

The Hawarden Kite

The techniques of spin-doctoring were well known to Victorian politicians. *M. R. D. Foot* considers a notable case of press management which went wrong. Or did it?

The Hawarden Kite was the prominent news item, published in the *Leeds Mercury* and the *London Standard* on 17 December 1885, announcing that Mr Gladstone (who lived at Hawarden near Chester – hence the name) had become convinced that Ireland needed a separate parliament: a fact he had long found it necessary to keep secret. A fuller version of the Kite lay in a statement put out on the previous night by the National Press Agency, which supplied over 160 local papers with political news from London; this is conveniently available in print¹. To understand this catastrophe – if indeed it was a catastrophe – the event must be placed in its context, both national and local.

A general election had just been held, spread as was then usual over four weeks; the very last returns, from Orkney & Shetland and the Scottish universities, had indeed yet to come in. It was the first election fought on a much enlarged electorate: the third Reform Act, 1884, had just raised the total number of voters – all men over twenty-one – from some three million to about five million, between a seventh and an eighth of the total population of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, which was thirty-five million at the census of 1881 and nearly thirty-eight million at that of 1891. For the first time, there had been contests in more than three-quarters of the seats. Most of the new voters were farm labourers.

A hung Parliament was elected. The Conservatives did unexpectedly well in the towns, carrying (for example) three seats out of five in Leeds and every seat but one in Liverpool. Birmingham was the only large city in which they failed to capture a single seat, for it was tied up by the Chamberlain machine. In the counties the Conservatives did unexpectedly badly, for Chamberlain's 'Unauthorised Programme', that offered 'three acres and a cow',

appealed to the newly enfranchised labourers. Neither of the two great parties could be sure of a working majority. In a house of 670 members, 333 Liberals faced 251 Tories – so far as either party could be counted exactly; the gap of eighty-two between them was almost precisely plugged by the eighty-six MPs returned for Parnell's Irish Nationalist Party. This party gained a preponderance of the Irish seats – eighty-five out of 103; they also secured the only seat not to vote Tory in Liverpool. Over a quarter of these Nationalist members, Parnell included, had recently been in prison. County Antrim was the only Irish county in which no Nationalist was returned at all; and outside the nine counties of Ulster every seat went to a Nationalist, except for the lonely pair of Queen's Counsel returned unopposed for the University of Dublin. Fourteen Liberals had sat for Irish seats in the previous Parliament; not a single Liberal secured a seat in Ireland in 1885.

One caveat needs to be put in about these figures. It is a mistake – universally made, but still a mistake – to be too precise, as between Liberals and Conservatives; to carry back into the nineteenth century the habits of the twentieth, and to ascribe to every MP a specific party allegiance. Some years later, in 1893, a clerk at the table remarked on thirty members at least who came down to the House to listen to debate, and voted as reason and conscience inclined. Mr Gladstone himself, as recently as 1870, had still been describing himself in *Dod's Parliamentary Companion* as 'A Liberal Conservative', an accurate label.

A Conservative government under Lord Salisbury was in office. It had existed, on sufferance, since the previous June. Salisbury doubled the posts of Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary, and spent much of the autumn engaged in the intricacies of the eastern question, currently made more intricate than usual by a war between Serbia and Bulgaria. The British army was at war also, on two fronts – with the Mahdists in the Sudan, and against King Thiba in Burma. The Cabinet decided, at a meeting on Monday

14 December, that it would hold on until Parliament met in late January, and see what happened then. Salisbury, for one, hated it; as he wrote to his Irish viceroy, Lord Carnarvon, who was about to retire, on 3 January 1886: 'I am feverishly anxious to be out. Internally as well as externally our position as a Government is intolerable.'²

A major problem in politics awaited – as indeed it awaits – solution: how should Ireland be governed peaceably? As Salisbury said the next summer to one of his sons: 'People make a distinction between principles and details, but the distinction is only valuable as an intellectual assistance. In practice, everything is done by the arrangement and execution of the details.'³ Nobody at the end of 1885 could get clear the details of what ought to be done to reconcile, or if necessary to separate, the British and the Irish nations. Much of history consists of the record of neighbouring groups that have wrestled and fought with each other, and then decided after all to work together against some other group that seems even more dangerous – as for instance those age-long enemies, Wiltshire men and Somersetshire men, came to work together in the end, under Alfred, to drive away the Danes. Similarly in 1914 the British and some at least of the Irish could work together against the greater menace of Wilhelmine Germany, when they had been right on the verge of fighting each other;⁴ but 1885 was not 1914.

