Statues and politics

Controversies over statues are not a new feature of political debate. **William Wallace** describes the role the statue of Oliver Cromwell played in the end of Lord Rosebery's Liberal government.

Cromwell's Statue and the Fall of the Liberal Government in 1895

Those who assert in the contemporary political debate that statues should be respected as symbolising the accepted version of British history have forgotten the controversy over the erection of the statue of Oliver Cromwell outside Westminster Hall. On 14 June 1895, the House of Commons in committee voted on a motion to reduce the sum allocated in the Estimates by Lord Rosebery's Liberal government for the erection of such a statue by £500 (then a considerable amount of money). After a sharp debate, the critical motion fell short by only fifteen votes. On 17 June, at report stage, renewed opposition led to the government's Commons leadership withdrawing its support; when Irish MPs nevertheless pressed to a division, the motion to fund the statue was defeated by 200 votes to 83. Three days later, the government lost another vote, on a minor issue of army estimates and the availability of cordite, and resigned.

Why so much passion on both sides about Cromwell, 240 years after his death? And why did this contribute to the collapse of the Liberal government? And how, in spite of this defeat, was the statue erected in time for the tercentenary of Cromwell's birth in 1899? The explanation lies partly in changing attitudes to Cromwell in the late nineteenth century, partly in the weak and divided character of the post-Gladstone administration of 1894–5, and partly in the character of Lord Rosebery himself.

Cromwell

Cromwell's reputation had remained 'overwhelmingly critical and negative' for the first 150 years after his death – except on the part of English Nonconformists, who remembered him as the first protector and tolerator of religious dissent.[1] Whigs thought more kindly of him than Tories, who dismissed him as a regicide – though radical Whigs condemned him as the man who suspended parliament and replaced it with authoritarian rule.[2] Parliament and the seventeenth-century struggle against prerogative power, together with the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1689, played a central role in the Whig interpretation of history.

When the Palace of Westminster was rebuilt after it had burned down in 1834, the Royal Fine Arts Commission, chaired by the young Prince

Albert, drew up a list of figures from the Civil War to be erected inside the palace. These originally included Cromwell, alongside Falkland, Hampden, Clarendon, Strafford, Montrose and Monck; but Cromwell's statue was not commissioned.[3] When, in 1868, the Fine Arts Commission approved a line of English and British rulers for the Royal Gallery, *The Times* protested that Cromwell had again been omitted; but the Tory First Commissioner of Works, Lord John Manners, dismissed the complaint out of hand in a Commons exchange.[4]

In the agitation for political reform that led up to the 1832 Reform Act, the image of Cromwell as a leader who dismissed a corrupt parliament had become more popular. But it was a Tory, Thomas Carlyle, whose publication of Cromwell's *Letters and Speeches* in 1845 reshaped his legacy among the literary and political establishment. Carlyle believed strongly in the importance of 'great men' in history; and for him Oliver Cromwell had undoubtedly been a great man. Imperialists, both Liberal and Conservative, began to look back to Cromwell as the first ruler of the 'three kingdoms' to have established a strong navy and to make England play a powerful role in the international politics of Europe. Austen Chamberlain made this point in the debate on 17 June 1895, which ended in government abstention and defeat; so did John Morley (then chief secretary for Ireland).[5] W. T. Stead, the editor of the *Northern Echo*, had linked Gladstone's campaign on behalf of the Bulgarians persecuted by Turks to Cromwell's efforts to defend the Protestant Waldensians, exploiting Milton's well-known sonnet ('Avenge, oh God, thy slaughter'd saints…') in support.[6] Radicals had come to see Cromwell as 'the embodiment of successful resistance to arbitrary power' – as the prominent radical Henry Labouchere put it in the same debate.[7] An East Anglian Liberal MP, representing a strongly Nonconformist constituency, had declared in the short debate three days earlier that 'Cromwell fought against the tyranny of kings … The statue would simply be an historical tribute to a great man, one of the strongest whom England ever knew.'[8]

