

The Gladstone Bicentenary Conference

Conference organised by the University of Chester, in association with St Deiniol's Library, Hawarden, 5–8 July

2009

Report by Tony Little

THE SCALE of Gladstone's achievements in government, the depth of his thinking on issues which still disturb our polity and the sheer longevity of his career make him one of the great Victorian figures, a man whose bicentenary deserved commemorating at a four-day conference at the University of Chester in July. More surprisingly, scholars had developed some forty papers to present at this colloquium, even though the centenary of Gladstone's death had been marked by an extensive conference less than a dozen years previously.¹

When, in 2007, the Liberal Democrat History Group posed the question of 'Who was the greatest Liberal?', Gladstone lost out to John Stuart Mill, the publication of whose great work *On Liberty* we also celebrate this year. Was this because Gladstone is so much the archetypal Victorian that he has become impossible for modern minds to understand? Have we so absorbed the thinking of Victoria's rebels and radicals, from Darwin and Marx to Carlyle and Newman, that we can no longer empathise with Gladstone, a man so in tune with the nineteenth century that, in his own time, he enjoyed the popularity our era reserves for celebrities rather than politicians? Or are today's progressive statesmen still his heirs, successful only when they abandon utopias for Liberal values? These were the questions posed and debated, but left still undecided by the end of the conference.

The potential incomprehensibility of Gladstone is compounded not only by the

growing gulf of time between his period and ours, and the impenetrability of some of the topics to which he devoted his time, but also by the wealth of evidence. Gladstone left a great deal of documentation to be explored, while further clues to his thoughts and achievement can be gleaned from the growing inventiveness of those using his diaries in combination with his library preserved at St Deiniol's. A visit to the library and to Gladstone's study formed part of the conference, while a paper was presented on the GladCAT database project which is digitising Gladstone's marginalia in his books.

This wealth of material gives a false impression that we could know him in a way that would be impossible for most historical characters – an impression frustrated by the elusiveness of many of the diary entries and the famously Jesuitical complexity of Gladstone's prose. The part played by Gladstone's obstructive subtlety was amply demonstrated to those of us not expert in the field by Jonathan Conlin's paper on the controversy between Gladstone and Huxley ('Darwin's bulldog'), which spread over 500 pages of the journal *Nineteenth Century*. As with most things Gladstonian, there are modern echoes, in this case of the debate between Dawkins and Biblical scholars. Gladstone versus Huxley was in part an argument about evolution, the scientific truth of the Bible and the role of its creation myths, and in part a continuation of the argument Gladstone had had with Newman forty years earlier over the

probability of evidence – a way of thinking Gladstone derived from Bishop Butler. Gladstone even found time during the arguments over Home Rule and the 'Hawarden kite', in early 1886, to suggest that the book of Genesis should be valued as a sermon, not damned as a scientific lecture. As in his politics, Gladstone's liberalism in science and religion was broader and more tolerant than his opponents.

The problems in understanding Gladstone were posited by Frank Turner as deriving not only from his religious perspective but also from his classical education, the typically Victorian Empire sources of his family wealth, and his approaches to public finance. More importantly, Turner argued that the lack of resonance between Gladstone and our contemporaries reflects our approach to politics. The Grand Old Man was not a believer in the perfection of worldly government, whereas the twentieth century can most easily be presented as a striving for alternative utopias, whether socialist in Russia or nationalist in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. Gladstone's Peelite alternative derived from his study of Homer and, when his idealist vision of church and state had failed, he relied on trust, toleration, transparency in state finances, the diversity of local government rather than the uniformity of the centralised state, and the incorporation into the state of newcomers as they qualified themselves for citizenship. Part of the elusiveness of Gladstone's liberalism lies in his focus on reform rather than transformation. He wished to channel the forces of his day through existing mechanisms rather than to rebuild the state. For Gladstone, there were not the absolutes on which his radical, Tory, Catholic and socialist critics rely.