It was not even clear at the end of 1885 who was to lead any of the three main parties in Parliament. Salisbury's leadership of the Tories was under challenge from the rising star of Lord Randolph Churchill, who had captured the party machine, and was not of course then known to be fatally ill. Mr Gladstone's leadership of the Liberals, equally, was in doubt. He had several times over, during the past three years, talked of – indeed looked like – retiring; he was rising seventy-six; privately he longed to get away from contention and prepare his soul to

meet his Maker.⁵ The succession seemed to lie either with the Whig Lord Hartington, or with the radicals, Joseph Chamberlain and Sir Charles Dilke. Dilke at that moment was embroiled in the divorce case that was – though no one then knew it – about to put an end to his official life. Chamberlain seemed to have the succession at his disposal, if he played his cards correctly.

There were various public signs that the Conservatives were prepared to do a deal with the Irish. Back on 1 August 1885, Parnell and Carnarvon had met – unaccompanied, and in deadly secrecy – in an empty house in Hill Street, Mayfair, for a long talk. What passed between them remained a deadly secret for ten months – Parnell blurted out his version of it in the Commons in the following June, in a mistaken last-minute attempt to influence waverers about to vote on the first Home Rule bill.⁶ Forty years on, Carnarvon's biographer published the full account the Viceroy had taken down to Hatfield that August evening to show to Lord Salisbury, who approved: but did not tell even the Queen, let alone the Cabinet.⁷ Carnarvon restricted himself to inquiring what sort of terms Parnell would regard as reasonable for a home rule settlement; particularly, what guarantees Parnell would be able to offer to safeguard landlords' rights in their property, always a cardinal point with Conservative statesmen.

Parnell kept his own counsel about his talk with the Viceroy: typically, 'Uncrowned King' of Ireland though he was, he kept himself very much to himself; a course to which we now know he was bound by the exigencies of his private life, but which looked to his close political aides much like hauteur. If we can believe the radical Labouchere's account of a talk with Tim Healy, one of Parnell's chief helpers, on 19 December 1885, 'Parnell is half mad.' 'To tell you the truth,' Healy went on, 'we settle everything almost always, and he accepts it.'⁸ Parnell's aides' trouble was simple but basic – they

never knew where he was. Even his secretary did not know his private address; he came and went as he chose. These were not gifts that were going to keep a man firm in the saddle till he died: as the eventual catastrophe of Committee Room Fifteen explained. Parnell had to his left Michael Davitt and an infuriated peasantry, still ready to skirmish on with the land war; and to his right the embattled Catholic clergy of Ireland, whose spiritual descendants looked after the early years of the young republic.

Momentarily, however, he was in control; and just before the general election began, he instructed Irishmen on the mainland to cast their votes for Conservative rather than for Liberal candidates. This is thought to have cost the Liberals a minimum of two dozen seats; later of course a cause for bitter regret by those who might have used those votes in the Commons in favour of home rule. It also caused severe ructions during the campaign.

Gladstone himself maintained a judicious silence about the Irish question all through the autumn of 1885. He devoted just over two pages of a twenty-three-page election address to Irish affairs, of which the keynote was an appeal for 'enlightened moderation', the last characteristic most politicians are capable of displaying at times of crisis.⁹

It is important to view his problem historically, as well as politically. He had already been an active politician for over fifty years, and an active student of politics for sixty; as an Eton boy he had followed the rise and fall of his mentor George Canning, as an Oxford undergraduate he had flung his soul into the campaign against parliamentary reform, as a young minister he had helped Sir Robert Peel reform the tariff. As leader of the House of Commons, he had locked horns in a struggle with Disraeli over the second Reform Act that had resulted – because the Conservatives took it up after the Liberal government had fallen – in a large rise in the electorate. He knew that all major constitutional changes had to be

put through by Conservative governments, because they alone could control the House of Lords, then far more weighty than today.

Indeed, on 15 December 1885 he drove over from Hawarden to the Duke of Westminster's palace at Eaton for a talk with Salisbury's nephew A. J. Balfour, an old personal friend whom he had once hoped to welcome as a son-in-law. He told Balfour that if the Conservatives cared to take up the by now highly visible desire of the Irish for some substantial say in how their own affairs were run, any Conservative efforts in this direction would receive all the backing Gladstone could give them. He used to pride himself on his sense of right timing; this time he got his timing disastrously wrong. For by the time Balfour reached Salisbury with his message, the Hawarden Kite had been flown.

