessful, not least because donors threatened to withdraw funding, but more so perhaps because in Oxford Rhodes was seen as a historical product of his time rather than as a toxic oppressor whose poison still permeated the daily reality of political life.

The same can be said for Cromwell. Despite the grievances that Irish people still feel (because the repercussions of Cromwell’s campaign unravelled into the modern age with the country of Ireland splitting into two) we need to place him into historical context. The threat of a Catholic invasion funnelled through the back door of Ireland was a very real threat in the 1650s. Cromwell sought to obliterate Irish relations with Catholic countries on the continent. He did a Harry Truman, choosing radically brutal tactics as a means of forestalling future catastrophes. We should remember too, that following the massacres at Drogheda (Hiroshima) and Wexford (Nagasaki) Cromwell was much more lenient with other conquered towns.

Another question to ask is if it is not Cromwell worthy of a statue then who could replace him on his vacated plinth? The three most recent statues to be put up in Parliament were Nelson Mandela (2007), Lloyd George (2007) and Mahatma Gandhi (2015). What links all three of these characters was that they all fought vigorously for the rights and welfare of the dispossessed and unrepresented poor. Cromwell also did the same things by fighting for the rights of the “Godly” working folk in England and against the royalists and a failing monarchy. His promotion of a meritocratic system created opportunities for poorer, less well educated or socially connected citizens to break out of the cycle of poverty.

Seven of the eleven statues in Parliament Square feature British prime ministers. There’s also Abraham Lincoln, Jan Smuts, Nelson Mandela and Mahatma Ghandi (the only non prime minster/president.) Martin Luther King is sometimes offered up as a candidate, and he’d fit well with the three most recently successful applicants. But maybe there is an argument for replacing a Briton with a Briton. The Duke of Wellington is a viable option, being a solid nineteenth century historical statesman. But there would be little popular appetite for such a conservative choice, and besides, though he was a successful military leader, he was a mediocre politician – and anyway there’s already a full size equestrian statue of the “Iron Duke” down the road at the Royal Exchange. Margaret Thatcher could be a possible option, as there are currently no female statues in Parliament Square. But she’s already got a full sized, handbag clutching likeness installed inside the Palace of Westminster.

How do we sum up the achievements of a man like Oliver Cromwell? He started life as an ordinary land owning farmer, became an astute military commander, and after much soul searching a regicide that toyed with the idea of becoming king himself. In a sectarian, intolerant age, he championed religious toleration. In an age of sour faced Puritanism, he loved practical joking. He didn’t seek power for personal aggrandisement, but as a means of serving his fellow countrymen. He laid the foundations for the British Empire and Britain’s prosperity over the ensuing centuries. He is an original and compelling figure of British history, whose contribution is unparalleled.

At the beginning of this essay, I mentioned the 2010-2015 petition to get the statue of Oliver Cromwell pulled down. Only eight people signed it.

The statue should stay.

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