

Cromwell

An address delivered at St. Ives, Huntingdonshire

By Lord Edmond Fitzmaurice

On the occasion of the unveiling of a statue of Cromwell by Mr. Pomeroy. Erected by public subscription.

IT was my privilege the other day to read the account of the unveiling of the statue of King Alfred at Winchester. I could not help mentally contrasting some of the circumstances with those of to-day connected with the statue which I have just unveiled. King Alfred is not the subject of modern controversy. I think that even the Danish Minister might have been present with unruffled feelings on the 20th of last month in the ancient capital of Wessex. But the name of Oliver Cromwell, in this respect almost alone of English historical characters, is still able to arouse political animosities of the fiercest character, and even to excite the passions of Parliament to fever pitch. We may have divergent views about the doings of Henry VIII. ; but we do not make him the subject of debate in the House of Commons and take a division about his numerous marriages. Our feelings about Queen Elizabeth may be mixed, but the House of Lords is not to-day asked to take sides in a controversy about her virtues, and Convocation accepts her "as a bright occidental star." The great names even of Pitt and Fox are passing more and more out of the region of political controversy into that of purely historical discussion. Not so Cromwell. A debate in the House of Commons about a proposal to erect a statue to him near the Palace of Westminster was one of the contributory causes, I am told, of the fall of a recent Ministry. The House of Lords only the other day prayed the Crown to be relieved of the neighbourhood of that same statue. One Prime Minister has publicly consoled himself by reflecting that if the statue has after all been erected, it has at least been erected at the bottom of a pit. Another Prime Minister has come to the rescue, and has consecrated that pit with the

adornment of his eloquence. While these debates have been raging about the statue which has been placed outside the walls of Parliament, a bust has silently and mysteriously appeared inside those walls, and is, I believe, regarded by some members with the same feelings as those which filled the breasts of the theologians of the Synod of Dort, when, it is said, an owl appeared on the floor of that learned assembly.

Bearing these controversies in mind, I feel how necessary it is to-day that I should remember the warning of a great living German author, that in history there is no such thing as an absolute judgment, and that any attempt to pronounce such judgments is only a subtle form of self-deception, because it is based on a desire to apply the accurate and complete methods of scientific investigation to the elusive facts and imperfect knowledge, which is all that we can possess about the events of the past and the motives of the actors in those events, and to give to what is after all only a subjective mental process an authority to which it is not entitled. Once we acknowledge this to be so, it is easy, I think, for men of different parties and various opinions to be here to-day without either claiming to be panegyrists of everything done by Cromwell, or to possess the key of every historical problem of the seventeenth century. Without believing that the last word has been spoken, or ever will be spoken, in the great controversies of that day, we can nevertheless, I think, put in an unanswerable plea for the commemoration of Cromwell by a statue, and, above all, by a statue in his own county, and ask men of different political and religious opinions to unite on such an occasion. Your time to-day does not admit of a full statement of all the reasons. I can only try to give a few of



(W. E. Drives, photographer, Huntingdon)

Unveiling of the Cromwell Statue at St. Ives, erected by public subscription

them. In the first place, with Marlborough and Wellington, Cromwell makes up the great trio of Englishmen who have been prominent both in war and in peace: great as generals and great as statesmen. "Your General," said Queen Christina of Sweden, the daughter of Gustavus Adolphus, to Whitelock, Cromwell's Ambassador, "hath done the greatest things of any man in the world; the Prince of Condé is next to him, but short of him." Condé destroyed the hitherto unconquered Spanish infantry at Rocroy in 1643, and thereby opened up a new chapter in the history of Europe. When in 1644 Cromwell at Marston Moor first routed the Royalist right wing, then carried his cavalry round the rear of the enemy, and thus routed their left wing by an attack from outside, he opened up a new chapter in cavalry tactics and he also practically decided the Civil War. If there is any Scotchman present in my audience, I hope I shall not be understood by these observations as in any way underrating the share of General David

