

# Gladstone and Books

*Lord Jenkins of Hillhead* gave the Gladstone Lecture at St Deiniol's Library, Hawarden, on 8 July 1998, in the centenary year of Gladstone's death.

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As you may imagine, this is not the first time that I have talked about Gladstone. It is, however, very much the first time that I have ventured to do it so very close to his home ground. I talked in both Chester and Llandudno 2½ years ago, soon after the publication of my book on him, thereby establishing a sort of bracket on Hawarden. But Hawarden itself, and St Deiniol's Library in particular, offers a new order of presumptuousness.

There is a further aspect of challenge about today. Sir William Gladstone has heard me on his distinguished ancestor on three previous occasions this summer. On this fourth occasion, if I were to cover the same topics, when I catch his eye I must expect either a drooping eyelid, or, if he is too polite to let that happen, at least a silently critical comparative appraisal of my performances, rather as though I were an actor subject to off days. And I must also spare a thought for my wife, who is also rather used to me on Gladstone.

So I thought I would chose a somewhat different approach and talk not about Gladstone in general, but about *Gladstone and Books*, his reading habits and a comparison between them and those of other Prime Ministers – which I hope is an appropriate subject for a library.

Throughout his life he had both a physical and an intellectual obsession with books. In 1854, during his first Chancellorship on his first day back in London after an absence of eight weeks he wrote 'worked 5½ hours on my books' – this meant unpacking and arranging, and was a fairly typical diary entry both in London and at Hawarden. One of the most vivid and symbolic pictures from his extreme old age was 'the wheeling of the books'. When he had built and endowed this library with £40,000 of 1890s money, he himself spend several days at the age of eighty-six pushing barrows full of the contents of his own library along the connecting route.

It was not just that the handling of books appeared to give him the same sort of satisfac-

tion that a dedicated old-style grocer might have got from cutting and wrapping pounds of butter or cheese. He also believed that, in his unending battle against the efflux of time, he might gain a few yards of territory by unrelenting and sometimes indiscriminate reading. Augustine Birrell, great wit but ineffective minister, said that: 'Gladstone would rather read a second-rate book than think a first-rate thought', which was an odd statement for it assumes that a first-rate thought can be done to order. This wild and almost pointless eclecticism was splendidly illustrated by his 1853 reading of, as he put it 'Colt and his revolvers'. This meant a recently published work by the American inventor of a type of pistol which bore the unpromising title of: *On the Application of Machining to the Manufacture of Rotating Chamber-Barrel Fire Arms and their Peculiarities*.

We have already heard this morning about the 20,000 books which he consumed during his active adult reading life, say the seventy or seventy-one years from 1825, when he was sixteen, to 1896 or 1897, when he was eighty-six or eighty-seven. Thereafter his eyesight was too bad for reading. 20,000 is an extraordinary, an almost unbelievable quantity of books to have got through. It means an average of 280 a year. Perhaps inspired by Gladstone, I have taken to keeping a list of what I read, and it comes out remarkably steadily at between seventy-five and eighty-five a year.

Was Gladstone's claim therefore just an idle boast? Politicians are well-known boasters. 20,000 is a good round number to think of, 10,000 not good enough, 30,000 too far over the top. But no, they are all listed, mostly annotated, and many of them to be seen here at St Deiniol's.

What did he read? 20,000 leaves room for a great deal of eclecticism, and this he certainly practised. He read a great deal of theology and of church history, for as well as his politics he was deeply involved in almost every liturgical and eschatological dispute – of which there were a great number – of the middle years of the nineteenth century. He also wrote theology. Indeed when after his first (1868–74) pre-

miership he withdrew from the leadership of the Liberal Party it was in order to devote himself for his declining years to producing theological works. The trouble was that he was by no means a first-class theologian, whereas he undoubtedly was a first-class politician and, indeed, statesman. As a result, almost like the operation of a physical law, he was after eighteen months drawn back into what he was best at, and filled his declining years, which lasted a quarter of a century, with, amongst other things, being Prime Minister another three times.