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Irish MPs, on whom the Liberal government depended for its majority, saw Cromwell very differently. The MP for Roscommon, who moved the motion to reduce the Estimates on 14 June, declared that 'in Ireland Cromwell was thought of with a bitterness and hatred that could scarcely be exceeded.' He quoted from Gardiner's just-published *History of the Commonwealth* on the Drogheda massacre that Cromwell 'had one measure for Protestants and another for Papists, especially for Irish Papists.'[9] Willie Redmond, a prominent Irish Nationalist MP, added that Cromwell was 'regarded by the nine-tenths of the Irish people not only as a murderer, but as a canting hypocritical murderer as well.'[10]

Britain's Jewish community had also reappraised the importance of Oliver Cromwell. Carlyle had stated that Cromwell's contribution to the position of Jews in England had been limited. But, in 1894, Lucien Wolf had suggested in a paper to the Jewish Historical Society that his interventions had enabled Jews in London to gain freedom of worship and protection from discrimination in trade.[11] London's Jewish community in the 1890s was small but influential. Rosebery knew its leading members well. He had become a friend of Baron Mayer de Rothschild through their shared love of horse racing and had married his only daughter Hannah.

Religion was an important factor in political and social life in the 1890s. The Commons spent

a good deal longer on 17 June 1895 debating Welsh disestablishment and religious tithes than it devoted to the proposal to pay for a statue of Cromwell out of public funds. Across the Channel, the Dreyfus affair had just erupted, with Catholics on one side and secular Republicans on the other, and with strong elements of anti-Semitism. Views on Cromwell differed from oratory to church to chapel to synagogue.

The Liberal Party was a coalition of Nonconformists and socially minded Anglicans, with support from many within the Jewish community, but was dependent on the continuing support of Catholic Irish MPs. Gladstone's Protestant religiosity and his commitment to disestablishment had sustained the loyalty of Nonconformist leaders and their churches; his departure weakened that link. Cromwell's willingness to allow debates within the New Model Army and the Commonwealth on diverse structures for worship had earned him heroic status among Nonconformists – though for Irish Catholics he was a symbol of oppression. It was not easy to hold this diverse coalition together, and Cromwell was a symbol for division.

A fractious and demoralised Liberal government

When the 84-year-old Gladstone finally retired as prime minister in 1894, he left his party without an agreed successor or political strategy. Gladstone favoured Earl Spencer as his successor, despite his position in the Tory-dominated Lords. Queen Victoria, suspicious of almost all Liberals and still exercising a considerable degree of choice in the appointment of a prime minister, preferred Rosebery. Chancellor of the Exchequer William Harcourt had acted as Gladstone's deputy for much of his premiership and hoped to succeed him. Rosebery was twenty years younger than Harcourt and had served as his junior minister; his first ministerial position had been as under-secretary of state to Harcourt as home secretary in 1881. Harcourt and John Morley, chief secretary for Ireland, had taken much of the burden of managing Commons business in Gladstone's final administration, while Rosebery as foreign secretary remained at some distance from the details of legislation and party management. Many of Gladstone's other senior ministers, however, favoured Rosebery over Harcourt.

Personal relations among leading ministers were poor at the outset and worsened as the months went by. Harcourt was abrupt and short-tempered with his colleagues. He resented Rosebery's promotion over him and attempted to impose tight conditions in return for accepting office under him.[12] After the success of Harcourt's 1894 budget, which introduced death duties, dislike deepened into hatred. He told Morley that Rosebery was 'a rogue and a liar and he knows that I know him to be such'.[13] Lewis Harcourt, his son and private secretary, openly jeered Rosebery as the prime minister arrived to present the prizes at Eton College in June 1895.

In 1890 John Morley had agreed that he would support Harcourt against Rosebery as Gladstone's successor; but the two had later fallen out. In 1894 Morley hoped that Rosebery on becoming prime minister would offer him the Foreign Office, after his years of service on Irish home rule; but Rosebery, a Liberal imperialist, disliked his 'little Englander' tendencies, and preferred Lord Kimberley. The radicals in the parliamentary party, committed to abolishing the Lords, objected to a peer as prime minister. Labouchere's bitter attacks on Rosebery were sharpened by the latter's resistance to the determined efforts two years earlier of both Labouchere and his wife to persuade Rosebery as foreign secretary to appoint him minister in Washington.[14]

The morale of the Liberal Party and government would have been higher if there had been less confusion about policies and priorities now that Gladstone's dominating presence had withdrawn. Rosebery caused widespread dismay by admitting, under pressure as he wound up his government's first Queen's Speech debate in an overwhelmingly hostile House of Lords, that Irish home rule was not attainable until public opinion in England was willing to accept it.

