

Writing About Gladstone

As author and statesman, *Roy Jenkins* gives his impressions of the challenges in tackling a prolific fellow author.

When, just over six years ago, I was persuaded to undertake a life of William Ewart Gladstone, it was my sixteenth book and ninth work of biography. I nevertheless approached him with trepidation. That is the reason I use the phrase 'I was persuaded'. My literary agent and my then publishing editor were at first keener that I should do the book than I was. I thought Gladstone was too big a subject for me, and in particular I doubted my ability to get to adequate grips with his important but subsidiary pursuits, such as the theological and liturgical disputes of early Victorian England or his attempt to see Homer as part of the headwaters of Christianity.

The trepidation was, however, mingled with fascination. He was the highest peak in the mountain chain, and as such the most enticing as well as the most intimidating. Once I had hesitantly started the climb I never regretted it. The 600-page book took most of my spare time for 2½ years of writing, preceded by six months of reading myself in and followed by another six months of revision and checking. I never got remotely bored with Gladstone during this period. This did not mean that I was starry-eyed about him. He was intolerable as a young man, priggish and without much sense of the ridiculous, particularly where he himself was concerned, although he greatly improved in tolerance as he grew older.

As I went along I found him increasingly easy to laugh at. This was not at all because he diminished under probing. On the contrary, indeed, it was the sheer exuberance of his energy which increasingly attracted my irony – a quality in which he himself was not strong. This was in no way incompatible with the fact that at the end of my 3½ years' immersion with him

both my affection and my admiration for him increased. My pleasure in making mild jokes about him fitted in with my growing conviction that most really great men have elements of being figures of fun about them. This was certainly true of both Churchill and General de Gaulle, to take two later examples. And Gladstone's greatness never weakened under the microscope. There is room for argument about whether he should be first amongst the fifty men and one woman who, beginning with Sir Robert Walpole, have filled the office of Prime Minister. But I have no doubt at all that he was the most remarkable specimen of humanity who ever occupied 10, Downing Street. He was the biggest beast in any forest which he inhabited throughout his 88½ years of life, a much more unusual span in the nineteenth century than it has become in the late twentieth.

The fact that I never regretted the Gladstone enterprise once I had embarked upon it was far from meaning that I was not filled with apprehension as the date of its publication approached. There was a vast Gladstonian literature. There was John Morley's three authorised volumes of 1903, which were at once the best example of and the beginning of the decline of the multi-volume 'tombstone' biography. There was Philip Magnus' highly successful and much shorter 1954 re-interpretation, which still reads very freshly and in the modern idiom, while nonetheless getting Gladstone demonstrably wrong on a number of important points. And, above all, there was Professor H. C. G. Matthew's massive work on the Gladstone diaries, fourteen volumes meticulously edited and accompanied by introductions which between them have amounted to a full biographical study.

So there was a lot of room for critical comparative judgments, and when I had completed the manuscript I awaited publication with a new wave of trepidation. It was a great relief

and considerable surprise to me when it was received with remarkably little jugular criticism, and moreover sold well. This does not mean that it was free from errors. I have been much struck by how elusive is the search for absolute accuracy. I devoted great initial attention to trying to get things right, and there were no swingeing accusations of 'slap-dashery'. Nevertheless, through five or six successive impressions I have been engaged in a constant rolling process of correction, mainly as a result of letters from those who knew some little fact which had previously eluded me. And I have no doubt that there are still some so far concealed errors. Truth is always relative rather than absolute, but this is no reason for not constantly trying to get nearer to it.

When *Gladstone* came out in America, approximately eighteen months after its London publication, it was almost as widely reviewed as it had been in the British literary press, and also sold surprisingly well for an English political biography in that now somewhat internally oriented and apolitical market. But the reviews, although gratifyingly extensive, were more critical than the English ones had been. Trying to find a reassuring reason for this difference I decided that it was at least partly because American reviewers did not like the jokes. If a man was a great man, and therefore worth writing about at length, he should be immune from even the occasional flippancy. But I am aware that in evolving this explanation I was seeking a comforting corn-plaster.

I also discovered that the value of reviews is to be measured much more by their column inches than by what they actually say. Nearly everyone in America who has since spoken about them to me has referred to the wonderful *Gladstone* reviews. And when I point out that the *New York Times* may have put it on the front of their book section but that the actual words were far from ecstatic and that the *Washington Post* had quite a few criticisms, even though the *New Yorker* rose

above such petty points and the *New York Review of Books* at least engaged a reviewer who was more interested in Disraeli so that he did not bother much to engage with my view of Gladstone.

What are the specific qualities which made me say with such confidence that Gladstone was a pre-eminent specimen of humanity, and which also made him so rewarding to write about? I would select two: first the number of different points at which he touched life, and second his energy. On the first point I have already mentioned his involvement in all the great religious disputes of his age. But he did not merely take sides. He also wrote a good deal of theology, and indeed soon after the end of his premiership retired from the leadership of the Liberal Party in order to devote what he saw as his few declining years to theological writing. The plan was, however, based on two false premises. First, his 'few declining years' amounted to about a quarter of a century, during which time he was again three times Prime Minister. Second, he was by no means a first-class theologian, whereas he indisputably was a first-class politician and indeed statesman. As a result, almost as in the operation of a physical law, he was quietly drawn back into that at which he was best.

He was a better classical scholar than he was a theologian, although even here, while he had sound knowledge and muscular intelligence, he lacked the intuitive verbal sensitivity which marked out the greatest classicists. But he devoted a lot of time to classical texts, and he read the bible in Greek every day. Towards the end of his life work on his new translation of Horace's odes became a ruling passion. When he got back from Windsor after his final resignation and an ungracious audience (more on her side than on his) he immediately got down to a Horace translation.

As a literary critic Gladstone's preference was somewhere between his theology and his classicism. He wrote a good long essay on Tennyson,

although he and the Laureate mostly circled round each other like two cats with arched backs, perhaps sub-consciously aware that, with only a handful of others, they were amongst the greatest stars of the nineteenth century, and as such needed their own unimpeded orbits. Gladstone also undoubtedly read more fiction (contemporary in his case) than any subsequent Prime Minister until Macmillan, although Asquith would have been a clear third.

This leads on to the intellectual aspects of Gladstone's energy. He claimed that he read 20,000 books over his adult lifetime (approximately 280 a year) and sustained the claim by listing all of them and annotating most. He kept his daily journal for 69½ years. He habitually sent out 15 to 20 long handwritten letters a day. At the age of 84, and during one of the most difficult weekends of his life, he took time off to compose a 4000-word treatise on church music and how it had changed (and on the whole improved) during his lifetime.

Moreover, this intellectual vigour was matched to an equally astonishing physical energy. At the age of 74, staying at Balmoral as Prime Minister he escaped for 7½ hours and climbed Ben Macdhui, at 4100 feet the highest point in the Cairngorms. His favourite recreation from middle-age onwards was the felling of great trees; he brought down his last one at the age of 81. When, at about the same time, he was knocked down by a cab in London, he got up, pursued the errant driver, and held him until the police came. There was always plenty to write about and unexpected quirks to Gladstone. Despite his earnestness he was rarely dull.

Lord Jenkins of Hillhead was until recently the leader of the Liberal Democrats in the House of Lords and is currently chairing a commission on electoral reform for the government. He is the author of several books, including Gladstone (Macmillan, 1995) and The Chancellors (Macmillan, 1998).