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. (Nevertheless he got a wonderful rhythm into the Latin translation of the hymn which we sang this morning.) He devoted a lot of time to classical texts. He read the Bible in Greek every day. He was devoted to Homer, and published several commentaries upon him, including some fairly fantastical theories which tried to see him as part of the headwaters of Christianity. Towards the end of his life work on his new translation of the odes of Horace became a ruling passion with Gladstone. When he got back from Windsor following an ungracious audience with the Queen (on her side more than his) after his last resignation as Prime Minister, he immediately got down to a Horace translation.

As a literary critic of works in English his performance was somewhere between his theology and his classicism. He wrote one very good long essay on Tennyson, whom he also created the first and almost the only poet-peer – Byron inherited his title and was not created – although they, Gladstone and Tennyson mostly circled around each other like two cats with arched backs, perhaps sub-consciously aware that they, together with a handful of others – Newman, Dickens, Darwin, perhaps Carlyle, were amongst the handful

of great stars of the nineteenth century and, as such, needing their own unimpeded orbits. They were also said still to be jealous, fifty years later, Prime Minister and Poet Laureate, about which had stood higher in the affection of Arthur Hallam.

Gladstone also undoubtedly read more fiction when he was in office than any subsequent British Prime Minister until Macmillan, although Macmillan read fiction which was contemporary to Gladstone rather than to himself nearly a century later, and Asquith would have run them both fairly close as a third contender. No other Prime Minister would have been near. But Gladstone read all the main Victorian novels as they came out – Trollope and George Eliot certainly, Dickens a little less strongly, and many lesser ones as well. And he also found time to go back quite frequently to Fanny Burney, Jane Austen and the Brontës.

This, then, was the broad pattern of Gladstone's reading. What about the reading habits of other British politicians and particularly Prime Ministers? The pattern varies a lot. There were undoubtedly some very classically and more generally historically educated figures in the middle of the nineteenth century – Peel and Derby most notably. And Disraeli was highly literate both in input and output. Balfour and Asquith were sophisticated intellectuals.

Then there was a sag until the near quarter century starting in 1940 when British governments were led by a series of men whose minds were to an exceptional extent moulded, refreshed and stimulated by their historical knowledge. Churchill was, of course, the outstanding example. Although he had no formal training, he wrote history with a verve unequalled by any other British statesman, and with a professionalism which could be rivalled in this category only by John Morley or James Bryce. Beyond that, his imagination was constantly seized by the tides of historical events and an epic view of how great men could direct them. He was undoubtedly much motivated

by an awareness of his own historical destiny.

Clement Attlee saw himself and events less grandiloquently. He had no gift of narrative prose. But his training was historical, as were his continuing intellectual interests. He had an acute instinct for balance between continuity and change, and his laconic sense of proportion, which cut men and events down to size, owed much to his knowledge of the past.

Anthony Eden knew a lot about Persian and Arab history and came to acquire an encyclopaedic knowledge of the minutiae of diplomatic exchanges of the first half of this century. But his interests were more aesthetic than intellectual, and of this quartet his mind was probably the least conditioned by history, just as his term of office and Prime Ministership was much the shortest and least successful.

The fourth member was Harold Macmillan. He, like Attlee, had little of Churchill's command over written English, and he could not therefore compete as a chronicler. But his knowledge was at least as great as Churchill's, and, indeed, covered a wider span. He knew Greek and Roman history in a way that Churchill, whose interests were always concentrated on the past 300 years, never did. Macmillan was not a great writer of history. His six volumes of memoirs, unlike his much more interesting wartime *Mediterranean Diary*, are pretty dull stuff. But his most characteristic speeches moved easily from the Peloponnesian War to the Battle of the Somme.

Since Macmillan's resignation in 1963 it has been mostly downhill all the way so far as historical knowledge and interest – and probably general knowledge and interest too – are concerned. Harold Wilson knew a great deal of detail about the American Civil War, but not much other history. Margaret Thatcher liked arguing by historical comparison, but the comparison was almost always only with the government which immediately preceded hers. She almost invariably argued in a scale of two. Her his-

tory showed few signs of going back beyond 1974.

What of the new regime? Mr Blair has expressed to me his regret that he read law and not history at Oxford and has become a considerable addict of political biography. But the fact remains that it was law that he read.

What about American Presidents? What is true, however, on both sides of the Atlantic is that whether or not politicians read history they now try to write it to an extent which was previously almost unknown. Of the eleven British Prime Ministers between 1880 and 1940 not one wrote full-scale autobiography. Gladstone left a fragment only, as did Balfour, and Lloyd George wrote a large-scale

*pièce justificative*, but not an autobiography. Of the ten who have completed their term of office since 1940, only Edward Heath and John Major, both said to be busy writing, have not published.

