

Gladstone's Death and Funeral

H. C. G. Matthew marks the centenary of Gladstone's death.

Few political deaths can have been so anticipated as that of William Ewart Gladstone on 19 May 1898. Though 88 years old when he died, Gladstone had been in harness until March 1894, when he resigned for the fourth and last time as prime minister. He had first been in office in 1834, so his was a 60-year long career which began before the reign of Queen Victoria and lasted almost to the end of it. Moreover; though in his last administration he had clearly been near to retirement, his government had been no nostalgic parade. He had carried through the House of Commons a Home Rule for Ireland Bill, and had thus demonstrated that such a thing was possible, even though it was immediately thrown out by the House of Lords almost without debate. Nor had Gladstone been silent once he had retired. His last campaign was an appeal for justice for the Armenians against persecution, made during a great speech at Hengler's Circus in Liverpool, the town of his birth, on 24 September 1896, which had occasioned the resignation of Lord Rosebery from the leadership of the Liberal Party. Gladstone's final illness and death was that of an old man, but one still very much in the public eye.

A slow and semi-public death

After retirement from politics – he did not stand for his Midlothian constituency at the general election of 1895 – Gladstone rather systematically prepared himself and his affairs for death. In the same month as his retirement from the premiership he discussed with his wife Catherine arrangements for their funerals (unfortunately, no details of this conversation remain). At the end of 1896 he wrote his third and final will; he made what in his family be-

came known as the 'Declaration' (on his sexual life and the extent of its improprieties); and he wrote the final entry in the daily diary he had begun while a schoolboy in 1825. All was thus in order. But death was not to be so neat. Gladstone's remarkably tough body put up a strong fight. His habit of tree-felling – so derided by his contemporaries and subsequently – had kept him in excellent shape. His main problem was his eyesight, for which he had an operation for cataract in his right eye in May 1894; this helped in that eye, but cataract quickly developed in the left eye, and a further operation was thought inadvisable. Apart from this difficulty, Gladstone remained apparently healthy. When he and his wife left to winter in Cannes in November 1897, with Gladstone feeling pain from neuralgia on one side of his face, his former secretary noted: 'He has always made the most of his ailments ... one must make allowance for some exaggeration ... Apart from glumness and depression I could see no sign of increased failure either mentally or physically.' In fact Gladstone was suffering from the cancer which killed him. While in France, he had to take opiates but he refused close medical examination until he came home. He listened a great deal to music and his family noticed that his usual daily round of reading and correspondence was in effect abandoned. Even so, he was able to give an interview to the *Daily Telegraph* on Arthur Hallam, his Eton friend in the 1820s and the subject of Tennyson's *In Memoriam*; the *Telegraph* published it on 5 January 1898 in the form of an article, the last of his many literary publications.

The Gladstones in March 1898 returned to Britain a disconsolate party, and went to Bournemouth, as an intermediate temperature between the balmy Mediterranean and the bracing cold of wintery Hawarden Castle, the family home in North Wales where Gladstone had told his family he wished to die. He was examined in Bournemouth by his doctor; Samuel Habershon, who found a swelling on

the palate; the leading cancer surgeon, Sir Thomas Smith, diagnosed cancer; but it was decided not to operate. An announcement was made to the press which made it clear that death was imminent.

Gladstone returned to Hawarden on 22 March, but he did not die quickly. His final months occasioned intense public interest, with a squad of press reporters based in Hawarden keeping the world in touch with developments by telegraph. A stream of Liberal potentates visited to pay their respects. Gladstone received them on his sofa, still getting up each day to dress and to dine. He calculated how many days of his working life had been lost by illness (he could remember the dates of all significant illnesses, for they were few) and he refused to take many opiates despite the pain, on the grounds that he would be 'falling into bad habits'. He regaled his visitors with hymns, especially J. H. Newman's 'Praise to the Holiest in the Height'. On 9 April Gladstone went out of doors for the last time; on 18 April he ceased to come downstairs; and about this time he made his last communion, celebrated by G. H. Wilkinson, Bishop of St Andrews. Nursed by Kate Pitts, Gladstone continued to get out of bed for a time each day, but by mid-May it was clear that he would soon die. Just after 5 a.m. on the morning of Ascension Day, Thursday 19 May, with his wife, eight other members of the family and three doctors round the bed, Gladstone was pronounced dead.

