Churchill and Asquith has pride of place, and Asquith's exposition of how to run a Liberal Party in a three-party system is impeccable.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the most challenging speech is by Keynes to the Liberal Summer School in 1925. His forecast of the key questions is one we are only just catching up with seventy-seven years later. His prediction that questions of contraception, marriage law and the relations of the sexes will become politically central is only just beginning to come true, as is his similar warning about drugs. His question about the growing bulk of business Parliament cannot handle is one we are not yet on top of. His most serious warning is that the economy is becoming so complicated that the laws of supply and demand no longer work effectively. When we have come to terms with these fundamental insights, casually tossed off, we may be ready to get started.

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Restorative Conservativism

Eugenio Biagini: *Gladstone* (Macmillan Press, 2000) Reviewed by **Tony Little**

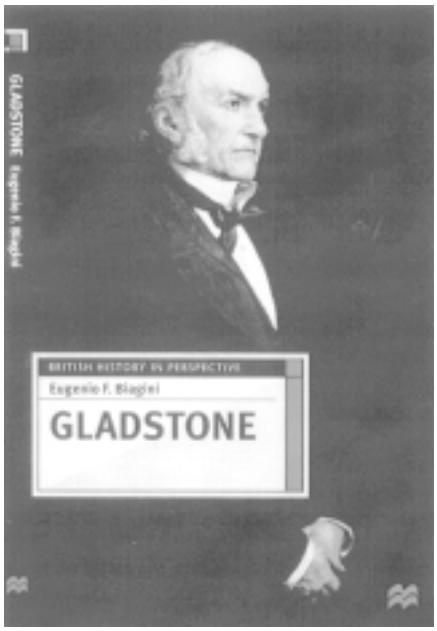
With a political career that spanned more than sixty years, William Ewart Gladstone is the dominant figure in Victorian politics, initially taking office even before Victoria came to the throne and only leaving the premiership in 1894. In many ways, he defined the nature of Victorian Liberalism, based on free trade, fiscal rectitude and the incorporation into active political life of ever-wider groups of the population, in a career which, despite all his intentions, became progressively more radical as it unfolded.

It is no surprise that he has been the subject of a multitude of biographies. But following Colin Matthew, Richard Shannon and Roy Jenkins, who have all produced different modern biographies, is there room for more? Biagini's volume looks very much as if it is aimed at the undergraduate market. The great advantage it has over its competitors is its length, 138 pages including the index, but this is a succinct rather than a skimpy tome. The other difference is Biagini's adoption of a thematic rather than purely chronological approach, which engages with Gladstone on an intellectual level, sparing only the minimum necessary space for the incidental and personal. This is not the book in which to explore the complexity of his dealings with Peel or Palmerston or in which all the Home Rule intrigues of 1886 are disentangled.

The limitations of space also force Biagini to focus closely on the forces which unified Gladstone's approach and on his major achievements, whose scale few politicians can hope to approach – reform of taxation, tariffs, army, church, education and the electoral system. One cannot hope to understand this statesman without recognising the lifelong influence exercised over him by Burke and Butler. From Burke he gained a 'method of historic assessment and his sensitivity for tradition and the possibility of change through organic growth' – which reinforced Gladstone's Platonic notions of the perfectibility of society, producing a form of 'utopian conservatism'[1] which the Tories of the time were unwilling to acknowledge. It was to Edmund Burke that he turned for the intellectual and historic backing for his ideas for Home Rule. From Bishop Butler[2] he drew the means to reconcile uncertainty with moral obligation which became the key to Gladstonian decision making: 'first … to amass information, then to weigh the probabilities, and finally, once a decision was taken, to pursue the policy with undeviating commitment'.[3]

Gladstone prided himself in his ability to spot that the time was ripe to tackle an issue but did not always prepare his colleagues for the conclusions at which he had arrived or the forceful purpose with which he then pursued them. Although this laid Gladstone open to charges of Jesuitical casuistry and to inconsistency, it was the foundation of his moral strength of character which in turn was the basis of his popularity with the working and non-conformist classes, a popularity reinforced by his politicisation of the Exchequer in the 1860s, particularly when he accomplished the abolition of the paper tax – a 'tax on knowledge' – despite the opposition of his prime minister and the House of Lords. Gladstone's tax policy eased the creation of a mass media of popular newspapers.

