

Divisive He Stands

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By Mike Trippitt

ON REMEMBRANCE SUNDAY, the sight of Oliver Cromwell adorned with a scarf of red poppies left me pondering his presence in our town centre.

Last September, *The Sunday Telegraph* reported historian Jeremy Crick's call for the statue of Cromwell outside the Palace of Westminster to be removed. Crick was quoted as saying: "Its banishment would be poetic justice for his Taliban-like destruction of so many of England's cultural and religious artifacts carried out by his fanatical Puritan followers."

Crick was not referring to the statue here in St Ives (one of only three of Cromwell on public display in England), but campaigns to remove statues of those with controversial pasts continue to arise. In America, there are calls for the removal of several public sculptures of those associated with its civil wars.

Cromwell is the most divisive figure of Britain's political heritage. He championed against the power of the monarchy and became the first, and only, head of state not of royal blood. Yet after his death from natural causes he was "executed" posthumously, and his severed head displayed at Westminster Hall.

His actions and motivation continue to divide historians and commentators. Almost 200 years ago Huntingdon MP Lord Russell described Cromwell as "the only great man the shire has produced", but conceded that the people of the county "have not yet dared to raise a statue in his honour on the soil from which he sprang".

But in 1901 they did. Here in St Ives. The statue, by renowned sculptor F.W. Pomeroy (the creator of the Lady Justice statue on The Old Bailey), owes its existence in part to the historian and philosopher Thomas Carlyle. His 1845 work *The Letters and Speeches Of Oliver Cromwell* gave momentum to the belief that Cromwell was a statesman whose life should be celebrated.

Though Carlyle was against the growing trend of the day to erect "ugly brazen images" of "mere commonplace adventurers" and "paltry scoundrels, worthy of immediate oblivion only", he was in favour

of the St Ives statue. As he put it: "Proper, good every way, and right on the part of St. Ives."

So for nearly 120 years, Cromwell has stared out, black-eyed across our market square. The bronze and Portland stone of the monument stand immutable against the elements.

But for how long.

Will the tide of political correctness sweeping our shores, and the sensitivities that it stirs result in the statue being removed in the next 120 years. Will it be replaced with something intellectually sterile and uncontentious.

Who knows. For now at least, when we face the war memorial to honour our fallen, we have the choice of whether we look up to, or turn our back on, Oliver Cromwell.

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