

LIBERAL HISTORY NEWS

SPRING 2010

Liberal History News

is a new regular feature in the *Journal* (except in special themed issues), reporting news of meetings, conferences, commemorations, dinners or any other events, together with anything else of contemporary interest to our readers. Contributions are very welcome; please keep them reasonably concise, and accompany them, if possible, with photos. Email to the Editor on journal@liberalhistory.org.uk

Gladstone bicentenary

A WREATH-LAYING CEREMONY in Westminster Abbey on 12 January 2010 completed the bicentenary year of the birth of Liberal Prime Minister William Gladstone. History Group chair **Tony Little** was there:

The wreath was laid on Gladstone's grave, after evensong, by children from Gladstone's family in the presence of Sir William Gladstone, the Dean of Westminster Abbey and a congregation of around a hundred, including eminent historians of the Victorian era and prominent Liberal Democrat politicians Charles Kennedy and Lord McNally.

The ceremony took place in the shadows of the Abbey's statues of Gladstone and Disraeli which, failing to look each other in the eye and separated by a 'neutral' monument, give the impression of continued rivalry on either side of an invisible House of Commons, Gladstone posed next to the statue of his mentor Sir Robert Peel.

Appropriately, David Steel read Gladstone's warning to 'remember the rights of the

savage, as we call him', from the 1879 Midlothian campaign speech on the Afghan war. Rev Paul Hunt, chairman of the National Liberal Club, hinted at the expenses scandal when he spoke of Gladstone's assertion that 'nothing that is morally wrong can be politically right', while Rev Peter Francis, Warden of St Deiniol's Library, Gladstone's national memorial, noted the Grand Old Man's belief that 'life is a great and noble calling, not a mean and grovelling thing'. Sir Alan Beith delivered the eulogy, which is reproduced below.

On Gladstone's birthday at the end of December, wreaths were also laid in ceremonies in Liverpool, his birthplace, and Edinburgh, where he was MP between 1880 and 1895 (see story below).

He made politics matter

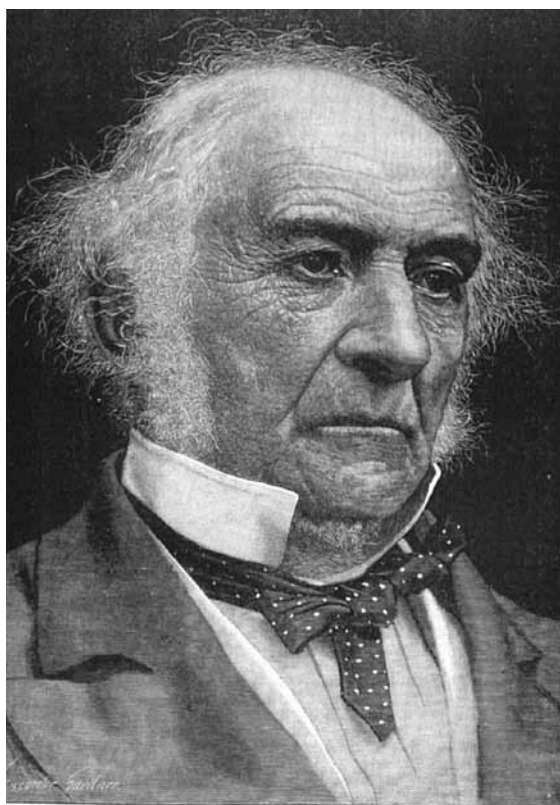
Rt Hon Sir Alan Beith MP's address at the wreath-laying ceremony in honour of the 200th anniversary of Gladstone's birth, Westminster Abbey, January 2010:

Today we honour William Ewart Gladstone, four times Prime Minister of this country and Leader of the Liberal Party.

Born 200 years ago, he not only lived through almost all of the nineteenth century, he dominated the politics of that century. He achieved that dominance with a sense of moral purpose rooted in his Christian beliefs, and it is all the more fitting that we honour him in this Abbey, which he knew so well, following the Evensong service of the Church of England of which he was a

devoted member. Yet at the same time this devoted churchman was the political hero of most Non-conformists, he devoted much of his political capital to an attempt to end the religious and political subjection of the Catholics of Ireland, and he fought for the right of an atheist to sit in the House of Commons.

He had turned from a Tory upbringing to the promotion of Liberalism. It was a Liberalism which asserted the value of every human being. It embraced, as we heard in his own ringing terms, 'the meanest along with the greatest' over 'the whole surface of the earth'. At home it involved tackling the very issues which challenge today's politicians,



most notably stabilising the public finances and modernising the political system by opening it up to voices and groups which had previously been excluded, from Westminster right down to the parish council.

