

Gladstone left the nation his books and papers not just to help us as historians, but to help us to see our own society more clearly, critically and above all, to carry on his humanitarian, religious and political work based on extensive research.

*Peter Francis has been warden and director of Gladstone's Library since 1997.*

1 David P. Forsythe (ed.), (Oxford University Press 2009).

# Reviews

## Transatlantic Gladstone

Review of Stephen J. Peterson, *Gladstone's Influence in America* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018)

Review by **Roland Quinault**

IN THIS AGE of Global History, 'Global Gladstone' is an eminently suitable subject for enquiry – his influence and reputation extending beyond the United Kingdom and the British Empire to reach the wider Anglo-sphere. In the later nineteenth century, Gladstone's standing in the United States was unequalled by any other Briton, with the possible exception of Queen Victoria. Thus *Gladstone's Influence in America* deals with an important, though hitherto largely neglected, subject. This study had its origins in a doctoral dissertation, at the University of Stirling, which was inspired and supervised by David Bebbington, a leading authority on Gladstone's ideas. Given the book's provenance, it is not surprising that it is a work of diligent research, both clearly written and thoroughly referenced.

Unfortunately, however, the title of the book is misleading and inaccurate. Little attempt is made to trace Gladstone's influence on American thinking. Instead, Peterson provides good summaries and helpful contextualisation of comments in some twenty or so American newspapers and journals on Gladstone's views. But the claim that those comments provided a portal into contemporary American views on religion and politics more generally is not clearly demonstrated. When those wider American views are considered, as in chapter 2, little reference is made to Gladstone. Moreover crucial areas of Gladstone's outlook and policies

– on issues such as free trade, Irish land reform, international relations and constitutional reform – receive little attention. Instead the study concentrates on American reactions to Gladstone's religious policies from the 1860s to the 1890s. Consequently the subtitle of the book – *Reactions in the Press to Modern Religion & Politics* – gives a much more accurate description of its contents.

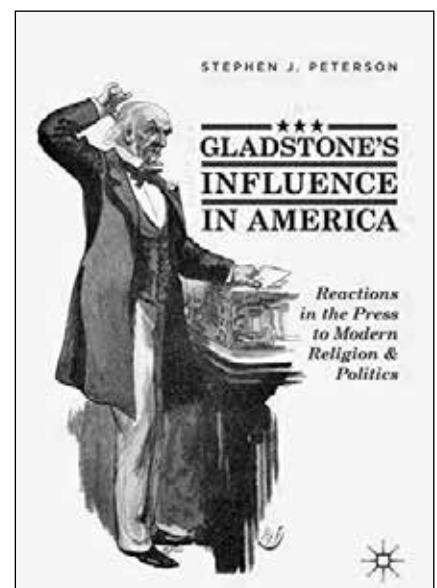
In the first half of his political career Gladstone was not particularly popular in the USA. Indeed his claim in 1862, during the Civil War, that the South was making a nation, won him no friends in the North. Yet only a few years later, his successful campaign to disestablish the Anglican Church in Ireland was overwhelmingly supported by American commentators. It was seen as evidence that Britain was following the American example of separating Church and State. At the same time, many American Protestants were suspicious of the growing influence of Roman Catholicism in the United States, which was boosted by Irish immigration. Consequently they shared Gladstone's fear that after the declaration of Papal Infallibility, in 1870, Roman Catholics would put their loyalty to the pope before their loyalty to the state. In the early 1880s Gladstone's response to the Bradlaugh case, which raised the question whether an avowed atheist had the right to sit in parliament, generated a mixed press in America. While Gladstone's initial failure, as prime minister, to take decisive action on the Bradlaugh issue was widely

criticised, his speech on the 1883 Affirmation Bill, in which he made a plea for religious liberty, was generally admired by American Protestants, who were conscious of their own religious heritage.

As Peterson points out, the American religious press, unlike its secular counterpart, paid much attention to Gladstone's dispute with T. H. Huxley over the conflicting creation narratives provided by Genesis and modern geology. Two years later, Gladstone waged another literary war in defence of traditional Christianity in his dispute with the influential American agnostic Robert Ingersoll. Their literary contest attracted huge popular interest and the journals that carried their rival arguments sold in the tens and even hundreds of thousands.

Nevertheless Gladstone's popularity during the Gilded Age owed much to his views on topics other than religion. In particular, his support for Irish home rule, in the last decade of his political career, was welcomed by a wide range of Americans, ranging from Senators to servants. Yet Peterson provides only a short summary of the American reaction to Gladstone's home rule policy. He does point out, however, that many Americans admired Gladstone on personal, as well as on policy, grounds. The young Woodrow Wilson, for example, regarded Gladstone as the ideal political leader. Yet while some American commentators were impressed by Gladstone's probity and intellect others questioned his tact and temperament. In that respect, as in some others, American responses echoed opinion in diverse British circles.

*Gladstone's Influence in America* says little about America's influence on



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A Liberal Democrat History Group evening meeting

# Gladstone's first government 1868–74

One hundred and fifty years ago, in December 1868, William Ewart Gladstone became Prime Minister for the first time. Over the following six years, from 1868 to 1874, his government produced a series of lasting reforms, including nationwide primary school education, the secret ballot, legalisation of some trade union activities and the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland. Join **Professor Jon Parry** and **Dr David Brooks** to discuss the importance and legacy of what might be considered the first Liberal government and the first modern administration. Chair: **Baroness Liz Barker**.

**7.00pm, Monday 28 January** (following the Liberal Democrat History Group AGM at 6.30pm)  
Lady Violet Room, National Liberal Club, 1 Whitehall Place, London SW1A 2HE

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A Liberal Democrat History Group fringe meeting

# Liberalism in the north

Despite its decline after the First World War, the Liberal Party managed to hang on in Yorkshire and Lancashire, contributing to its eventual revival. Discuss why this was with **William Wallace**, **Tony Greaves** and **Michael Meadowcroft**. Chair: **Baroness Kath Pinnock**.

**8.15pm, Friday 15 March**

Meeting room 1/2, Novotel Hotel, Fishergate, York YO10 4FD (no conference pass necessary)

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Gladstone. Yet in his later years, Gladstone displayed considerable interest in various aspects of American life. That was evident, for example, in his various contributions to the *North American Review*, especially his 1878 article on 'Kin beyond Sea'. Gladstone's prediction that the United States would surpass Great Britain as an economic force in the world was music to American ears, as was his admiration for the American constitution. The article helped to inspire the movement in favour of the unity of the English-speaking peoples, which was popular in America at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In the last chapter of the book Peterson ranges beyond religious themes to

chart the perception of Gladstone as the 'British Lincoln' – a liberal reformer and advocate of international amity and transatlantic unity. When Gladstone died, in 1898, his American admirers bestowed almost semi-divine status on him. He was hailed as a great Christian as well as a great statesman and one Baltimore minister eulogised him as 'the friend of America, the prophet of her greatness and the friend of God'.

Peterson has performed a valuable service in revealing and analysing the full extent of American interest in Gladstone's religious views and actions. Nevertheless the reception in America of Gladstone's views on other issues requires more investigation. It

must also be remembered that American interest in Gladstone reflected a more general phenomenon: the closeness of the ideological and cultural ties between Britain and the USA in the later decades of the nineteenth century.

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