

Reviews

The Two Mr Gladstones

Travis L. Crosby:

The Two Mr Gladstones: A Study in Psychology & History

(Yale University Press, 1997)

Reviewed by Tony Little

As we pass the centenary of his death, we are finally beginning to get to grips with Gladstone. Not the great statesman, the outstanding orator and reformer, but the fallible human. Gladstone, the great Victorian idol, 'The People's William', was celebrated in the newspapers of the day – he was an early exploiter of the mass media and was one of the first major politicians to campaign among the people 'out of doors'.¹ Gladstone the statesman was entombed in Morley's monumental biography.² But it was not until Magnus in the 1950s³ that we began to get an insight into the man behind the mask, and it was not until the publication of the diaries that the evidence was clearly and publicly available for analysis. Jenkins' recent book⁴ added the insight of a practising modern politician, highlighting, for example, the stress-related illnesses. Are there more insights to be found?

Travis argues that there are. His is not a gimmicky Freudian expose of the Grand Old Man, as has been practiced by Leo Abse on Mrs. Thatcher, and it does not focus exclusively on the unknowable aspects of the rescue missions among fallen women. Rather, it is a serious analysis, drawing on Freudian work where necessary, but concentrating on stress and coping strategy. The mass of material generated by Gladstone, his rivals, colleagues and observers means that if any historical figure can be subject to a psychological analysis, Gladstone must be the prime candidate for treatment.

The duality of Mr G's personal-

ity is expressed in many ways. The collector of porcelain may be contrasted with the ill-tempered debater. The fearless statesman is also the man who longs for escape. The century's greatest mass orator is also the neat administrator, the amateur theologian was also a man of excess physical energy whose main hobby was the felling of trees and who thought nothing of a twenty-mile walk. Are these just random aspects of the same character, or are they linked into a coherent whole by this psychological inspection? If psycho-history is to add value it must add to our understanding of the personality, and, more importantly, it must help ex-

plain some of the more perplexing episodes of a career not satisfactorily resolved by more traditional techniques.

Travis argues that at heart Gladstone was a carefully organised man who reacted negatively when that order was disturbed – only a carefully organised man could have produced so much written material in his life. His ambition was to bring order to the country. This is readily seen in the great reforming budgets and the reforms of his first premiership. In smaller things it is seen in his frequent re-ordering of his books and papers and in the methodical process of the diary. When people or events conspired to prevent Gladstone achieving his targets, how did he cope with the resulting stress? One answer, already given, was to run away until a solution presented itself or until Gladstone devised a new strategy. Into this category may be put the Ionian Commissionership in the frustrating officeless mid-1850s. Similarly, his reaction to the 1874 defeat by throwing up the party leadership; and the retreat to France in the crisis of 1894. During the period in which he decided to bring forward Home Rule, Gladstone may be accused of skulking in Hawarden and keeping colleagues in the dark. Throughout his career, when in subordinate positions, he threatened resignation, as Peel and Palmerston found to their exasperation, and when in the highest office, he used retirement for the same purpose of enforcing his will or providing an escape route.

The G.O.M. always found attractions and temptation in the company of pretty women – a nickname among the demi-monde was Gladeyes – and if there was a religious angle, the temptation was especially strong, as Laura Thistlethwayte proved. While there was always more in the rescue missions than Christian sympathy for Magdalenes, it was less than Gladstone's enemies hoped, as he adopted strategies to sublimate the temptation. Nevertheless it is clear that the streetwalking was itself a means of coping and was at its high-

est when he was under severe stress with problems in his family or political life.

Fifty years ago, this book would have come as a great revelation. Now no biographer can escape an exploration of his hero's motives and Gladstone has not escaped the attentions of Jenkins, Matthew, Shannon *et al.* Travis has added valuable new insights, but they are too often points of detail rather than breakthroughs. Importantly, the

book is not laden with jargon and acts as a good short introduction to the life for those who already have some understanding of the politics – and adds that little extra understanding for the specialist.