However much anticipated, this was an event reported throughout the world. The pressmen were waiting in the smoking room immediately underneath Gladstone's bedroom and they knew that he was dead when the stentorian voice of Stephen Gladstone intoning the prayers for the dying and the dead echoed around the corridors of Hawarden Castle. Gladstone's timing was in a way inconvenient, for although the news was immediately telegraphed to the Press Association and around the world, the first edition of the London papers had gone

to press; but this meant the profitable sell-out of extra special editions mid-morning. The press had had ample time to prepare: special supplements were issued with the main papers and memorial books and pamphlets of photographs were at once on sale. Newspapers could not then print photographs, and had to fall back on drawings; most of them therefore either produced their own photographic books or had a partnership with a publisher heavily advertised in the new papers, for which even the most staid carried unusually large advertisements.

Gladstone's death was thus the second British death which was a media event of the modern sort (the first had been the death of Gordon in 1885, for which Gladstone was much blamed – but that was in the Sudan and without direct reporting, and Gordon's body was never found). Intimate descriptions of Gladstone's body on the deathbed – of a sort probably unacceptable today – immediately appeared in the *Daily News*, the main Liberal paper in London: 'the figure on which I looked down, tremulous, might be some beautiful statue of grayish white marble lying recumbent upon a tombstone ... only a very few of the intimate friends of the family have passed through this dim chamber of death, just pausing for a moment by the bedside to cast a fleeting, a reverent look'. But of those few, most then published their observations. Sir William Blake Richmond, who made a drawing of Gladstone just after death (dedicated to Nurse Pitts), also issued a detailed (if romanticised) verbal portrait of the dead prime minister. These reports were not regarded as intrusive nor were they resented by the family, for they fitted with the Victorian view of death as something both reverential and ordinary.

Plans for the public funeral

The Gladstone family bore the immediate responsibility for the ar-

rangements which followed and indeed proceedings were already in place before Gladstone died. In his will Gladstone gave three directives: an absolute requirement that he should not be buried where his wife might not subsequently be laid also; the instruction that 'no laudatory inscription' be placed over him; and the statement that his burial was 'to be very simple unless they (his Executors) shall consider that there are conclusive reasons to the contrary'. This might be seen as a simple preference for a simple burial, or it might be seen a characteristic piece of Gladstonian ambivalence – wanting to appear simple while leaving the door open for a public funeral. Even before his death, the family had opted for the latter.

A public funeral was one paid for by Parliament through a resolution to the monarch. It was, and remains, a very rare event. In the nineteenth century only Nelson, Pitt the Younger, Charles James Fox, R. B. Sheridan, George Canning, the Duke of Wellington, Palmerston, and Napier of Magdala had been so buried (several had been offered and declined, for example Beaconsfield and Russell). Palmerston was the best precedent (and he had made the same requirement about his wife), but he had died in the Parliamentary recess and the procedures had had to be short-circuited. The Wellington funeral had been a lavish but rather chaotic affair; the catafalque being too heavy for the road which gave way under it in St James' and too large to get through the gates of St Paul's (where both Nelson and Wellington were buried) and the congregation was thus kept waiting for over an hour. Gladstone's funeral was to be the first public funeral with a recognisedly modern aspect – worldwide press coverage via telegraph and the procession filmed. The arrangements for a public funeral are, like those of a coronation, in the hands of the Earl Marshal, the Duke of Norfolk. To liaise with him, the family asked Edward Hamilton, formerly Gladstone's secretary, to take time off from the Treasury;

Hamilton had in fact started work on the plans before Gladstone had died.

We often think of public funerals as martial events, with streets lined with soldiers, bands playing, the coffin covered with medals and borne on a gun carriage flanked by men in uniform. Gladstone's funeral showed that this need not be so, even at the high noon of Empire.