On that same Tuesday, Gladstone's youngest son Herbert left Hawarden for London to talk to some journalistic friends.

Through the publication of his private diaries we know a good deal about Gladstone's private life: so much indeed that even an editor three generations younger than John Morley could feel, as Morley did, qualms about the ancient crime of violating the sanctuary. With his wife Catherine, Gladstone made an arrangement, as soon as they were married: he offered her the choice of knowing all his secrets, and revealing none of them, or of remaining ignorant. She – wise woman – chose to know, and to be silent. A similar plan was arrived at with his children, all of whom, save his darling Jessy, whose death aged nearly five in 1850 had all but driven him mad with grief, were grown-up by the middle 1880s.

While a junior minister, he had been used mercilessly by his own father as a private secretary;¹⁰ he was a shade more merciful to his own brood. One daughter, Agnes, was married and away from home; Helen, while a don at Cambridge, did her stint at Hawarden during vacations; so did Mary, who married

the local curate. Stephen, the second son, was rector of Hawarden, a rich living of which the advowson belonged to the family; Henry was an India merchant. William, the eldest child, who never quite outgrew his father's shadow and was destined to die before him, had just retired from twenty years on the back benches of the Commons to manage the family estates. Herbert, having got a first in history at Oxford, had stayed up for a few terms to teach, but his heart was in politics. When, in 1880, the Liberal electors of Leeds insisted on electing his father as MP, as a form of safety-net in case the campaign in Midlothian went wrong, and W. E. Gladstone elected to sit for the Midlothian seat he had triumphantly captured,¹¹ Herbert John Gladstone secured the Leeds seat, in which he had sat for five years. He had just been returned, by a comfortable majority, for West Leeds.

One other family connection, of crucial importance for Ireland, needs mention. Lord Frederick Cavendish, the Irish Secretary who had been deliberately murdered in the Phoenix Park on 6 May 1882, had been almost a fifth son to Gladstone: he had married Lucy Lyttelton, Catherine Gladstone's sister's child, and the Uncle William who sparkles through her diaries had both liked him a great deal, and worked with him closely.¹² Lord Frederick had been Gladstone's chief assistant at the Treasury for two arduous years, May 1880 to April 1882, while Gladstone attempted the mistake that helped to kill Canning – combining the of-

fices of Prime Minister and Chancellor of the Exchequer. His death was almost as much of a family shock to Mr Gladstone as it was to Lord Frederick's eldest brother Lord Hartington: whose refusal to look at any proposals for home rule stemmed from abhorrence at the murder.¹³

One of the reasons indeed why Gladstone felt himself chained to the oar of political work for Ireland was the feeling that he, with his detailed knowledge of many intricacies of Irish history and politics, might be able to do something to make up for Lord Frederick's death. To this view he seems to have been held by his womenfolk – his wife, his daughter Mary, and Lady Frederick who lived in Hawarden village and saw him often. (Hence Lord Milner's ill-chosen phrase about Gladstone's 'se-raglio', long and often misinterpreted.) Not much sense can ever be made of Gladstone's political desires without putting the question, central for so religious a man, though not much regarded by historians today: What did God want? He be-



Hartington and Chamberlain resisting the call to office after the 1885 election.

came convinced that God wanted him to do something for Ireland, to atone for his nephew's murder. But we must go back to Herbert.

During his five years as a back-bench supporter of his father's second government he had nursed Leeds carefully, and had made his name as a more than competent speaker of the second rank, a tenacious arguer, and a left-of-centre Liberal. He was a bachelor of nearly thirty-two, knew his father's mind quite accurately, had been present at some of the less formal conversations his father had recently had with such visiting grandees as Lord Granville and Lord Spencer, and was well, though not intimately, informed about the state of the Liberal Party generally. He was himself a pronounced advocate of home rule for Ireland, and as recently as 8 December had pronounced in a letter to a travelling artist, who wrote to him from a Flintshire address, that 'if five-sixths of the Irish people wish to have a Parliament in Dublin, for the management of their own local affairs, I say, in the name of justice and wisdom, let them have it.'