Notes

- ¹ H. J. Hanham: *Elections and Party Management* (Longmans, 1959), p. 202.
- ² J. Morley: *Life of Gladstone* (1903).
- ³ P. Magnus, *Gladstone* (Murray, 1954).
- ⁴ R. Jenkins, *Gladstone* (Macmillan, 1995).

Some Gladstonian Attitudes

Peter J. Jagger (ed.):

Gladstone

(The Hambledon Press, 1998)

Reviewed by Tony Little

The opening illustration of Peter Jagger's book shows a cartoon of Gladstone at work in the Commons, but it is the other meaning of attitudes which comes over in this book. Any book with essays on Gladstone and Acting, Ireland, Rhetoric, America, Disraeli, the working man, Ruskin, Railways, to name some of the topics, and with authors as good as Asa Briggs, Lord Blake and David Bebbington, to select just some of those whose names start with B, is bound to offer some little treat. This book offers a whole feast.

When he died Gladstone left his library at St. Deiniol's, Hawarden, for the use of scholars. Each year a Founder's Day lecture is held to commemorate some aspect of Gladstone's life. All but two of these essays were first given as lectures at St. Deiniol's over the period 1968–96 and all but a (different) pair appear for the first time in this volume. The Blake piece on the rivalry with Disraeli was first published in the now out of print first volume of Founder's Day lectures and is well worth the reproduction, though not without the unworthy thought that it would be hard to imagine a similar book on the Tory leader that en-

compassed such a wide range of interests.

In his introduction, Peter Jagger describes Gladstone as a 'Victorian colossus: a man of boundless energy and varied and great gifts'; here we are given a glimpse as to just how wide these gifts were, and an introduction to the magnitude of the problems he was prepared to tackle. Some, such as Ireland, the Balkans and management of the railways are still unresolved. The problem with a colossus is its sheer scale. The Gladstone diaries, as published, take up fourteen volumes, and the Gladstone papers have now been published on 262 reels of microfiche,

of which the thirty reels of general correspondence and associated letter books alone cover more than 15,000 letters. As Peter Jagger makes clear in his own contribution on 'Gladstone's Library', Gladstone's 30,000 books were a working library and there is evidence from the diaries and the books themselves (heavily annotated) that he read around 20,000 of them. It is not surprising that biographers as practiced as Lord Jenkins have approached their subject with some trepidation.

It is also no surprise that many prefer to specialise, tackling just some part of Gladstone's contribution to the nineteenth century. It is in this specialisation that this book finds some of its strength. For example, Glynne Wickham is not just a great grandson of the Grand Old Man but also a professor of drama, well-placed to demonstrate the influence of classical oratorical skills on both Victorian politicians and actors, to illustrate Gladstone's love of the theatre (once he had overcome his evangelical fears of its sinfulness) and his willingness to promote the profession in society. He persuaded Victoria to offer a knighthood to Irving (refused at the time but accepted later) and invited him to breakfast at Downing Street – luvvies and politics go back a long way.

David Bebbington offers one of the most sparkling pieces on what might at first be thought an especially obscure subject – 'Gladstone and Grote'. 'Who he?' would probably be the reaction of most readers, but this merely illustrates the strength of Bebbington's essay. Grote was a somewhat idealistic radical MP, utilitarian, strongly in favour of democracy and fanatical about the secret ballot, at a time when Gladstone (who later ironically introduced the secret ballot), a rising Tory, opposed each of these views. Grote is now more famous for his pioneering history of Greece, but into this history he imported his philosophical ideas, placing temptation in the path of that amateur classicist Gladstone, who was temperamentally incapable of resisting the call to respond, toss-

ing off a three-volume 1500-page work on Homer. This defended not just Homer's unique pre-vision of biblical tradition, but also an idealised view of Homeric kingship and aristocracy which matched Mr. G's own view of how the British constitution ought to work. Homeric studies became political warfare by other means.