Gladstone quickly demonstrated ministerial competence under Peel but his rise to pre-eminence in parliament was more a tribute to his eloquence than to his man-management skills. Biagini argues that this same oratorical skill saw him supremely well placed to take advantage of and to channel the enthusiasm of the enlarged electorate which emerged from the 1867 and 1884 reform acts and which formed



the readership of the new mass circulation papers and periodicals. Radicals such as Bright had demonstrated that the masses could be mobilised for positive political purpose, as opposed to mob violence, but Gladstone was a pioneer among the ministerial elite in harnessing this force and in utilising it to overcome opposition from the establishment in both Houses of Parliament. Biagini concludes that his true strength was not so much the individual reforms he accomplished but that 'he found the people who live in cottages hostile to political parties, and … succeeded in uniting them with the rest of his countrymen'.[4]

Biagini has created a first-class introduction to one of the most successful and yet baffling of all premiers, with a fine judgment on the key controversies. The limitations of the space within which he has been confined may even have been an advantage in cutting to the essentials of each issue. Any diligent reader will be well equipped to tackle one of the more complex biographies such as Matthew's or to dip into any number of the specialist topics derived from the multi-faceted life of the Liberal Party's greatest leader. Only the price, at nearly 10p a page, is a deterrent.

Tony Little is the Chair of the Liberal Democrat History Group.

1 E Biagini, *Gladstone* (Macmillan, 2000), pp 11, 13.
2 Joseph Butler (1692–1752) English moral philosopher and divine. Gladstone published a two-volume edition of his works in 1896.
3 Biagini, *Gladstone*, p. 13, citing D. W. Bebbington, *William Ewart Gladstone: Faith & Politics in Victorian Britain* (1993).
4 Biagini, *Gladstone*, p. 117, quoting *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle* 7 August 1880.

Internationalism and interdependency

Richard S. Grayson: *Liberals, International Relations and Appeasement* (Frank Cass 2001; pp194)

Reviewed by **Ian Hunter**

This book proves the proverb that you shouldn't judge a book by its cover. The cover is terrible. The book is very good, if, at only 156 pages, a little short for the money.[1]

Richard Grayson's latest publication makes a significant contribution to the history of the British Liberal Party in the interwar period.[2] It furthers our understanding of the role that the Liberal Parliamentary Party and its associated interest groups had in developing a coherent opposition to the policy of appeasement. Its period of study is from 1919–1939 and, as such, is, ultimately, a study in failure. The Liberals were increasingly marginalised after the fall of the Lloyd George Coalition in 1922, as a result of the party's internal splits between Asquith and Lloyd George and then Samuel and Simon. These divisions led to the Liberal Party being reduced to a rump of only seventeen MPs by the late 1930s. Even when the Liberals held the balance of power (during the two minority Labour Governments of 1924 and 1929–31) their ability to shape policy was very limited. Liberalism during this period shifted from being a coherent, credible political competitor for government to being almost the brand label for a fragmented pressure group of non-socialist radicals. It is a sad story of lost opportunities and overlooked warnings. But the Liberal Party can draw comfort from being broadly right when the majority in both the Conservatives and Labour Parties, certainly up until 1938, were decidedly wrong in their opposition to rearmament and support for appeasement.

Grayson maps out the development of Liberal thought driven from the principle of international interdependency – where institutions such as the League of Nations were held up as the tools by which the greatest good for the greatest number could be achieved. Whether this was ultimately realisable is obviously a moot point. As J. M. Keynes made clear, the concept of interdependency could only hold good if a sense of mutual benefit, equity and ease of redress existed. None of these factors were found in abundance following the peace settlement of 1919. One of the most interesting sections of this book is its chapter on 'Liberal Thinkers'. In direct contrast to its electoral weakness during the inter-war years the broad church of the Liberal Party attracted some of the biggest intellectual heavyweights to its pews. Most notable were figures such as J. M. Keynes, Walter Layton, William Beveridge, Gilbert Murray, Lord Lothian (Philip Kerr) and Ramsay Muir. These individuals made significant contributions to the development to Liberal policy, in particular in challenging the concept of a belief in national sovereignty as the basis of long-term security, and in developing the concept of interdependency. Keynes, Layton, Murray and Muir were also very active in the influential Liberal Summer Schools, often overlooked by historians, but which are covered in depth in this book and provide significant insights into the development of Liberal thinking up to 1939.

Grayson provides a particularly clear summary of the key role from 1935 that the Liberal Party under Sir Archibald's Sinclair leadership played in leading the opposition to Chamberlain's appeasement policy. It is often forgotten that appeasement was a popular policy with large sections of the British population. Sinclair risked unpopularity and accusations of war-mongering with his attacks on Chamberlain's foreign policy, but he built a national reputation for himself and he enabled the small parliamentary Liberal Party to punch considerably more than its parliamentary weight of seventeen MPs.

Grayson makes a critical assessment of the overall practicality of Liberal policies during the interwar period. He questions the party's approach to issues