His correspondent, Frank Miles, forwarded the letter to *The Times*, which printed it on Saturday 12th; there it triggered off a number of letters about whether Herbert's claim of 'five-sixths of the Irish people' would stand up to analysis of the votes cast, not to speak of priestly or terrorist intimidation of the new voters. On this last point, the last word lies with Conor Cruise O'Brien: 'As for the "inexperienced electorate", it went on voting for home rule at every election up to 1918, when it started voting for a republic.'¹⁴ As usual, the Gladstones' enemies took for granted that the son was speaking on his father's orders; as usual, he was in fact speaking his own mind in his own way.

In those days, every serious newspaper carried – every day – a few lines on the Queen's movements of the day before, and a line or two about Mr Gladstone's as well. She stayed at Windsor, driving daily in the Great Park, until after the serv-

ice at Frogmore on 14 December, the anniversary of Albert's death; she then retired to Osborne for Christmas. So minute was the notice taken by the press of Mr Gladstone that that Monday's newspapers remarked on the fact that, although he had of course been to matins in Hawarden church on Sunday, he had not read the lesson.

There was more in the serious press than these trivial reports about occupations of the notable. Herbert Gladstone was annoyed by a *Daily News* article on Friday 11th, which foreshadowed a speech by Dilke to his constituents in Chelsea on the 14th in suggesting that the Tories might usefully be left in office for some months to come, forced by a hostile Commons majority into enacting Liberal measures. On the 12th a leader in the same paper remarked: 'We presume that it is now admitted, not that Ireland ought to have a domestic legislature in this form or in that, but that Parliament will have to consider what modification it is necessary to make in the Parliamentary connection of the two countries.'

On the morning of the 14th, Herbert Gladstone got a letter from Wemyss Reid, the editor of the *Leeds Mercury*, which stirred him to action. A point in local politics is here worth noticing: Wemyss Reid, a strong supporter of W. E. Forster (who took no part in all these current controversies, because he was dying), was a prominent and energetic Yorkshire journalist, determined that Birmingham should in no circumstances steal any kind of march on Leeds or Bradford. In retrospect this looks quite petty; at the time it was central to Reid's and indeed to Herbert Gladstone's thinking. Reid could not abide Chamberlain; he had written to Herbert, back in January 1885, 'In my opinion the man who is capable of making such speeches, at once cowardly and crafty, mean and swaggering, is absolutely incapable of ever developing into even the similitude of a statesman.'¹⁵ He now reported that, in his belief, Dilke, Chamberlain and their hench-

man John Morley were conspiring – secretly egged on by Churchill – against Mr Gladstone, intending to force him out of politics and to take the Liberal Party off on the radical course forecast by Chamberlain's 'Unauthorised Programme' in the election campaign of the earlier autumn.¹⁶ 'The present crisis,' he wrote, 'is one of extreme gravity, & the forces which Chamberlain can command both in Parliament & the press are very formidable.' Could Herbert Gladstone help?¹⁷

It is perhaps just worth disposing, in parentheses, of John Morley: who had been jobbed into Parliament, as a replacement for Dilke's ailing brother, in 1883 and had hitherto worked as a dutiful subordinate to the other two. The Irish question now brought him under Mr Gladstone's attractive power, and he gave up an intimate friendship with Chamberlain for subservience to a still more tremendous personality.¹⁸

'Either the Irish question must be at once taken up or the Party must choose a new leader, or break up,' Herbert replied to Reid on the 14th; and they arranged to meet in London next day.¹⁹ 'I resolved,' Herbert wrote to Lucy Cavendish, 'without consulting my Father to go up to London & find out how matters really stood.'²⁰

Now though Herbert was well informed about the way his father's mind had been moving on the Irish question, 'the one question', as he put it himself, 'on which I feel very deeply and with reference to which I can sacrifice my opinions to nobody',²¹ he did not know everything. Quite probably he had never seen the letter his father had written to Lord Rosebery on 13 November, while both writer and reader were staying at Dalmeny, Rosebery's place by Edinburgh; for by that date he too was only too busy electioneering. Its firm statement that 'the production at this time of a plan by me would not only be injurious, but would destroy all reasonable hope of its adoption'²² might have made even his son pause. As it was, Herbert plunged ahead.