The reader will pick and choose among these essays in accordance with personal predilection but I hope that all Liberal Democrats will read the two lectures on Ireland and Wales. Each is still of relevance to today and helps shape our politics.

How do we rise to the challenge that Gladstone set himself, quoted at the end of Boyce's shaping of the deeper context of Liberal Irish policy? 'We live ... in a labyrinth of problems, and of moral problems from which there is no escape permitted us.'

The challenge issued at the Gladstone Centenary International Conference was to rebuild Gladstone as an integrated personality. This book illustrates the breadth of that task, and the words quoted above represent one of the keys to the way in which Gladstone approached not just politics but his whole life.

There were too few real aristocrats to be statistically significant, and the things they shared with their poorer sisters were too limited to be constrained by the same theories. And it is hard to call them victims. Consequently this book is a welcome diversion which makes a strong case, not only for looking at these women in a new light, but perhaps also for pointing the way to a re-examination of the variety in the role of women in the other layers of society.

Reynolds makes the argument that for women in the higher reaches:

- the theory of separate spheres of influence between the genders is not adequate;
- we should see their lives as part of a continuity of aristocratic modes of behaviour from the eighteenth century (or even earlier); and
- a satisfactory role in politics was open to women and accepted by men even though women did not have the vote and could not take part in parliament.

One of the great attractions of the nineteenth century is the abundance of material from both private and public sources. This is much less obviously true of the areas studied in this monograph. So much of what Reynolds is trying to illustrate was just normally accepted behavior among those studied that there was never a need to write it down. Some positives are proved by criticism of negative behaviour (for example criticism of Lady (John) Russell's failings are used to deduce what the role of a political hostess should be), and quotations from fiction are sometimes made to fill a gap. I do not feel that damage is done to the argument by either device.

Reynolds worries a little about the political bias of the book. Whig/Liberal ladies appear to have kept rather more extensively available records than the Tories. Again this is a bias for the *Journal* to forgive readily and it is good to be reminded of the part played by the Duchess of Sutherland in the career of Gladstone, or of the importance of Lady

'The only being who elects without voting, governs without law'¹

K D Reynolds:

Aristocratic Women and Political Society in Victorian Britain

(Oxford University Press, 1998)

Reviewed by Tony Little

For many years history appeared to carry the gender implicit in the first part of the word. Nowhere was this more obvious than in the Victorian era where, apart from the Queen and the Lady with the Lamp, few schoolchildren could name another significant female Victorian.

The greater assertiveness of women in our own time has been reflected in a greater focus on women in history. A number of different theories have been developed but unfortunately all too often driven to see women purely in terms of their sex rather than in their varying roles. There has also been a focus, quite rightly, on the middle and working classes. But here, for the Liberal, there can be severe disadvantages, particularly the tendency to work on the

masses rather than on the individual, to look for the typical, common, behaviour rather than to celebrate differences, to use statistics to make up for a paucity of other forms of records. There has also developed a stereotype of the female victim of the patriarch, confined to child-rearing, prostitution or servitude, which is all too common in popular 'historical' drama, especially on the television.

Victorian aristocratic ladies do not readily conform to stereotypes.

Palmerston to the growing coherence of the Whig/Radical/Peelite alliance that in the 1850s became the Liberal Party.

Under the notion of separate spheres women occupied the positions dictated by their gender – for example child-bearing – and roles developed from this position that did not interfere with the roles of the more dominant male. In this analysis, female charity work was an extension of care within the family and women could have a role in education on the same basis but should not be seen as entering the economic or political spheres.²

Those of the British aristocracy who continued to play a part in political life in the nineteenth century were driven by a sense of duty and historic continuity. Without a French-style revolution there was no clear break between rule by the aristocracy and a full democracy – some will argue that there still has not been, with hereditary peers active in the Lords. Aristocratic families continued to use techniques which had proved effective in the eighteenth century well after Victoria came to the throne. A territorial base was required to provide wealth, though as the century progressed and agriculture declined in importance, those who did not have industrial sources of income tended to be left behind. A London base was required for the Season – near the centre of power, and often providing a retreat within easy reach of the capital.

