



# MURDERING *his darlings*

Acclaimed sculptor Martin Jennings talks to Gerald Heys about Betjeman's hat, Orwell's ciggie and Stanley Baldwin's British belly



It's hard to pass the Sir John Betjeman sculpture in St Pancras station without smiling. And difficult not to be delighted by the detail: the bag of books; the mismatched shoelaces; the shabby collar; the uneven trousers; and, caught by a gust from a train, the billowing overcoat. The creases, folds and wrinkles of being alive. But much of the charm – and charm it certainly is –



## A GOOD SCULPTOR MUST BE PREPARED TO MURDER HIS DARLINGS AND, LIKE BARON FRANKENSTEIN, DISCARD THE BITS THAT DON'T DO THEIR JOB.

comes from the angle of his gaze and the attendant way he hangs on to his hat.

'He's looking at the roof,' Martin explains, 'and doing what we all do really, which is looking up in awe at this wonderful, secular cathedral. I got the idea for that when I was viewing the site originally while it was being refurbished. Every now and then, you'd see the builders gazing up at the roof and holding on to their hard hats so they wouldn't fall off. If you're wearing a hat, and you're in that station, you hold on to it as you look up.'

And looking up here, at the high ceiling of Martin's studio by the single-track line between Combe and Hanborough stations, you see a shelf packed with assorted busts: the Queen Mum, Ted Heath, Arnold Toynbee, Philip Pullman. And, looming over us like the Ghost of Christmas Yet-to-Come, a shrouded eight-foot George Orwell, destined to preside over the break-time smokers outside Broadcasting House.

Like Betjeman, Orwell's figure has detail and energy: looking down at you – yes, you – his fist on his hip, haranguing,



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demanding that you think about and not just accept the tommyrot of received wisdom; that fag in his hand as much a part of the man as his big feet. And next to him when he's in situ will be a frequent motif of Martin's work: words. Carved in the wall of the BBC will be an Orwell quote as pertinent now as back in the day: 'If liberty means anything at all, it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear.'

'I try to imagine how the person might have stood in the space the sculpture will occupy,' Martin says. 'From my research I develop a sense of the driving forces that impelled my subject and then I choose a pose that best expresses those characteristics.'

And there is Stanley Baldwin, standing on his plinth on a workbench: a small maquette that's the starting point for the full-sized clay model that is then cast in bronze. And over coffee from the cafetière and chocolate digestives, Martin talks about the Baldwin it portrays. 'It's

the image that he [Baldwin] wanted to put across: that he represented Britain: firm, steadfast, comfortable with itself, one-nation Britain. . . . It's appropriate to have him in his country tweeds in Worcestershire rather than in a sharper London suit. It seems utterly natural that he should be holding a pipe in his hand. And his stomach is pushed outwards in an expression of prosperity. So it's not just a portrait of him; it's a portrait of the Britain he wanted to represent. Bluff, no nonsense, a half smile on his face.'

And it's all there in miniature, from the smile to the pipe to Stanley's comfortable physique. And, as with Betjeman and Orwell, Baldwin is designed to fit in with his future surroundings but still have prominence. 'It does need to be up in the air a bit, which is why he'll be on a plinth. He's in a very comfortable corner in Bewdley, with the council building nearby. And you look up towards him as you come up from the river. He needed to be at a certain height to look comfortable in that space. You wouldn't want someone like that – a figure like that, of that period – at ground level.'

Martin read English Literature at Oxford, after which he went to City and Guilds art school to study lettering, calligraphy and inscriptions. Much of his early work was architectural and memorial inscriptions, which progressed on to portrait sculpture

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and then public monumental work. Among his most notable public statues are Charles Dickens, Mary Seacole, Philip Larkin and Ronnie Barker.

Is mucking about with all that clay as fun as it looks? 'It is both fun and terribly trying. Because it's very, very slow and you keep doing it one way and then realising you've got to change that and do it again. It should end up looking like it's there with a certain amount of ease; like it could only ever have been that way. But that is achieved because you've gone through all the ways in which it isn't quite right.' A good sculptor must be prepared to murder his darlings and, like Baron Frankenstein, discard the bits that don't do their job.

His work has been described as figurative rather than abstract. Martin explains, though, how these distinctions can overlap. 'Every good sculpture ought to have abstract qualities to it, because the composition is very important, and composition is something that works on an abstract level. The way that the various elements are disposed has to be satisfying in its own terms. It has to work as an object first of all, be pleasing as an object. Even to a figurative statue, we respond, initially, on an abstract level: Do I like that as a thing? And then we ask, Do I like what it says about this person? So the divide between abstract and figurative is not quite as clear-cut as people like to imagine.'

The final product is at least partly subjective. 'You have to tell the truth about the person as far as you can. But it is, of course, filtered through your own imagination, sensibilities and sympathies.' The process is not reportage, but more akin to an actor creating a character. 'While you're doing the figure, you are trying to see them from the inside as well as from the out. So you kind of have to live with them. And you hold in suspension those aspects of the character you don't like; there are always some of those.'

But his research is meticulous. Next to the studio's resident skeleton (reminding Martin of the proportions of the human frame), there's a board crowded with Baldwin images. There is video footage available of Baldwin making speeches in Worcestershire country marquees that can be used, 'but mainly it's about collecting together as many pictures as you can from all the various sources, reading about the man, picking up on who he was and what he represented, and then choosing your pose. I was also greatly helped by suggestions from members of the commissioning body, not least the current Earl Baldwin himself.'

And the result is the essence of Stanley Baldwin: comfortable, four-square, his hand in his jacket pocket. The squire as Prime Minister.

Martin has tried to produce Barbara Hepworth-style abstract pieces in his time, but says it's not really him. 'For some reason or other, this strange, rather old-fashioned figurative art form suits me.' And, if the public and critical response to his work is anything to go by, it suits us too. ●

**Previous pages:** Jennings' sculpture of Sir John Betjeman in St Pancras station; and the artist in his studio with the maquette of Stanley Baldwin in the background. **Left:** The one-fifth scale maquette of Stanley Baldwin, standing on a plinth in Jennings' workbench, the starting point for the full-sized clay model that will then be cast in bronze.