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.

'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. 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

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.