

REVIEWS

New perspectives on Gladstone

Roland Quinault, Roger Swift and Ruth Clayton

Windscheffel (eds.), *William Gladstone: New Studies and Perspectives* (Ashgate, 2012)

Reviewed by **Tony Little**

IN THE contest to identify the greatest Liberal held by the *Journal of Liberal History* in 2007, William Stuart Gladstone lost out to John Stuart Mill. Was this a preference for a thinker over a doer, for the purity of philosophy over the compromises of statesmanship and government? Would the result be different today when Liberal Democrats have experienced the disappointments of office? Or is it that we can no longer identify with the milieu in which Gladstone operated?

Abraham Lincoln, Charles Darwin and William Gladstone, three giants of the nineteenth century, were all born in 1809 yet, as Frank M. Turner argues in the opening essay of this collection, Darwin and Lincoln are much better remembered today. Turner suggests that the best remembered figures of the nineteenth century were those who, like Darwin, were cultural rather than political radicals. Gladstone became increasingly politically radical as he aged but he remained the archetypal Victorian in his tastes, his intellectual development and especially in his religiosity. But paradoxically, this is why he remains of considerable interest to the academic community. His drive to account for every moment of his life to his Maker has meant that there is a mass of raw material for historians to work on, material sufficiently ambiguous or complex that there is room for endless reinterpretation and room to provide those of us fascinated by the Grand Old Man with a rewarding supply of new reading.

Gladstone's long life meant that the centenary of his death was celebrated only just over a decade before the bicentenary of his birth, and both occasions were marked by a conference at the University

of Chester. This book represents a selection of the papers from the second of these conferences. It has been organised somewhat artificially into five sections: Reputations, Images, Personal Questions, Officialdom, and Ethics and Internationalism. Certainly one of the two Officialdom articles could be considered under the International heading and the two Image articles could be taken under Reputations. But this is quibbling, and should not deter any reader.

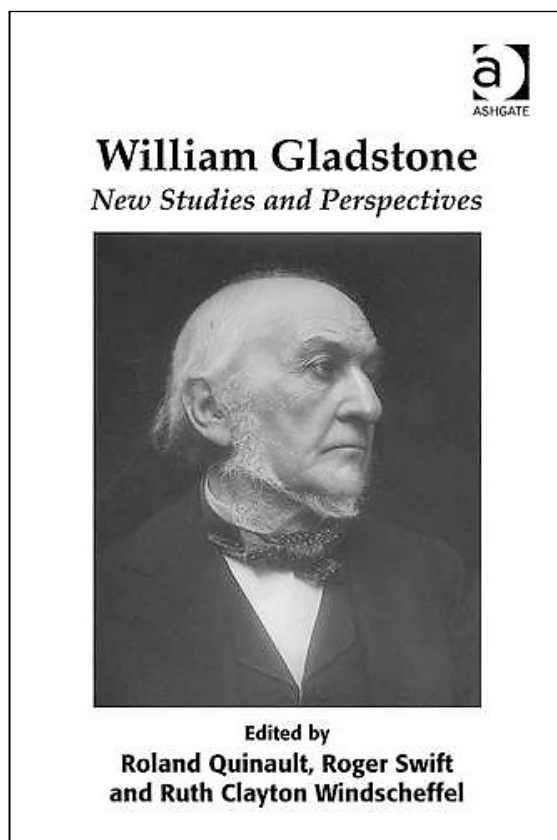
Perhaps reflecting the timing of the conference post-9/11, the International section is the most rewarding and the most relevant to those whose interest in Liberalism extends from the historical into current politics. As Turner points out, Gladstone studied Homeric Greek government to sharpen his political thinking. With profit, we could use Gladstone's experiences to refine our understanding of current policy dilemmas, and these essays are a useful toolkit for this engagement.

In Quinault's essay on *Gladstone and War*, he quotes the Grand Old Man as saying: 'we have no faith in the propagation of free institutions, either political or social, at the point of the sword among those who are not prepared to receive them'. Do Iraq and Afghanistan come to mind? Gladstone was the liberal interventionist who awakened the world to atrocities in the Balkans, but he was also the premier who bombarded Egypt to suppress a popular uprising. Can you be a convincing advocate of peace while prepared to lead the nation into war? Those of a suspicious turn of mind might notice that Gladstone often opposed wars which occurred while he was out of office, while generally supporting those

which occurred when he was in government.

Gladstone presided over the British Empire as it approached its zenith, but saw its expansion as wasting resources, and promoted devolution to preserve the union, most notably in New Zealand and India. Brad Faught's paper on Gladstone's sole experience of ruling a colony – a short period in the Ionian Islands while he was between parties – illustrates the complexity of his views on nationalism and the extent to which he viewed British colonies as a trust which could not lightly be discarded merely in response to local calls for independence or, in the case of the Ionian Islands, closer links to Greece. The impact on the balance of power in Europe was to his mind crucial. Significantly, as Derek M. Schreuder notes, Gladstone was a great promoter of globalisation (before the term existed), describing trade as a 'powerful agent in consolidating and in knitting together the amity of nations', morally obliging Britain towards free trade and the promotion of international law.