Lesley in that great operation, a share to which full justice has been done in the recent "Life of Alexander, Earl of Leven," by Mr. Terriss, a book of learning and authority. As with Cromwell's tactics so with his strategy. "Cromwell," says a military critic quoted by Mr. Firth, in his "Life of Cromwell," "was the first great exponent of the modern methods of war. His was the strategy of Napoleon and Von Moltke; the strategy which, neglecting fortresses and the means of artificial defence as of secondary importance, strikes first at the army in the field." The careers of Monk, Blake, Rupert, and others, will remind you how common it was in those days for naval and military command to be shared by the same person. It is true that to this list the name of Cromwell is not to be added, but his Government restored—nay, almost created—our Navy in the modern sense of the term. He discovered our greatest admirals. If the West of England can claim Robert Blake, whose statue at Taunton we also owe to the

skill of Mr. Pomeroy, you in the East gave him Edward Montague, whose career is so intimately associated with the affairs of the Protectorate; whose death at Southwold in 1672 is one of the most glorious pages of our naval records. His name is still among you. Cromwell even anticipated the ideas of naval and military defence, which in our own days we have at last agreed upon. "You have accounted yourselves happy," he said to one of his Parliaments, "in being environed with a great ditch from all the world besides. Truly you will not be able to keep your ditch nor your shipping, unless you turn your ships and shipping into troops of horse and companies of foot, and fight to defend yourself on terra firma." That might have been said yesterday.

Cromwell's active career may be said to have extended from 1640 to 1658. The first part of it was more connected with military than with political action. That is why I have touched on it first. Did the second portion, which was more connected with civil and political action, add as much to the inheritance of the nation as the first portion? Did Cromwell go further than Condé, who was a great general but a political failure, as Queen Christina lived to see. In the concluding sentences of his work on this period of history, Monsieur Guizot says that Cromwell's career was a failure because he left behind him "the two things he hated most: the Stuarts and anarchy." Up to a certain point this is true, but it is not a statement of the whole case, but only a criticism of part of it. A statesman is not to be judged merely by the actual edifice he builds and leaves behind him erect and standing. A living and fruitful idea put into a working shape is as good a claim on posterity, even if the full fruition of it is delayed. Cromwell—and Monsieur Guizot had this no doubt in his mind in the observation I have just quoted—Cromwell combined in a marked degree the two salient features of what we now recognise as constituting the English political character: the love of liberty and the love of order, and he left what I may call the common denominator of those two factors to the people of this country as his legacy. The first of these characteristics is seen more distinctly in the

struggle with the King; the second in the contest which began with the dismissal of the remains of the Long Parliament and continued till his death. It is not inconsistent with this to believe it possible that Cromwell may not have been infallible in his judgment, when at the most momentous crisis of his life he had to choose, as he thought himself obliged to choose, between sacrificing either liberty to order, or order to liberty. It is not the least of the many services rendered by Mr. Firth to the history of the subject, that he has shown that in the opinion of his contemporaries, Cromwell was often influenced by passion and acted on sudden impulse. Naturally and constitutionally, Cromwell had a firm desire to reconcile the liberties of his country with the ancient constitution in which the Crown had its place. He finally and suddenly broke with the King only when it flashed upon him as beyond question that the King had made a breach unavoidable. This seems to me the reasonable interpretation of the most momentous chapter of his life when, after the end of the first Civil War, the King had been removed from Holmby to the part of England in which we now are; and those negotiations took place for the restoration of Royalty with constitutional limitations, which cover the period from June 1647 to November of that same year. It would be beyond the limits necessarily imposed on to-day's proceedings to do more than indicate this as the turning point of Cromwell's career, or to try to discuss the wisdom of Cromwell's final decision in this and the other great crisis, when he dismissed the Long Parliament to save the business of the nation from obstruction by what was a mere fragment of the House of Commons. I can only once more say that I am not trying to lay down an absolute judgment on past events, or trying to apply the measuring rod of the quiet times in which it is our privilege to live, to the stormy epoch of Cromwell's days. It is sufficient for my purpose if I can convince my audience that Cromwell loved liberty and loved order; that he aimed at combining them; that he struck heavily only when he believed that whether at tyranny or at anarchy a blow had to be struck outside the limits of constitutional



(W. E. Driver, photographer, Huntingdon)