In his support for the National Liberal Club, of which he was the founding president, he sought to create a centre in London for those newcomers to politics from all over Britain who would not readily have gained admittance to the gentlemen's clubs of Victorian London. Party leaders today worry about how to make politics relevant to ordinary people. Gladstone drew vast crowds to listen to his ideas at open-air meetings in Scotland, Wales and the industrial centres of Northern England. Wherever he went he was presented with petitions backing the causes he had espoused. He was a celebrity whose picture hung in tens of thousands of homes and stared out with his steely gaze from cups, plates, medals and much else of what we would now call 'merchandise'. He clearly made politics matter.

Gladstone was no stranger to Prime Ministerial leadership battles or party divisions, but he never let them blunt his determination to fight for what was just. He was a man of formidable intellect, incredible industry, massive self-consciousness and turbulent spirit. He cannot have been easy as a political colleague, or easy to live with; indeed, he found it difficult at times to live with himself. But such is the way with people who embody greatness. He was a giant in the land. We should honour him not only in the wreaths we lay but in what we do to advance the freedom and well-being of humankind.

Gladstone and Bulgaria

YORK MEMBERSHIP traces the historic connections between Gladstone and Bulgaria.

'Some of my countrymen might be admirers of Margaret Thatcher or Tony Blair,' said Dr Lachezar Matev, the Bulgarian ambassador to Britain, 'but William Gladstone will always be number one as far as we're

Gladstone was no stranger to Prime Ministerial leadership battles or party divisions, but he never let them blunt his determination to fight for what was just. He was a man of formidable intellect, incredible industry, massive self-consciousness and turbulent spirit.

concerned.' Matev was speaking at the launch of Gladstone's bicentenary celebrations at the four-time Liberal Prime Minister's former London residence in Carlton House Terrace last year. But the anniversary of his birth in December 1809 was celebrated in almost equal measure by the ambassador's countrymen. Not only was there lecture and reception at the Bulgarian embassy in London, there was also a special Gladstonian academic conference in the country's capital, Sofia, and a trip by the British-Bulgarian Friendship Society to Bulgaria to investigate his legacy.

The reason for the Grand Old Man's enduring popularity is simple. In 1876, news of the brutal suppression of the 'April Uprising', an insurrection organised by the Bulgarians in what was then part of the Ottoman Empire, involving regular units of the Imperial Army and irregular *bashi-bazouk*, reached the other end of Europe. The Tory government of Benjamin Disraeli, in keeping with normal British foreign policy, regarded the Ottoman Empire as a bulwark against possible Russian expansion into eastern Europe, and was reluctant to become entangled in what it regarded as a largely domestic issue. But Gladstone was enraged by reports of the massacre of thousands. He published a powerful polemic, *Bulgarian Horrors and the Question of the East*, which called for the Ottomans to withdraw 'bag and baggage' from Bulgaria. 'Let the Turks now carry away their abuses in the only possible manner, namely, by carrying off themselves,' he raged.

The pamphlet sold 200,000 copies in a month, helped rally other influential figures such as the Italian nationalist Giuseppe Garibaldi to the Bulgarian cause, and led to Europe-wide demands for reform of the Ottoman Empire, which contributed to the re-establishment of Bulgaria as a de facto independent nation in 1878.

In the ensuing Midlothian campaign of 1880, Gladstone drew frequent attention to the Bulgarian Horrors in a series of mass public election rallies in which foreign policy played a surprisingly large part, leading to

the Liberals' triumph at the ballot box.

Gladstone's actions gained him heroic status and his name was championed across Bulgaria. 'There is hardly a town in Bulgaria that doesn't have a street named in his honour,' said Dr Matev. Even during the long years of communist rule, his importance in the creation of the Bulgarian state continued to be emphasised.

'For someone like Gladstone to speak out so clearly and passionately – such a commanding figure in the most powerful nation on earth – had a huge impact,' said Professor Richard Aldous, author of an acclaimed co-biography of Gladstone and Disraeli, *The Lion and the Unicorn*. 'While the parallel is far from exact, look at the importance that Barack Obama's opposition to the war in Iraq on moral grounds had on a global audience and the importance that had in his subsequent election campaign.'

What would Gladstone himself have made of all the fuss surrounding the bicentenary? Peter Francis, warden of St Deiniol's, the prime ministerial library founded by 'the People's William' in Hawarden, North Wales, says: 'I think he would have been deeply gratified, for the two countries both had a special place in his heart.'