In the United States there were twelve Presidents between 1880 and 1945. Three of them (Theodore Roosevelt, Coolidge and Hoover) did write memoirs. But since 1945, of the ten who have gone from the highest office only two (Franklin Roosevelt and Kennedy) have, for different but compelling reasons, remained silent. Whether this spate on both sides of the Atlantic produces much good literature may be open to question, but I believe that it at least makes prospective authors a lit-

tle more aware of how their actions may look in longer perspective and of their performance *vis-a-vis* others who will be working at the memoir face alongside them. And the effects of this and of general historical interest are more likely to be good than bad.

Gladstone stands unique on either side of the Atlantic in the range and quantity of his reading, and rivalled only by Churchill in his written output.

*Lord Jenkins of Hillhead was Leader of the Liberal Democrats in the House of Lords 1988–98, and is the author of several books, including Gladstone (Macmillan, 1995) and The Chancellors (Macmillan, 1998).*

## Research in Progress

*This column aims to assist research projects in progress. If you can help any of the individuals listed below with sources, contacts, or any other helpful information – or if you know anyone who can – please pass on details to them. If you know of any other research project in progress for inclusion in this column, please send details to the Editor at the address on page 2.*

**The party agent and English electoral culture, c.1880 – c.1906.** The development of political agency as a profession, the role of the election agent in managing election campaigns during this period, and the changing nature of elections, as increased use was made of the press and the platform. *Kathryn Rix, Christ's College, Cambridge, CB2 2BU; awr@bcs.org.uk.*

**Liberal policy towards Austria-Hungary, 1905–16.** *Andrew Gardner, 22 Birdbrook House, Popham Road, Islington, London N1 8TA; agardner@ssees.ac.uk.*

**The Hon H. G. Beaumont (MP for Eastbourne 1906–10).** Any information welcome, particularly on his political views (he stood as a Radical). *Tim Beaumont, 40 Elms Road, London SW4 9EX.*

**Defections of north-east Liberals to the Conservatives, c.1906–1935.** Aims to suggest reasons for defections of individuals and develop an understanding of changes in electoral alignment. Sources include personal papers and newspapers; suggestions about how to get hold of the papers of more obscure Liberal defectors welcome. *Nick Cott, 1a Henry Street, Gosforth, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, NE3 1DQ; N.M.Cott@newcastle.ac.uk.*

**Liberals and the local government of London 1919–39.** *Chris Fox, 173 Worplesdon Road, Guildford GU2 6XD; christopher.fox7@virgin.net.*

**The Liberal Party and foreign and defence policy, 1922–88.** Book and articles; of particular interest is the 1920s and '30s, and also the possibility of interviewing anyone involved in formulating the foreign and defence policies of the party. *Dr R. S. Grayson, 8 Cheltenham Avenue, Twickenham TW1 3HD.*

**Archibald Sinclair and the Liberal Party 1935–45.** Sources, particularly for Sinclair's Air Ministry period (1940–45), the reorganisation of the party in 1936 and the 1945 election, needed. *Ian Hunter, 9 Defoe Avenue, Kew, London TW9 4DL; Ian\_Hunter@ATKEARNEY.com.*

**The Liberal Party 1945–56.** Contact with members (or opponents) of the Radical Reform Group during the 1950s, and anyone with recollections of the leadership of Clement Davies, sought. *Graham Lippiatt, 24 Balmoral Road, South Harrow, HA2 8TD.*

**The grassroots organisation of the Liberal Party 1945–64;** the role of local activists in the late 1950s revival of the Liberal Party. *Mark Egan, 42 Richmond Road, Gillingham, Kent ME7 1LN.*

**The Unservile State Group, 1953–1970s.** *Dr Peter Barberis, 24 Lime Avenue, Flixton, Manchester M41 5DE.*

**The political and electoral strategy of the Liberal Party 1970–79.** Individual constituency papers from this period, and contact with individuals who were members of the Party's policy committees and/or the Party Council, particularly welcome. *Ruth Fox, 7 Mulberry Court, Bishop's Stortford, Herts CM23 3JW.*