He then compounded that confusion by making abolition or reform of the Lords the main plank of a succession of campaigning speeches, while failing to define whether he wanted to replace the hereditary second chamber or move to a single-chamber legislature. Rosebery's Bradford speech in October 1894, in which he referred to the Liberals struggling against the Lords 'in the manner of Cromwell's Ironsides', alarmed some of his colleagues as well as the Queen and the Tory press.[15] Harcourt meanwhile moved on from introducing death duties to campaigning for temperance reform (restrictions on alcohol), a popular issue with Nonconformist voters. Neither Rosebery nor other senior ministers focused on social reform or workers' rights, which would have been welcomed by many recently enfranchised voters and would have provided a rationale for a confrontation with the Lords on issues far more popular than Ireland.[16]

The question of a memorial to Cromwell would have been a minor issue for a strong government. It was first announced to the Commons by Herbert Gladstone, the commissioner of works, in August 1894, looking ahead to the tercentenary of Cromwell's birth. Rosebery wrote him a stern note to complain that he had known nothing about it until he read about it in *The Times*. The cabinet agreed to the proposal in December. The following April, however, Harcourt attempted to insist that the statue should be placed between those of Charles I and II inside Westminster Hall rather than in Rosebery's chosen site, which he described as in 'the ditch' outside.[17] It seems remarkable that the cabinet had not anticipated the reaction of Irish MPs. When these erupted in the Commons, Harcourt and Morley's response was understandable in terms of parliamentary management but infuriating to a prime minister already deeply suspicious of their intentions and their refusal to consult him on policy and procedure. Angry notes were exchanged, relations within the cabinet deteriorated further, and defeat on the issue of supplies of cordite for the army a few days later led to the government's disintegration.

Archibald Philip Primrose, 5th Earl of Rosebery (1847–1929) (© National Portrait Gallery, London)

Rosebery

The eccentricity of Lord Rosebery was a major factor in both this disintegration and the outcome of the dispute over Cromwell. In 1894–5, Rosebery was one of the richest men in Britain. He had inherited the Dalmeny estate, west of Edinburgh, when a student at Oxford, on the death of his grandfather; his father had died when he was seven. His marriage to Hannah Rothschild had brought him ownership of Mentmore and its Buckinghamshire estate, and considerable additional wealth. She encouraged him to purchase a house in Berkeley Square as their London base, while Rosebery also bought a mansion (the Durdans) close to the racecourse in Epsom to support his involvement with horse racing.

Early inheritance of his title deprived him of the 'apprenticeship' many young aristocrats served, as MPs for family-sponsored seats. He never cultivated close ties with Liberal MPs; his reputation was based upon his fluency as a speaker at mass meetings. He first came to prominence as the manager of Gladstone's Midlothian campaign – directed from Dalmeny, using

techniques of street processions and mass gatherings that he had observed on visits to the USA. Throughout his career he was ambivalent about public office. He turned down Gladstone's first offer of a ministerial post, in 1880. He resigned after two years in office in 1883 to embark on a lengthy tour of North America and Australia. He became foreign secretary in Gladstone's brief 1886 government, but agreed to resume that post in 1892 only after repeated pleas, during which Morley travelled up to Dalmeny to bring him back to London and a succession of others then visited Berkeley Square.[18] A similar sequence of hesitations, imploring letters and journeys to follow him from one of his four residences to another preceded his acceptance of nomination as prime minister in 1894.