Gladstone bicentenary event in Edinburgh

THE BICENTENARY of the birth of W.E. Gladstone was celebrated in Edinburgh on 29 December 2009; report by **Nigel Lindsay**.

Amid thickly-falling snow, a wreath-laying ceremony took place at the Grand Old Man's impressive statue in Coates Crescent Gardens, part of his Midlothian constituency, in the city's west end. The wreath, which had been specially made in the Victorian fashion by Maxwell's of Castle Street, was laid by Lord Steel. It is a tribute either to the reverence in which Edinburgh citizens hold W.E.G., or perhaps to the continuing icy weather, that the wreath was still undisturbed in its place on the plinth of the statue a fortnight later.



Gladstone commemoration in a snowy Edinburgh, 29 December 2009

7/6, and 10/-. Lord Steel told how Gladstone had nevertheless cost him a vote at the 1966 general election; that of a woman who said she could never vote Liberal, much as she liked his year as MP, because 'they would not send help for General Gordon'. He paid tribute to Gladstone as a nineteenth-century politician whose work remained relevant in the twenty-first century, mentioning Gladstone's advocacy of what would nowadays be called 'an ethical foreign policy' in Afghanistan and the Balkans and the G.O.M's emphasis on extending educational opportunity. He referred to the esteem in which Gladstone was held in Scotland, and pointed out that the completion and inauguration of the huge statue in 1917, in the midst of the First World War, was evidence of this.

After a brief pause for photographs (see left) those present adjourned to the nearby Hilton Hotel in time to avoid frostbite setting in.

What would Gladstone think?

THE QUESTION of Gladstone's political views made its appearance in the 2010 election campaign, after the Conservative leader David Cameron quoted him in a speech on 27 April. The following day, BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme took up the issue, with an interview conducted by Justin Webb from the BBC's Bristol studio.

JW: David Cameron invoked the great Liberal Prime Minister William Gladstone yesterday: 'Government should make it difficult for people to do wrong, and easy for them to do right'. Well, perhaps we're all Liberals now, and if we are, has the West Country's life support of the party in the barren post-war years been a service to the nation?

Professor Richard Aldous is author of *The Lion and the Unicorn: Gladstone versus Disraeli*, and Duncan Brack is Editor of the *Journal of Liberal History* and chair of the Liberal Democrat Conference Committee. Good morning to you both.

RA: Good morning.

DB: Good morning.

Among those attending in overcoats, scarves and hats were Liberals who represented all strata of elected office in the area. In addition to Lord and Lady Steel, the company included Dr George Grubb (the Lord Provost of Edinburgh), John Barrett MP, Robert Brown MSP, and councillors Paul Edie and Phil Wheeler of Edinburgh City Council. Of these, John Barrett then represented an area that was once part of Gladstone's Midlothian constituency, while Phil Wheeler was Liberal candidate for Midlothian in 1974. Donald Gorrie, who previously represented part of the constituency, was also present.

The ceremony was necessarily brief because of the winter morning temperature. The organiser of the event, Nigel Lindsay, welcomed those who had braved the weather, and reported apologies from two councillors who were unavoidably absent. He recalled a centenarian elector who had supported him in an Aberdeen election in the early 1970s because of positive memories of Mr Gladstone.

Willis Pickard then read the following email message he had received from Gladstone's

descendants Hannah Kempton, Beth Marsden and Tom Gladstone:

In his later years W.E. Gladstone enjoyed spending his birthdays on the Riviera, escaping the inclement British winter weather. As the great, great, great, great, grand nieces and nephew of W.E., we are more accustomed to the Scottish habit of celebrating in all weathers and can think of no better place to do this than Edinburgh. Two of us called the city home for the four years that we attended the University, and others of Gladstone's direct descendants have also studied here. So we join you all in wishing the Grand Old Man a very happy birthday and thank you for braving the elements to remember him.

Lord Steel then laid the wreath and paid tribute to Gladstone's unique record as four times Prime Minister, concluding at the age of 84. He drew attention to the huge audiences Gladstone attracted to his public meetings and referred to some tickets he had for one of those meetings – priced at 5/-,

JW: Professor Aldous, there's nothing terribly revolutionary, is there, about David Cameron praising William Gladstone; didn't Mrs Thatcher like him as well?