Lying-in-state at Hawarden and Westminster

While Hamilton and the Duke planned in London, the first steps were taken at Hawarden. There, Gladstone's body was laid out in the Temple of Peace – his study in the Castle – dressed in his doctoral robes from Oxford University. The family chose these scarlet robes deliberately to emphasise that Gladstone was not merely a politician but a person of letters. Wearing his robes, his body was placed on a silk cloth embroidered 'Resquiescat in Pace', the head and chest slightly propped up, with his mortar board laid on his chest and a red silk handkerchief given to him recently by the Armenians covering his feet. A bust of Disraeli was prominent among the busts on the top of the bookcases in the room. The room was then open for mini-lying-in-state for the people of North Wales, and large numbers came to file past it. On 25 May, the body, still in its doctoral robes, but now sealed in a simple oak coffin, was pulled on a hand bier by colliers, estate workmen, tenants and labourers of Hawarden to the church where communion service was held. Pulling a body on a bier was the traditional Victorian way of showing respect – just as live politicians who were popular used to have their carriages pulled by hand when they visited a town to make a speech. The closed coffin was the result of a decision which caused the only serious disagreement in the making of the plans: the family was keen that the

coffin be kept open for the lying-in-state. Hamilton and the Duke thought that this 'would no doubt be thought "unEnglish" and without precedent', as did the Prince of Wales who was becoming increasingly involved in the plans for the proceedings in London. Hamilton had to exercise 'peremptoriness' to persuade the family to close the coffin.

Hamilton and the Duke, whom the former found 'a charming man to work with – such a gentleman', had made arrangements for the body to lie in state in Westminster Hall. It was brought to London during the night of 25–26 May on a special train pulled by the engine 'Gladstone' (now in the Railway Museum at York), the train also containing the large crowd of journalists and illustrators who had gathered at Hawarden. On reaching Willesden in north London, the coffin was transferred to the District line of the underground, in which company Gladstone had been a shareholder since its flotation. The underground train took the coffin to Westminster station, from which it was carried into the Hall across the road. Part of the aim of this operation had been to avoid a procession: there seems to have been general agreement among the organisers that a procession, which would inevitably involve soldiers or police, would be inappropriate in Gladstone's case.

The coffin lay in state in Westminster Hall from 6 a.m. to 8 p.m. on Thursday and Friday, 26 and 27 May. It lay on an undecorated catafalque while over a quarter of a million people filed past it. During the night, Anglican priests and laymen kept a vigil, but during the day the coffin was unguarded. The crowds were partly from London, but many came by special train from the provinces, for Liberalism was weak in London and strong in the rural areas and in the Northern towns. One of those who filed through the Hall was the novelist Thomas Hardy, always a sharp observer of the telling detail. Hardy wrote to his sister:

'I went to see Gladstone 'lying in

state' this morning – though it can hardly be called in state – so plain, even to bareness was the whole scene – a plain oak coffin on a kind of altar covered with a black cloth ... Two carpenters in front of me said "a rough job – $\frac{3}{4}$ panels, & $1\frac{1}{4}$ framing" referring to the coffin, which was made by the village carpenter at Hawarden. The scene however, was impressive, as being in Westminster Hall, & close to where his voice had echoed for 50 years.'

At the end of the lying-in-state on the Friday, the doors of the Hall were reopened to allow Liberals to pay their respects: led by officials of the National Liberal Federation and the Liberal Chief Whip, Tom Ellis, and concluded by members of the National Liberal Club, a long procession of deputations from Liberal Associations throughout the county filed by. Given the state of their party in 1898, they must have wondered if they were bidding farewell to the last Liberal prime minister.

The grave, the pallbearers, and Queen Victoria's 'oversight'

Gladstone was buried in Westminster Abbey on the morning of Saturday, 28 May, nine days after his death. There was a good deal of negotiation about the place of the grave; Dean Stanley, the reforming Dean of Westminster twenty years earlier, had allocated a plot; but the grave had to be big enough in due course to contain Mrs Gladstone also; eventually a suitable spot was found in the crowded floor of the political corner of the Abbey – ironically it was near the statue of Disraeli (though he was buried at Hughenden) and was placed so that Disraeli's statue gazes permanently down on the grave of his dead rival.