As might be expected, the conference reflected academic

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trends, and papers were presented on images of Gladstone and his self-representation, outlining the degree of conscious control that he exerted over how he was represented not only in terms of the traditional portrait, incorporating contrasting aspects of masculinity, statesmanship and studiousness, but also through the new high-tech medium of the photograph. Towards the end of his career, camera technology had progressed sufficiently as to allow unofficial and informal pictures to be snatched. The battle for control over the image of the politician had begun to be lost.

Ample space was given for more conventional political history, though presented through an original filter. Lord (Paul) Bew presented Gladstonian views on Ireland from an Ulster Protestant, but sympathetic and Burkean, perspective. Bew praised Gladstone's efforts in the Fenian crisis, the way that he recognised the constitutional politician in Parnell, despite his pre-Kilmainham association with the 'men of violence', and Gladstone's openness on the special circumstances of Ulster. However, Gladstone progressively alienated Irish Whigs and Liberals. Disestablishment of the Church of Ireland may have been successful in reuniting

English Liberals, but it distanced the Irish and his first government compounded the problem with its proposed Irish university reforms, which did not even have the benefit of satisfying the Catholic hierarchy, and so paved the way for the Home Rule Party's ascendancy. Gladstone's land reforms may have defused a pre-revolutionary Land League but again made enemies of previous allies such as Lecky, while his assault on the Vatican Decrees irritated both Catholics and Liberal Presbyterians who relied on Catholic support to hold their seats.

Running counter to the usual focus on Gladstone as a Midlothian peacemaker, Roland Quinault spoke on Gladstone and war, showing that despite his career-long aversion to militarism and its cost, Gladstone did not flinch from supporting wars that he believed to be justified in Butlerian terms. Complexity arises from an analysis that would tend to show that the wars he opposed were those occurring while he was out of office, such as the 1857 Chinese Opium War and the 1879 Afghan War, while those he supported occurred while he was in office, such as the Crimean War. Further intricacy is encountered when trying to justify Gladstone's views on funding war and on intervention. Theoretically, Gladstone believed that war should be financed from taxation as a restraint on the jingoistic and imperialist enthusiasms of the electorate. In practice, however, he also funded government war efforts from loans. Gladstone sought a multilateral approach to international crises – the Concert of Europe – but no practical mechanism existed for its employment, no Gladstonian United Nations, and in reality Gladstone was as prepared to intervene unilaterally, for example in Egypt, as he was to urge but not to strike, as in Bulgaria and Armenia.

Frank Turner argued that Gladstonian liberalism was a path not taken beyond his own day, despite the Gladstonian echoes in US presidents Woodrow Wilson, Roosevelt and Carter. But, in the final paper of the conference, Eugenio Biagini argued strongly for an alternative view. He traced a series of heirs to Gladstone at home, in all parties, and abroad and argued that perhaps the decline of the Liberal Party after 1918 enhanced the continuation of Gladstonian policies by the Tories and that the influx of Liberals into the Labour Party influenced that party's internationalism and reliance on traditional management of the Exchequer. Biagini went on to argue that, when Blair modernised the Labour Party, he did so through the incorporation of Gladstonian ideas. Is it not to Gladstone that he owed his militant humanitarianism, his ethical foreign policy, his mission to pacify Ireland, his constitutional reforms of the Lords, and devolution, whilst holding down taxes and restraining government spending? The parallels between Blair's intervention in Iraq and Gladstone's in Egypt inevitably attracted discussion, and Biagini argued that Gladstone was willing to intervene in another country on humanitarian grounds where he considered that the government had failed, but that he considered interference to be undesirable if there was stable government even if that regime was bad. These criteria justified intervention in Egypt but not in Afghanistan, nor against the Zulus.

In the space available I cannot do justice to the range of papers delivered in Chester, but the impression I took away was that Gladstone the statesman remains a tough benchmark against which to judge his successors. The big issues of government that he tackled still have practical relevance to the

Gladstone bicentenary events

Bicentenary dinner

Wednesday 21 October, 7.00 for 7.30 p.m

National Liberal Club, London SW1

Speaker: Lord Ashdown.

£40 per head, to include reception and wine during dinner. Black tie.

Bookings may be made with Louisa Pooley on 020 7930 9871.