The Cromwell Statue at St. Ives

practice, in order to save liberty or order as the case might be; and that therefore, although the Stuarts and anarchy survived him, and it required the events of 1688 to settle matters, it is untrue to say that Cromwell's career was a failure merely because the final settlement was not with him. He left behind him a clear guidance as to this; that neither in the unlicensed power of Royalty introduced into France by Richelieu, which the Stuarts sought to introduce into England; nor by making the Rump of the House of Commons into the sole legislative and executive power in the country, could a proper distribution of

political forces be found. From both those dangers Cromwell was determined at all hazards to save the country. And he saved it by grasping the great idea of the union of liberty and order which he left as a legacy to be worked out by a subsequent generation. If he failed to find a permanent solution, it was because the times were not yet ripe. The people of England found it only after thirty years of trouble from 1658 onwards. This is perhaps the best vindication of Cromwell. "The question involved in the King's trial," says Ranke, "brings to light the opposition of the two powers which move the world: the inherited, historically formed

power, interwoven with existing laws and prevailing social ideas, and that which ascribes to the representation of the people, even though as in this case highly imperfect, an unlimited authority, before which all historical rights vanish. The idea of the sovereignty of the people and the divine right of kings enter as it were into a bodily struggle with each other." And the same observation, subject to but slight alteration, might be made to apply to the struggles between Cromwell and his own Parliaments. You cannot deal with situations such as these some two hundred and fifty years afterwards by quoting extracts from Hatsell and Erskine May about constitutional practice.

There is an often-quoted passage in "Pepys' Memoirs," in which he tells us how at a time when the Dutch fleet had entered the Medway, and was threatening London, and a corrupt court was trying to find out what had become of the old Cromwellian seamen, "everybody was reflecting upon Oliver and commending him, what brave things he did, and made all the neighbouring princes fear him." What was the secret which he had carried to his unknown grave? the secret which was not with Clarendon or Monk, nor yet with Ludlow or Haselrig. They were practical men, and so was Cromwell. But Cromwell was also something of the mystic and the idealist, which they were not. As they worshipped, so did he also worship, at the shrine of his country, but he pictured to himself the national glory as intimately connected with the glory of God and the spread of liberty and religion not only at home, but also in foreign lands. His alliance with France against Spain was a means to this end. Oddly enough, it is precisely this element in which some critics, from whom it may, I fear, seem almost presumptuous in me to differ, have seen the weak point of Cromwell's foreign policy. It is said that the policy was itself an anachronism, because the era of religious wars had ended with the peace of Westphalia; and that the alliance with France caused the preponderance of that country, which it

afterwards cost England so much blood and treasure to combat. I am, however, encouraged by finding myself in agreement with Mr. Firth, to say that the whole of this criticism is an illustration to me of what is a fault in historical method; for if it is true, it is only so because we are able to judge by the standard of subsequent events which we know, but which Cromwell could not possibly have known. Is it, however, true that religious motives ceased to operate as a great factor in politics after the peace of Westphalia, even if they became more mixed with purely dynastic or national motives in the next fifty years? Is it true that it was the co-operation of Cromwell and not the infamies of the Treaty of Dover which encouraged Louis XIV. in his European enterprises? My reply would be in the negative. Be that as it may, this appeal to the ideal gave the distinguishing note to the policy of Cromwell. Owing to it he possessed the art of inspiring those who served with him in the same manner as the elder Pitt did afterwards, in an age far less susceptible of enthusiasms. Whether we think or not that such inspired politics conduce to the peace of the world or to prosperity at home, or that they ultimately advance the good of the human race, the fact remains that the statesmen who represent idea and action combined, who have the "divinum aliquid" in their composition, which stirs up their contemporaries to immortal deeds, are the men whose names get fixed in the historic imagination of the people and are enshrined in the traditions of the human race. Alexander, Julius Cæsar, Charlemagne, survive for this reason above the welter of centuries and the lapse of time. For similar reasons the name of Cromwell lives and will live; and that is why the people of this country, and you in particular in Cromwell's own county, have resolved to perpetuate his memory in the bronze that breathes and the stone that speaks; though even were I to think that the stone might perish, and the monument decay, I would remain equally convinced that the name of Cromwell would survive in the imagination and tradition of the people of this land.