

newspaper comment and public opinion. If I have one criticism it is that having established the inseparability of the issues of land reform and famine relief, Gray proceeds to deal with each of these in separate chapters, which means that the reader can lose

sight of how the two threads interconnect. But that is just a small quibble about a book that really I cannot recommend too highly.

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Eloquence, energy and execution

David Bebbington & Roger Swift(eds.): *The Gladstone Centenary Essays* (Liverpool University Press, 2000)

Reviewed by **Tony Little**

In 1998 a conference was held at Chester College (part of the University of Liverpool), in commemoration of the centenary of Gladstone's death. This collection consists of eleven of the lectures delivered on that occasion, together with a very useful essay by David Bebbington reviewing the historiography of Gladstone. For those of us who attended the event these essays act as a useful reminder of what was said; they elaborate and provide the references for the arguments used. But do they provide a valuable read for those who are not specialists?

In his opening public lecture at the beginning of the conference (unfortunately not included) the late Colin Matthew, the editor of the bulk of the Gladstone Diaries,¹ argued that the diaries were the skeleton on which the body of Gladstone studies would hang. These essays represent a part of that body and try to convey something of the spirit and complexity of the man which no single biography, no matter how well written, can hope to capture. In a review of a biography of Pepys, Christopher Hill argues that the fascination of the Pepys' diary 'is that it does not put before us a single rounded personality but a broken bundle of mirrors. It is genuine because it is utterly inconsistent. Each of us can select his own Pepys'.² The issue for students of Gladstone is

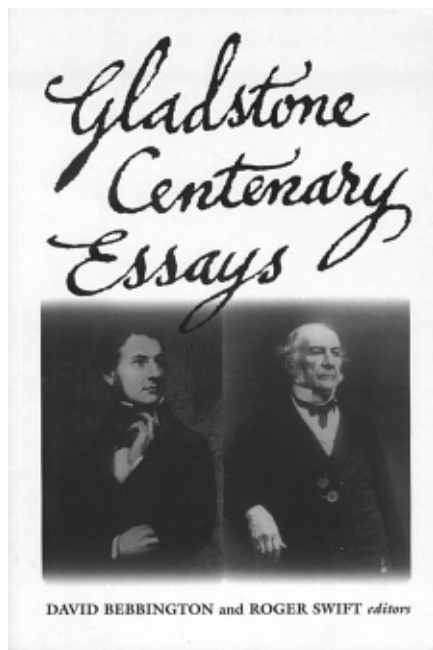
slightly different. His diaries were not primarily an outlet for internal thoughts and discussions of private actions, revealing the fallible man in the way we know and love of Pepys. The examination of conscience, the incidental comments on events and people take second place to a log of correspondence sent and received, people met and books read. It is these bare bones that provide the clues, for those who know how to interpret them. More importantly, as these essays illustrate, Gladstone was not so obviously a mass of contradictions as Pepys. Complex, yes; multi-faceted, yes; but a personality whose wide interests interacted and reinforced each other.

Crucially, Gladstone came to politics by way of religion. Thwarted by his father in his efforts to pursue a career as an ordained minister, he determined to use his skill in politics to fortify the Church. This was simultaneously an enormous strength and a significant weakness. The weakness appeared early, as illustrated in the essays by Stewart Brown on the disruption of the Church of Scotland, and Eric Evans on Gladstone as Peel's pupil. Gladstone's support for High Church Anglicanism never wavered but, with Peel's guidance and by learning from his mistakes, he accommodated himself to the growing diversity of religious opinion in the

country and to the growing significance of the secular business of government. He also managed to learn before he gained a position that was important enough for his early wayward views to have done any damage. The strength his faith brought him was the moral purpose with which he was able to invest all his activities. Like Cromwell, he was doing God's work, though unlike Cromwell, his chosen weapons were eloquence and legislation. Clyde Binfield's essay shows how his moral fervour resonated with the middle class non-conformists who formed the backbone of Liberal support while Eugenio Biagini brings out the theological/philosophical strands that informed the framing of colonial policy in the 1880s.

Gladstone's hobbies of Homer and tree felling are hard to integrate but both are aspects of his immense intellectual and physical energy. It would be inconceivable for Gladstone to restrict himself to admiration of the beauties of Homeric Greek or even to testing his language skills by translation (his Tory rival Derby published an edition of Homer which is to be found in Gladstone's library at Hawarden). As the paper from David Bebbington shows, for Gladstone, Homer was a means of continuing political and religious controversy, an opportunity to argue against the philosophical radicalism of Grote and in defence of divine revelation. The result was the three volume *Homer & the Homeric Age* and later the slightly shorter one volume *Juventus Mundi* in which the Greek gods of mythology are presented as a memory of the divine promise of the coming of God in human form. Bebbington concludes that the growing humanity of Gladstone's Homeric studies reflected the changes in his political beliefs. 'The humanity that transfigured Olympus and the humanity required of British foreign policy were one and the same, a core value of Gladstonian Liberalism'.³