Evensong

Tuesday 12 January 2010, 5.00pm

Westminster Abbey

The centenary year will conclude with a special evensong at Westminster Abbey, followed by a wreath-laying ceremony at the Gladstone Memorial. Sir Alan Beith MP will speak before the laying of the wreath.

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modern day, and his approach to government can be embraced by reformers with confidence in its soundness. Investigations into Gladstone the man still have scope for discovery and amplification. Despite the strong foundations laid by those like David Bebbington, much remains to be done to integrate the various components of his personality. Gladstone the Homeric scholar was also Gladstone the tree-feller, and Gladstone the firm defender of Bradlaugh was also

the champion of the Anglican faith just as much as Gladstone the Home Ruler was Gladstone the Unionist.

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1 The main papers were published as D. Bebbington and R. Swift (eds.), *Gladstone Centenary Essays* (Liverpool University Press, 2000) and the subsidiary papers as P. Francis (ed.), *The Gladstone Umbrella* (Monad Press, 2001).

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death in 1891, ownership passing to his son, William G.C. Gladstone (born 1885) who was the last Gladstone to serve in the House of Commons, as Liberal MP for Kilmarnock Burghs (Kilmarnock, Dumbarton, Port Glasgow, Renfrew and Rutherglen) from 1911 until his death in action in 1916.

Accordingly, with W.E. Gladstone being effectively 'Squire' of Hawarden for the last twenty-four years of his life, and thus with a site at Hawarden being freely available, there was never any question of the Library being located elsewhere. Another of the Prime Minister's sons, the Rev. Stephen Gladstone (1844–1920) was Rector of Hawarden when he inherited the Hawarden Estate in 1916 and his descendants also inherited the Gladstone Baronetcy and Fasque House and Estate in Kincardineshire in 1945 after the deaths of all the Prime Minister's elder brothers and their sons.

Further, although a High Church Anglican from the mid-1830s, William E. Gladstone was born as a Presbyterian in association with the Church of Scotland. Indeed, his father, John Gladstone (a Baronet from 1846) contributed to the cost of building the first Scots Kirk in Liverpool, which opened in Oldham Street in 1793. It was only later that John Gladstone and his family adhered to the Church of England – not, I would suggest, for any ecclesiastical reason but because of the then political and educational restraints on nonconformists in England.

However, the Gladstones' 'interest' in the Church of Scotland continued for some time thereafter. After the purchase of Fasque in 1829 the family supported the local (Fettercairn) Parish Church until the opening of an Episcopal Chapel in the grounds of Fasque in 1847. Further, in 1838–39, contrary to the expectation that new urban congregations would elect their

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How long was Lloyd George an MP? (continued)

Kenneth O. Morgan's letter (*Journal* 63, summer 2009) states that David Lloyd George ceased to be a Member of Parliament on 1 January 1945, when his peerage was conferred. But Erskine May has this: 'If a Member be created a Peer, his seat is not vacated until the letters patent conferring the dignity have passed the great seal.' According to *Burke's Peerage*, the earldom of Lloyd George of Dwyfor was created on 12 February 1945, which presumably was the date of the letters patent. The writ for the by-election to fill the vacancy, which took place on 26 April 1945, could not have been issued until after that date.

The rules for payment of salaries to Members of Parliament (which of course were not in force in 1890, although they were in 1945) allow for payment from and including the day following that on which the poll is held. The salary of a Member who is created a peer is payable up to and including the day

on which his letters patent are granted.

The custom for establishing who is Father of the House of Commons (as Lloyd George was from 1929) uses the test of the date on which a Member first took the oath.

Patrick Mitchell

Gladstone, St Deiniol's and the Church

Having spent a week at St. Deiniol's Residential Library at Hawarden in Flintshire when researching for my PhD (Church History) I have to suggest the basic reason for William E. Gladstone selecting the site in 1889 was not any of the reasons suggested by the Rev. Peter Francis, Warden of St. Deiniol's (*Journal of Liberal History* 63, summer 2009).

The Hawarden (Castle) Estate, previously owned by W.E. Gladstone's wife's family, was inherited by the Prime Minister's eldest son, William (Willy) in 1874 with, on his