To me, part of the value of such a collection of essays is in challenging preconceptions. Three essays in particular do this. Firstly, Richard



Gaunt's paper on Peel's inheritance shows that Gladstone was not the automatic inheritor of Peel's mantle that is implied in the title of the first volume of Richard Shannon's two-part biography. Gladstone was a great advocate of austerity – the 'retrenchment' in the Liberal slogan 'peace, retrenchment and reform' (another topic of great current relevance). But that did not make him the unthinking proponent of small government; under Gladstone, government began the gradual accretion of responsibilities such as education and entrepreneurial local government. Two essays here use the complexity of his ideas about retrenchment to explore his relationship with Ireland before he became Liberal leader, and the ambiguities of his attitudes to slavery in the context of a debate on the use of the navy in the suppression of the African slave trade.

Gladstone's participation in theological controversy, the fervour which he generated among the working class and his skirting of personal controversy in his charitable work, would probably damn him in today's tabloid press. But in his own time no one was better at the management of his image. This book contains essays on his nuanced relations with organised labour, how cartoonists saw him and on the survival of campaign paraphernalia idolising him, from the 1884 electoral reform agitation which assisted in the longer-term Liberal narrative of coherent progressive politics and built on the enthusiasm of popular support. Where is the equivalent support and material for reform of the House of Lords?

Two of the essays in the Personal section would not have been possible without the *Gladstone Diaries*, and demonstrate just how useful their preservation has been. Peter Sewter has written on Gladstone's tree-felling, making clear just how vigorous the GOM was, and how this was a positive conservationist activity rather than destructive. Jenny West's exploration of Gladstone's health adds considerably to Roy Jenkins' focus on the stress-related and psychosomatic illnesses of a long career, but she also draws attention to the difficulties of diagnosis at this distance in time and with Victorian medical knowledge only just moving from the comfort of custom

These fourteen essays prove that there is much still to be discovered about Gladstone and much that is pertinent to current debates.

into the practically scientific. The remaining paper in the Personal sections tracks two of Gladstone's friendships to their close, illustrating the price paid by politicians for their public career.

In the final essay, Eugenio Biagini reflects on a 1992 *Economist* front cover describing Gladstone as 'a prophet of the left'. Biagini reviews the ways in which Gladstone has continued to exert an influence beyond the grave. For example, in the last few years, Gladstone's legacy has been appropriated by Thatcherites who over-simplify the Victorian Liberal view of the roles of government and private enterprise. Tony Blair cited Gladstone in

his enticements to Paddy Ashdown over 'the Project', and to justify overseas intervention. This poses the question as to why, despite Ashdown's best efforts, the party that descends from Gladstone makes the least effort to safeguard his legacy of humanitarian Liberalism.

It is hard to do justice to such a disparate collection in a limited space, but these fourteen essays prove that there is much still to be discovered about Gladstone and much that is pertinent to current debates, particularly those concerned with international affairs.

Tony Little is Chair of the Liberal Democrat History Group

Lifelong campaigner

Bill Cash, *John Bright: Statesman, Orator, Agitator*

(I. B. Tauris, 2011)

Reviewed by **Anthony Howe**

WHEN POLITICIANS TURN to political biography (Powell on Chamberlain, Hurd on Peel, Jenkins on Gladstone) they often tell us more about themselves than they shed new light on their subjects. Bill Cash on John Bright is no exception, for we soon learn that Bright was his great-grandfather's cousin, both belonging to that generation of Quaker businessmen who contributed so much to the wealth and public spirit of provincial Victorian England.

Although Cash in fact tells us little about Bright the businessman (Rochdale cottonmaster and carpet manufacturer) he stands out as one of those successful entrepreneurial Quaker radicals whose sense of justice to his own order pushed him into the 1840s campaign against the Corn Laws (for which in this account read the Common Agricultural Policy) and to a lifelong crusade devoted to upholding 'justice and freedom', a message in which Cash finds a fitting template for the twenty-first-century politician. Several elements in Bright's subsequent crusades earn Cash's approval – not only his lucid 'case for global trade' but his opposition to any form of proportional

representation, balanced by his powerful advocacy of democracy, not least at the time of the Second Reform Act, which proved ironically counter-productive, allowing instead Disraeli to promote the Tories as the party of democracy. Bright's opposition to home rule for Ireland, which separated him politically if not personally from his long-standing friendship with Gladstone, is interpreted as a defence of British parliamentary sovereignty, comparable to that of some recent Conservatives with regard to the European Union.

More convincingly Cash, the stalwart backbencher suffering at the stifling hands of party managers, is keen to recognise Bright, never happy in his short periods in office, as a keen defender of the independent MP, willing to assert the rights of the Commons against over-mighty Cabinet government. Cash also highlights Bright's ambiguous approach to empire, especially India, willing on the one hand to foster its development while recognising the legitimacy of its demands for autonomy (but not yet); he also interestingly compares the enthusiasm for imperial federation of Bright's fellow MP for Birmingham, Joseph Chamberlain,