Rosebery was an intensely private man, marked by his privileged but lonely upbringing. His mother had remarried (becoming the Duchess of Cleveland). His marriage to Hannah Rothschild had provided personal and political support, and encouragement for his career in public life; but she had died (of complications following typhoid) in 1890, leaving him with four young children. Rosebery's politics were a mixture of social reform and liberal imperialism – shaped by his visits to North America and

Photo: Statue of Oliver Cromwell in front of the Houses of Parliament (Dion Hinchcliffe, Creative Commons BY-SA 2.0)

Australia. He was a powerful speaker, attracting enormous crowds in cities around the country. After the Liberal defeat in the 1886 election, he accepted nomination from the City of London to the new London County Council, which he chaired for six years – switching in 1892 to election for East Finsbury, where his representation is commemorated in Rosebery Avenue. In 1893, while foreign secretary, he successfully mediated between the striking Miners' Federation and their employers, at Gladstone's request. Queen Victoria described one of his speeches, in Birmingham in 1892, as 'radical to such a degree as to be almost communistic,' adding that 'poor Lady Rosebery is no longer there to hold him back.'[19]

He had failed to complete his studies at Oxford, withdrawing when his college told him to sell the racehorse he had just bought or leave. Two of his horses won the Derby, in 1894 and 1895 – a popular achievement for a struggling prime minister among many voters, though much less welcome to Liberal Nonconformists. Yet he was intensely intellectual. He restored part of the ruined castle in the grounds

of Dalmeny as a library and study for which he assembled an extensive collection on Scots and British history. He published four biographies, the earliest in 1891 of Pitt the younger. His espousal of the Cromwell proposal, once it had been launched, fitted in with his acceptance that great men shaped history, that the Whig historical narrative was key to Britain's rise, and that the Cromwellian Commonwealth had witnessed (in the wars with the Dutch) the beginnings of imperial assertion.

Rosebery was far more popular in the country than among his colleagues when Gladstone resigned. Those who had worked with him found him secretive, restless, moody, sarcastic, self-centred and hard to fathom.[20] He lacked the temperament to create a team out of government or party. His habitual insomnia had worsened after Hannah's death, and worsened again under the stresses of holding his divided government together. His popularity plummeted as he failed to provide any clear direction for his government. In the early months of 1895, after Rosebery had privately threatened to resign unless his cabinet treated him with more respect, his ability to sleep collapsed, and his doctor injected him repeatedly with morphine.[21] His partial recovery returned him to the head of a demoralised and directionless government and a faction-riven party. Cromwell and cordite were enough to bring it down.

Nevertheless, the statue was erected

Morley and Harcourt had withdrawn the government's support for public funding of the statue. But many of the statues that filled Britain's cities and towns in the late nineteenth century were funded by 'public subscription' – by contributions from supportive individuals and groups. His initial irritation at Herbert Gladstone's failure to inform him of the initial proposal long since forgotten, Rosebery wrote to him on 19 June (two days after the lost vote) that 'we must not lose Cromwell's statue. And I am authorised by a gentleman, whose solvency and good faith I can guarantee, to say that he will gladly take the place of the government in the matter and pay for the statue.'[22] Rosebery had already taken an active personal interest in the choice of sculptor and site; it came to be universally assumed that he was himself the anonymous donor. The contract for the statue was signed before the Liberals left office. Lord Salisbury's government honoured the contract and the choice of site.[23] Rosebery visited the sculptor's studio on several occasions to discuss the details of the statue's stance and dress. Everything was ready in time for the tercentenary of Cromwell's birth in 1899.[24]

The unveiling was anticlimactic: by workmen, at 7.30 a.m., to avoid giving an opportunity for protestors to gather. That evening, however, Lord Rosebery delivered a lengthy speech on 'Cromwell's immortal memory' to the 'Cromwell Tercentenary Celebration' at the Queen's Hall. The audience included a large body of Nonconformists and, as Rosebery noted, the leaders of the Jewish community. Rosebery praised Cromwell as 'the raiser and maintainer of the power and Empire of England', claiming the Lord Protector as a precursor of his own version of Liberal imperialism; as the first proponent of religious toleration, citing his willingness to listen to the Quaker George Fox; and as a statesman inspired by a firm religious faith:

> I will go so far as to say that, great and powerful as we are; we could find employment for a few Cromwells now. … The Cromwell of the nineteenth or of the twentieth century … would not compromise with principles. His faith would be in God and in freedom, and in the influence of Great Britain as promoting, as asserting, both.[25]

The statue is still there, standing on what is now labelled 'Cromwell Green'. There have been occasional protests against its position, from MPs with Irish links. After an attempted IRA attack on Westminster Hall in 1974 the statue was removed to a 'safe location'. Anthony

Crosland, announcing to the Commons as secretary of state for the environment that it would be returned in early 1977, declared that 'Cromwell was a stern defender of our constitutional liberties.'[26] And current controversies over statues in Westminster have passed Cromwell by.