RA: Yes, Mrs Thatcher always claimed that she was a Gladstonian liberal and was very proud of it, and in some ways, of course, it's entirely legitimate for David Cameron to claim Gladstone, because before Gladstone was a Liberal, he was a Conservative. He began his political career as a Tory; he was a Peelite, and he only really split from the mainstream of the Conservative Party in 1846, over the Corn Laws. So in many ways, Cameron is exactly right to say that Gladstone is as much part of the Conservative tradition as he is part of the Liberal one.

JW: Duncan Brack, how much is he part still of the Liberal one?

DB: Oh, enormously, I think. And I think that the quote that David Cameron came up with – I'm not sure I can think of anyone who would disagree with it! There are plenty of other quotes that he could have made; for example, from Gladstone: 'Liberalism is trust in the people, only qualified by prudence; Conservatism is mistrust in the people, only qualified by fear.'

I think there's a core of belief in liberty, and diversity, and tolerance, and decentralisation, and internationalism, that exists still in the Lib Dems of today, and we inherit from the Gladstonian Liberalism of the nineteenth century.

JW: But I suppose something then happened, didn't it, in the early part of the twentieth century, when you think of other Liberal leaders, more recent Liberal leaders, who took a sort of different tack, who believed much more in the state, to put it over-bluntly?

DB: Well the New Liberalism of the early twentieth century, of Lloyd George and Asquith and Churchill – social liberalism, as we would say today – certainly accepted a bigger role for the state in setting the conditions in which people can realise their freedom: good education, a good health service, help in old age and unemployment. But I think that Gladstone is mis-remembered often; he was pretty pragmatic

about economic interventionism – he nationalised the telegraphs, and he was ready to nationalise the rail companies if it proved necessary. So there's not such a big change that happened in the early twentieth century; I think there is a consistent theme from Gladstone.

JW: Professor Aldous?

RA: It's important to remember as well – Duncan's quite right about the social side of things – but we have to remember the other things which would appeal particularly to the Conservatives at the moment. Gladstone's big themes were retrenchment and low taxation; these were in many ways two of the key things that underpinned his philosophy. His idea of retrenchment was that you should always get rid of waste in government, even to the extent that he insisted that the diplomatic bags should always have the labels scratched off them, so that they could be used again. So, ideas in the Conservative manifesto now about getting rid of waste, I would have thought would be things that would very much appeal to Gladstone.

DB: That's true up to a point, but remember that government expenditure in the mid-nineteenth century was very heavily directed to things that benefited the upper classes. They were things like the military and the diplomatic service; John Bright called it 'a gigantic system of outdoor relief for the aristocracy'. Gladstone was concerned about not giving subsidies to the privileged elite.

JW: Can I ask you both about the West Country? We've spent three days now in the West Country, and when you talk to people, Liberal Democrats are now very much obviously part of the political mix here, in some places they have had representatives, and they're very much hoping to get a few more this time round. Duncan Brack, is it down to the West Country that the Liberal Party managed to stay alive in the barren times?

DB: Yes, pretty much – along with Scotland and Wales, I think. Those three areas almost always retained Liberal MPs, even in the darkest days in the 1940s and '50s and '60s.

JW: Why do you think that was? What is it about West Country folk?

DB: Yes, it's interesting. Again it's the same with Scotland and Wales; these are areas which I think have quite a strong distinctive sense of geographical identity, and they see themselves as very different from the centre, from the metropolis. And also, I think, in the earlier part of the century the survival of Nonconformity was very important; the Liberal Party was always a Nonconformist Party in its backbone. Somebody described the people who were prepared to vote Liberal still in the '40s and '50s as 'awkward Nonconformists'.

And I think it was really important in keeping the parliamentary tradition of the Liberal Party alive, so that people who thought they were Liberals, but didn't think there was much point in voting for them anywhere else in the country, then began to see the point of voting Liberal when disillusion grew with the other two parties in the '70s.

JW: Duncan Brack and Richard Aldous, thank you both.

You can hear this interview at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid_8648000/8648296.stm

New on the History Group website

THE LIBERAL Democrat History Group's website, at www.liberalhistory.org.uk, is gradually being updated and expanded.

New on the site recently is a biography of **Sir Clement Freud** (1924–2009), Liberal MP for Isle of Ely 1973–87, written by Sir Alan Beith MP. The biography can be found at: http://www.liberalhistory.org.uk/item_single.php?item_id=60&item=biography

Apologies ...

... for the late despatch of this issue, which should have been available in early April. Normal service will be resumed with *Journal 67*, a special issue on 'Liberalism and the Left', which should be available in early July.

'Liberalism is trust in the people, only qualified by prudence; Conservatism is mistrust in the people, only qualified by fear.'