A short procession bore the coffin from Westminster Hall to the Abbey in silence, on a simple funeral car (not a gun carriage), pulled by

two horses with civilian bearers and grooms – some of them from the Hawarden Estate – accompanied by the pallbearers and a political procession. The Guard of Honour was made up of schoolboys from Eton, Gladstone's school – a neat touch which emphasised the educational priorities of the dead man. The procession left as Big Ben struck 11 a.m., the bell of St Margaret's, Westminster having previously been tolling every minute together with the bells of the Abbey muffled. No account was taken of public wishes to see the coffin – those were thought to have been accommodated by the lying-in-state – and it was not processed round central London. The area around the Abbey was consequently crammed with a crowd estimated at up 100,000, many of whom were observed to be weeping openly.

The membership of the pallbearing party was naturally a matter of close attention and controversy, for the choice of pallbearers of a dead prime minister necessarily included enemies as well as friends. A. J. Balfour and Lord Salisbury, who had moved the relevant motions in the Commons and Lords, represented the government, despite their violent political antipathy to the dead man; Sir William Harcourt, Lord Rosebery, and Lord Kimberley represented the Liberal Party (we can be sure that Gladstone would have preferred Lord Spencer to Harcourt, whom he found especially difficult to deal with, but the Liberals could hardly have all been members of the House of Lords!); the Duke of Rutland, who as Lord John Manners had sat with Gladstone for Newark, his first constituency; and two cronies, George Armitstead and Stuart Rendel, who together had looked after and paid for the Gladstones in the last years of his life.

There were two further pallbearers: the Prince of Wales (soon to be

Edward VII) and the Duke of York (later George V). Their inclusion was controversial, especially to Queen Victoria. The monarch traditionally did not attend public funerals, and



what most saw as his mother's bad manners. He bluntly told the Queen, when she asked what precedents there were for royalty attending such a funeral, that 'the circumstances were unprecedented, and he would and should never forget what a friend to Royalty Mr G had been'.

The funeral

The congregation in the Abbey had begun assembling at 8.30 a.m., the door being shut at 10 a.m. Mrs Gladstone with her granddaughter Dorothy entered at 10.15, followed, just before the coffin, by the Princess of Wales (later Queen Alexandra) and the Duchess of York (later Queen Mary). The Earl of Pembroke, a person of no consequence, represented the Queen. Gladstone's funeral was thus attended by two future kings and two future queens. Then entered the funeral procession and the coffin. The music before the service was conventional – Schubert and Beethoven –

nobody at this time suggested that she should. Nor, however, did other members of the Royal family, at least not in a prominent role, and Wales' gesture was typical of his capacity to spot the need for change. The Queen was furious. Her antipathy towards Gladstone had reached a level of irrationality in the last years of his final government. In marked contrast to its effusive regrets – personally written by Victoria – for Disraeli's death in 1881, the Court Circular did not record Gladstone's death. When Lord Salisbury, as prime minister and aware of mounting public anger, pointed this out, the Queen replied that the omission was 'entirely an oversight!' The Prince of Wales, who had always enjoyed Gladstone's company and sympathised with some of his policies, and whom Gladstone had seen as the means of restoring the credit of the monarchy, was determined at the funeral to correct

and the setting was that of Croft. The first two hymns were Gladstone's known favourites. Toplady's 'Rock of Ages', almost an anthem of the Victorian evangelicals, reflected Gladstone's youthful religion: he approved of the hymn so much that he had translated it into Latin (Tractarianising it, almost); but it was the original version that was sung. The second hymn was Newman's 'Praise to the Holiest in the Height', verses of which Gladstone had quoted to his friends and family as he lay dying. The third hymn was Isaac Watts' 'O God our Help in Ages Past', a national hymn. The choice of hymns – a matter of great remark and sensitivity to contemporaries – was thus highly ecumenical, embracing evangelicals, Roman Catholics, and the non-English parts of the United Kingdom, for the Watts hymn was especially popular in Scotland. None of Gladstone's own

hymns was used, though immediately after his death several were republished in religious magazines.