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1 Peter Gaunt, 'The Reputation of Oliver Cromwell in the 19th Century', *Parliamentary History*, 28/3 (8 Sep. 2009), pp. 425–8.
2 Blair Worden, *Roundhead Reputations: The English Civil War and the passions of posterity* (Allen Lane, 2001), chs. 2–6.
3 Worden, p. 302, notes that the prince consort 'made some amends' for leaving Cromwell out of the dignitaries commemorated at Westminster by naming the main road past his new museums after him.
4 Stephen K. Roberts, 'The legacy of Oliver Cromwell in the English and UK Parliament, 1660–2009', in Jane A. Mills (ed.), *Cromwell's Legacy* (Manchester University Press, 2012), p. 161. See also Philip Ward-Jackson, *Public Sculpture of Historic Westminster*, vol. i (Liverpool University Press 2011), 172–73, and John Battick and N. C. Kmimavicz, 'Much Ado about Oliver: The Parliamentary Dispute over Cromwell's Statue', *History Today*, 24/6 (1974), pp. 406–12.
5 Hansard, Parl. Debs. (series 4) vol. 34, cols. 1345, 1350 (17 Jun. 1895).
6 Roberts, 'Legacy', p. 151.
7 Hansard, Parl. Debs. (series 4) vol. 34, col.1353 (17 Jun. 1895).
8 Hansard, Parl. Debs. (series 4) vol. 34, col. 1181 (14 Jun. 1895).
9 Ibid., col. 1192. Samuel Rawson Gardiner, *History of the Commonwealth and Protectorate* (Longmans 1894).
10 Ibid., col. 1192.
11 Cited in Philip Ward-Jackson, 'W. H. Thornycroft's Statue of Oliver Cromwell and the Bitter Waters of Babylon', *Sculpture Journal*, 29/2 (2020), p. 187.
12 David Brooks (ed.), *The Destruction of Lord Rosebery* (Historians' Press London, 1986), pp. 110–14.
13 Leo McKinstry, *Rosebery: Statesman in turmoil* (John Murray, 2005), p. 320.
14 Ibid., pp. 2326–7'
15 Brooks, *Destruction*, pp. 47, 52.
16 D. A. Hamer, *Liberal Politics in the Age of Gladstone and Rosebery* (Clarendon Press, 1972), pp. 197–9. See also Brooks, *Destruction*, pp. 43–4.
17 McKinstry, *Rosebery*, p. 377.
18 Ibid., pp. 224–33.
19 Ibid., p. 217.
20 Ibid., ch.1.
21 Brooks, *Destruction*, pp. 224–35 provides Sir Edward Hamilton's descriptions of Rosebery's illness. See also McKinstry, *Rosebery*, pp. 339–44.
22 Cited in Ward-Jackson, 'Thornycroft's Statue', p. 187.
23 Worden, *Roundhead Reputations*, p. 312, states that Rosebery 'made a bargain with the incoming Tory government', which Salisbury and Balfour honoured despite continuing criticism from their backbenches.
24 A statue of Cromwell had already been erected in Deansgate, Manchester before the tercentenary of his birth, paid for by the widow of a prominent Liberal Nonconformist. Displaced by bomb damage in 1940, it is now in Wythenshawe Park. In 1899 a Liberal councillor in Warrington presented John Bell's statue of Cromwell exhibited at the 1862 London Exhibition to his town, from which Cromwell had commanded his armies in 1648; there was a vigorous debate in the council before it was erected. Thomas Carlyle had recommended a statue in his birthplace of St Ives, in a letter to I. K. Holland in 1849. Nextdoor Huntingdon debated commissioning one for the tercentenary; when that plan was abandoned St Ives commissioned its own, erected in 1901.
25 Lord Rosebery, *Cromwell: A speech delivered at the Cromwell Tercentenary Celebration* (Humphreys, London, 1900).
26 David L. Smith, 'A statue of Oliver Cromwell at Westminster?', *The Property Chronicle*, 2 Jul. 2020.