The largely political essays, which form the bulk of the collection, focus primarily on the mature statesman, characterised, in Roland Quinault's



phrase, by his 'formidable powers of eloquence, energy and execution'.⁴ Nevertheless, continuity of thought over a sixty year career is strongly in evidence. Gladstone the Oxford Tory opponent of reform in the 1830s is less far removed from the Gladstone of the 'pale of the constitution speech' in the 1860s and of the 1884 Reform Act than might be imagined. The great Liberal Chancellor of the Exchequer learnt at the feet of the Conservative Peel as well the Radical Cobden. His first government was Gladstone's most successful, with reforming achievements in education, the electoral system and the army as well as the better known disestablishment of the Church of Ireland, described elsewhere in this issue. But as Jonathan Parry's thoughtful analysis suggests, many of these reforms were achieved by Gladstone's acolytes without much care and attention from the master. His focus was on the church and retrenchment, issues which were even then rather old fashioned and where he was attempting restoration rather than breakthrough.

The theme of Gladstone the conservative reformer is particularly strong in the essays dealing with Ireland. Here again we benefit from the way this collection creates links between the different areas of specialist scholarship. To some contemporaries, Gladstone's conversion to Home Rule was a stunning surprise. Biagini shows

the commonality of Gladstone's approach to the colonies from the 1830s to Egypt and Ireland in the 1880s – a policy of delegation of authority to the local community but within an imperial framework and subject to the appropriate fiscal rectitude that Gladstone expected of all. George Boyce emphasises the influence of Edmund Burke's writings about America and Ireland on Gladstone's thinking about Ulster. Burke began his career as a Whig but the French Revolution turned him into one of the greatest influences on Conservatism. For Gladstone, Home Rule for Ireland was not only the recognition of the will of the Irish people in the 1885 election but also the opportunity to reconnect the Protestant ascendancy of Ireland with its nationality and to provide the upper class with the opportunity to resume their leadership role within the community.

Ireland kept Gladstone on the treadmill of politics well beyond his expected retirement date. It might be argued that his obsession with Ireland did more damage than good to the Liberal party, although this is not a view held by this reviewer. However, a Conservative/Unionist government dominated the twenty years after 1886. Gladstone's final government of 1892 – 94 is analysed by David Brooks. The narrow majority was not propitious to the carrying of Home Rule, though it passed the Commons, and the determination of the Grand Old Man to pass this monument to his career put beyond redemption any lingering hope of re-uniting the Liberal Unionists with the rest of the party. Fittingly, Gladstone's premiership ended with yet another combination of the outmoded with a radical reform. He resigned over a dispute with colleagues on the level of naval defence expenditure, retrenchment again, and on the offer to lead the party into a campaign for reform of the Lords.

Rather surprisingly, in this age of iconoclasm, these essays make no attempt to debunk the Grand Old Man. Rather his reputation survives exposure to the accumulation of

information about his career and thoughts. Nowhere is this truer than over Ireland. Ireland's historians are rather ahead of her politicians in reassessing the myths of the relationship between Britain and Ireland. Alan O'Day elaborates on the arguments he makes elsewhere in this issue about the limited real achievements of Gladstonian Irish policy, to demonstrate that the generosity of his endeavour has been reciprocated in the critique of Irish historians who are far more scathing about their native heroes of the struggle for independence. Only in his own party is the leader without honour: Chris Wrigley shows how in the period after the First World War, Gladstone ceased to be an icon for the party. I would suggest that, even in the neo-liberal revival of the 1980s, the Liberals and the Liberal Democrats have failed to reclaim their legacy, allowing it to be abused by the Right, even though the leaders of the party from Grimond and Steel to Ashdown have been conscious of Gladstone's mantle.⁵

These essays serve as a good introduction to the breadth of material on Gladstone and whet the appetite for yet more knowledge, opening up strands any diligent student would wish to follow. They make no pretence to be a substitute for the biographies by Roy Jenkins, Richard Shannon or Colin Matthews but for readers of any of those who remain curious they are a stimulating read.

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- 1 M. R. D. Foot and H. C. G. Matthew (eds), *The Gladstone Diaries*, 14 vols. Oxford, 1968 – 94.
- 2 Christopher Hill, *England's Turning Point*, Bookmarks Publications, 1998
- 3 David Bebbington, *Gladstone and Homer*, in D. Bebbington & R. Swift (eds) *Gladstone Centenary Essays*, p. 71.
- 4 Roland Quinault, *Gladstone and Parliamentary Reform*, in D. Bebbington & R. Swift (eds) *Gladstone Centenary Essays*, p. 88
- 5 See Grimond's inaugural speech to the 80 Club in 1980, Steel's 'Go Back To Your Constituencies' speech and Ashdown's final speech in the House of Commons, D. Brack and T. Little (eds) *Great Liberal Speeches*, Politico's, 2001