By the end of the service, the coffin was in the grave, and the family and others went to look at it there. Mrs Gladstone led the congregation out of the Abbey. As she passed down the nave, the Prince of Wales leaned over his pew and spoke to her; they then shook hands on Mrs Gladstone's request. This brief gesture was very widely commented on, and was taken by most to be in effect an apology for his mother's behaviour. The Queen herself tried to make amends by publishing the telegraph of condolence which she sent to Mrs Gladstone on the morning of the funeral.

The service could, of course, only be seen by those in the Abbey, and there was no procession after the funeral, for the coffin was already in the grave. Contemporaries participated in the proceedings in a rather different way from our 20th-century TV-watching: church services were held in churches of all denominations in cities, towns, villages and parishes throughout the United Kingdom and throughout the Empire to synchronise thanksgiving for Gladstone's life with his burial in the capital. Similar services were also held in some cities of the United States, and especially in the mid-West, where there were many Home Rule Associations and several towns named 'Gladstone'. This idea of the nation literally at prayer for a specific purpose at a specific time was a remnant of the fast-disappearing custom of days of national penance or thanks. Despite a national and international fascination with the funeral, the rest of the Saturday was as usual. Theatres were open and cricket and horse racing were uninterrupted. The Grand National Horse Show opened that day at the Crystal Palace, but was poorly attended. The only cancellation seems to have been, somewhat ironically, the Royal Military Tournament, whose Saturday performance was postponed as a mark of respect.

Memorials: a death in perspective

A Parliamentary motion paid for the statue of Gladstone in Westminster Abbey. The national memorial to him took two chief forms. A Gladstone Memorial Trust was established which still looks after the residential library of St Deiniol's, Hawarden, based on his books but with a larger library and facilities for accommodation; another Trust was established which still dispenses bursaries, prizes and other grants; and provision was made for statues to be erected in the national capitals of London, Edinburgh and Dublin (that for Dublin was refused by the city until a suitable one of Parnell had been erected there first; it was meanwhile placed in Hawarden, where it remains).

Gladstone's funeral was, in retrospect, especially remarkable for its absence of bombast. Held at the very peak of Empire, it emphasised civic, non-military, and religious values. It was striking that the British could at that moment hold a state funeral which had no soldiers and no uniforms (save those of the Heralds and of the Speaker and Lord Chancellor). The funeral of Queen Victoria three years later was a very different affair, with much comment on the contrast between the Queen's personal faith and 'womanly' lack of presumption and the parade of military might which her citizens provided to accompany her to her grave.

Funerals are at their most effective when the service reflects the character and wishes of the dead person and at the same time caters for the often rather different concerns of the mourners. In Gladstone's case, there was a happy, almost organic, coincidence of the personal and the national, of the religious and the political. Indeed, it might be argued that the harmony between church and state which he had argued for in his book, *The State in its Relations with the Church* (1838), but which he soon recognised as impractical was,

even so, reflected in his funeral. This was, of course, in the larger scale of things a false impression. There was a forced contrast between the determined non-militarism of Gladstone's funeral and the temper of the times; and the British government was about to embark in South Africa on what was, in ratio to its objectives, the most expensive and inept of all its wars. Gladstonian Liberalism was to have a last, dramatic burst in the governments of Campbell-Bannerman and Asquith (1905–15), but the elegiac tone of the Gladstone funeral neatly brought to its end the century of Liberalism.

H. C. G. Matthew was Editor of The Gladstone Diaries from 1972. His two-volume biographical study of Gladstone has recently been published by Oxford University Press as a one-volume paperback, Gladstone 1809–1898. He is presently Editor of the New Dictionary of National Biography.

Further reading

H. C. G. Matthew, *Gladstone 1809–1898* (1997), from which above quotations are taken.

The Passing of Gladstone: his life, death and burial (1898), no author known.

D.W. Bahlman (ed.), *The Diary of Sir Edward Walter Hamilton 1885–1906* (1993).

File on Gladstone's funeral in Gladstone, Glynne MSS, St Deiniol's Library, Hawarden.

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