



through his children. Gladstone seems to have wanted to control his children and keep them close to him, a trait that seemed to intensify, once he himself lost control of his own party in 1886. That event was largely caused by his appalling mishandling of his Liberal colleagues and he seems to have taken the feelings of his own family for granted, in much the same way. One has to admire his daughter, Helen, who escaped to Cambridge to become vice-principal of Newnham College for nineteen years and who was only dragged back to Hawarden to nurse her ageing parents after William's retirement.

Inevitably, given the author's scrupulous concern for the use of primary sources to support all her assertions, there are frustrations. The question of Stephen's eyesight (he was blind in one eye and suffered restricted vision in the other) is given much attention in the first chapter, but seems to vanish once Stephen goes up to Oxford. Some minor issues, such as Stephen's thwarted plan to move away from his father's ambit in 1893, are explored in rather laborious detail with precious little contextualising, as the defeat of Gladstone's second Home Rule Bill in the same year must surely have been responsible for distracting the prime minister

from this comparatively minor question. By contrast, there is far too little analysis of Stephen's reaction to William's famously ambiguous and posthumous confession to Stephen that he had never 'been guilty of the act which is known as that of infidelity to the marriage bed.' Nor is it made clear enough that this 'declaration' was only opened in 1900, two years after the retired statesman's death, so that John Morley could use it in the authorised biography of Gladstone (Morley wisely chose to steer clear of the whole matter).

Perhaps the text also hurries to a finish somewhat, with the last ten years of Stephen's life condensed into a mere fifteen pages. In this way, Aitken perhaps unwittingly confirms that his importance *had* lessened once his father had died. However, as these years included the First World War in which Stephen's second son, Charlie, was held in a German P.O.W. camp for three and a half years, and his youngest son, Willie, was killed in the British army's successful advance in autumn 1918, it is a pity that more time and reflection could not have been spent in reviewing the impact of the global cataclysm on those hitherto protected from the harshness of everyday life such as Stephen Gladstone.

Ultimately, this is a very well-written and insightful portrait of a minor figure in the orbit of one of the most remarkable men of the Victorian age. Stephen emerges as something of an irritating millenquetoast, nagging at his father, yet unable to act independently, and his treatment of his wife Annie reflects poorly on his character, idolising her in his courtship, yet failing to defend her against the monumental busybody that was his mother, Catherine, once they were married. Remarkably, considering the unabated flow of scholarship on the four-time prime minister, Aitken's biography provides Liberal scholars with a completely original perspective on Gladstone; one which, in this reviewer's eyes at least, seems substantially to confirm Clement Attlee's judgement of William Gladstone as a 'frightful old prig', but which ameliorates it by revealing that Gladstone had, after all, spent his life in the company of prigs.

Ian Cawood is head of history at Newman University, Birmingham and is a member of the editorial board of the Journal of Liberal History. His latest book is The Liberal Unionist Party 1886–1912: A History (I.B. Tauris, 2012).

Art at the National Liberal Club

Michael Meadowcroft, *A Guide to the Works of Art of the National Liberal Club, London* (National Liberal Club, 2012)

Reviewed by **Eugenio F. Biagini**

THE ART COLLECTION at the National Liberal Club (NLC) is a great source of pride for its members and a delight for the visitor. This *Guide* is a gift to both, and indeed to anyone interested in the history of British Liberalism. It is lavishly illustrated and well supported by detailed descriptions of the works displayed, with short biographies of the subjects and of the artists who portrayed them.

Since its foundation in 1882, the Club acquired a substantial number of busts, monuments and paintings,

including works by leading British and Irish artists such as Jack B. Yeats and William Orpen. Given the 'pro-Europe' tradition of the party, it is not inappropriate that for over thirty years the person in charge of new acquisitions and the conservation of the existing works was a Dutch citizen, J. E. A. Reyneke van Stuwte (1876–1962), who joined the Club in 1908. The author of this book, Michael Meadowcroft, a former adviser to emerging democracies as well as a Liberal MP for Leeds West, is himself an example of such an internationalist

tradition of liberalism. Yet the collection is surprisingly and exclusively 'British': you don't find here any of the many champions of liberty British Liberals admired – such as Abraham Lincoln, Giuseppe Garibaldi or Dadabhai Naoroji (of the Indian National Congress, the first Asian MP and an ardent Gladstonian). It is also surprising – and rather sad – that the Club does not have a memorial to John Stuart Mill, voted 'the greatest Liberal' in a party-member poll a few years ago.

Many of the paintings are portraits of leading radicals – such as William Cobbett, G. J. Holyoake and Charles Bradlaugh – but most of them celebrate the party leaders, from W. E. Gladstone to Paddy Ashdown (there are no portraits, as yet, of Charles Kennedy, Menzies Campbell and Nick Clegg). The busts and statues include the seventeenth-century

revolutionary hero John Hampden, the eighteenth-century Whig leader Charles J. Fox, the Victorian Quaker John Bright, and, again, Gladstone, who has inspired several works of varying artistic value. A whole room is dedicated to women, first among them Lady Violet Bonham-Carter, in a portrait which does justice not only to her stunning beauty but also to her indomitable political resolve and visionary approach to politics.

It is interesting to reflect on what this art collection suggests about party identity and self-representation. Even this *sanctum sanctorum* of the Liberal establishment celebrates not power, but opposition to power, and its heroes are often men and women who never held office or did so very briefly, who opposed power with all their strength (like Cobbett), or even died in the attempt to overturn the

constitution (like Hampden). The most successful power politicians commemorated in the collection – Gladstone and Lloyd George – were themselves either 'trouble-makers' (in A. J. P. Taylor's words) or widely regarded as quasi-revolutionaries. There is also a bust of Sir Robert Peel: but then he too was a trouble-maker of sorts, having nearly destroyed the Conservative Party to advance the cause of free trade, 'the food of the people', which was and long remained one of the most important items on the Liberal agenda.

The message is clear: NLC members perceived Liberalism as 'conviction politics' in an exclusive, absorbing and uncompromising way. This does not mean that they had from the start the vocation of the 'party of protest' – as the media incessantly claim about the Lib Dems – but that they defined themselves primarily

as the watchdog of the people's rights, a force that contributes to the governance of the country by being critical, independent and rooted in the ideals of civic virtue, rather than in market forces, national chauvinism or pressure-group shibboleths. In other words, the Club's art collection proclaims that there is more to British democracy than the obsession with power which defines the party's more successful national competitors on either the right or the so-called left. Perhaps this should provide food for thought for the present-day Coalition Lib Dem MPs, as they survey opinion polls and consider the party mood in the run-up to the next general election.

Eugenio F. Biagini is Reader in Modern History at Cambridge and a Fellow of Sidney Sussex College. He has published extensively on the history of Liberalism in Britain, Ireland and Italy.

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