The territorial base in particular was used for the bestowal of patronage and charity, focused clearly on known individuals or in the case, for example of schools, known groups or communities. The influence gained could be translated into seats in the Commons. This system was less widely used in Ireland, which may help account for the greater difficulties in tenant-landlord relations and the reduced social cohesion of the community. The London Season was used for entertainment, not for enjoyment but to provide a place for politicians to gather to exchange information and build rapport. It was

an age without the pager to keep the back-benchers 'on message'. Through this process, support was built for the career of individuals and favours sought for the entourage of the great houses. This process of obligation, patronage and duty would seem to reflect a sense of social feudalism, though this is not a term Reynolds uses.

Where a Lady was without a husband or father, it was clearly necessary for her to manage not only the household but also the estate or other sources of wealth. It was acceptable for such women to interfere with the management of elections and clerical appointments. But what if the husband or other male relative was present and not incapacitated? The evidence suggests that gender was no obstacle to involvement and that aristocratic women would run the estate or even take charge of industry in partnership with a husband or in the place of a husband who was tied up in politics and managing the country. The objective of such 'incorporated'³ wives, apart from any intrinsic satisfaction, was to enhance the position of the family as a unit – securing patronage for male members of the family, or allowing them to devote time to politics without the distraction of the estate, benefited the whole unit.

There was one role, in politics where the woman came into her own, that of political hostess, and Reynolds devotes a separate chapter to this. For each generation there was one supreme hostess on the Whig/Liberal side. Lady Holland was succeeded by Lady Palmerston and then Lady Waldegrave. In each case the hostess was doing more than securing advantage for her husband; rather she was acting in the interest of the whole party. However, on a smaller scale it would form a major activity for any ambitious family. It is worth noting that the wives of party leaders did not always take on the role, nor did they always perform it well – Lady Russell and Lady Derby were both thought of as failures, while Catherine Gladstone did not seek to provide entertainment

on behalf of the whole party. Lady Russell found the issues of much more interest than managing the people. Disraeli made frequent complaints that the Tories were unable to undertake this vital function as well as the Liberals.

Reynolds mentions other roles played by political wives – wielders of patronage, confidantes and go-betweens. Of these the role of confidante is probably the most frequent but least recorded. Every politician requires someone with whom to converse in confidence and without any risk that the information will be abused, and a spouse is often the first choice. Surviving correspondence of the period indicates that wives took an intelligent interest in the controversies of the time and clearly understood the political implications. Mention is made of the Duchess of Manchester's conservative influence on Hartington but the Duchess of Sutherland's influence on Gladstone's temperament was missed.⁴ I felt that not enough was made of the impact that wives and other female confidantes could make.

This is a serious work, for all its modest scale, making full use of a sociological as well as a historiographical apparatus. It brings to the fore a much-neglected aspect of Victorian politics and I hope it will act as an inspiration for others. Reynold hints at the scope for further work, such as the impact of changes in generation on the prominence of women in politics. It ends with a potted biography of some of the main characters quoted. The variety of their lives and the sparkiness of some of the quotes makes me suspect that there is a bigger and more popular book waiting to be written from this material. The success of Stella Tillyard's *Aristocrats* with eighteenth-century material shows it can be done.

Notes

¹ Lady Dorothy Nevill *My Own Times* (Methuen, 1912), quoted in Reynolds.

² Reynolds, p. 3, and the references listed therein.

³ Reynolds, p. 43, and references listed therein.

⁴ R. Shannon, *Gladstone* Vol. 1, 1809–65, p. 556.