On Tuesday 15th – the day of his father’s talk with Balfour – he saw Wemyss Reid at some length in the Reform Club; and next day he had a long talk with Dawson Rogers of the National Press Agency at the National Liberal Club. Both these talks were meant to bring Herbert Gladstone’s hearers confidential news of what his father was thinking; in his own summary a fortnight later, his main message to Reid was contained in three points:

1. That the Govt. shd. deal with the I(rish) Q(uestion) & that a fair & thorough proposal from them wd. receive Liberal support.
2. That until he was formally called upon to assume responsibility nothing would extort a scheme or plan from my Father.
3. No negotiations (were being conducted) with the Irish party.²³

With Reid he spoke tête-a-tête; Dawson Rogers had two assistants with him. No-one, at either meeting, took any notes; nor was any piece of paper produced on either side. In the second talk, with the National Press Agency, Herbert seems to have speculated fairly freely about what he believed to be the opinions of Lord Spencer, Lord Hartington and others.

Commentators, historians included, like to insist on perfection, and forget too easily the Latin tag, *humanum est errare*: men and women make mistakes. Herbert made a mistake.

He did say, both to Wemyss Reid and to Dawson Rogers, that what he had to say should be regarded as confidential; ‘over-rating’, in his own phrase, ‘the discretion of men whose direct interest it may have been to be indiscreet.’²⁴ What he forgot to extract from either of his audiences was an assurance that the journalists would let him see any articles they

wrote, arising out of the talks, before they were published. Both went off to the telegraph machines: ‘the magazine then exploded’.²⁵

Brought up at J. L. Hammond’s knee to believe that the *Manchester Guardian* represented the fount of purest Liberal thought, I turned first to what it had to say on 17 December. Shortly after its leading articles, it carried the following report: ‘Mr Gladstone cut down a tree at Hawarden yesterday afternoon. He continues in excellent health.’²⁶ The *Guardian*, in fact, was scooped; so was *The Times*; so was the *Daily News*. The balloon went up in the *Leeds Mercury*. By-lined ‘Our London correspondent writes’, the article began: ‘Mr Gladstone’s scheme for dealing with the Irish Question has not yet reached a definite form, but I have the best reason to believe that he has laid down very clearly the principles on which he intends to proceed in his settlement

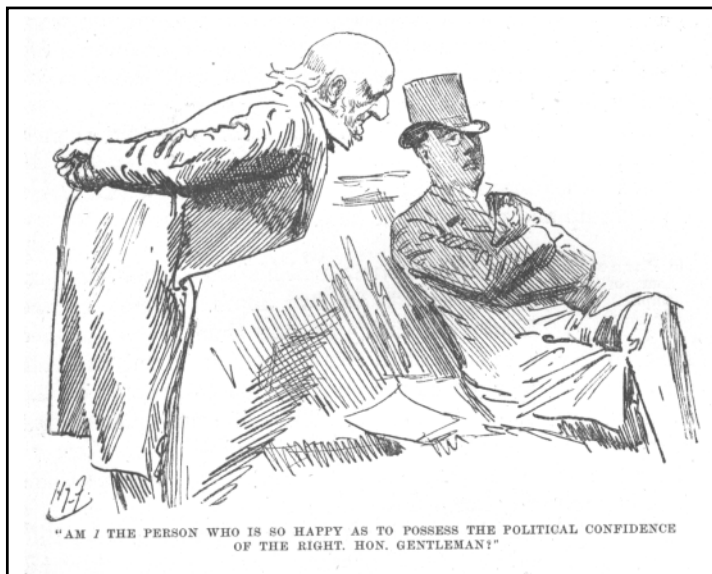
Gladstone, like his son, favoured a revival of the Dublin Parliament abolished by the Act of Union of 1800.

The *Mercury*’s accompanying leading article also bore traces of its editor’s talk with Herbert Gladstone, but less sensitive ones: it dealt mainly with Dilke’s proposal, which it deplored, that the Tories should be left in office just after they had done so much less well than the Liberals in the general election.

More oddly, there was also a leak in the *Standard*, then a principal London Tory morning paper. How this happened was never found out. The most plausible conjecture is that someone overheard the conversation at the National Liberal Club – four are always too many to keep a proper secret – and seized the occasion to make mischief, or even money. The *Standard* laid it down, at the end of its leading articles, that ‘We are in a position to state that the following

are the lines on which Mr Gladstone, on taking office, would be prepared to deal with the question of Home Rule for Ireland: The maintenance of the Unity of the Empire, the authority of the Crown, and the supremacy of the Imperial Parliament to be assured. The creation of an Irish Parliament, to be entrusted with the entire management of all legislative and administrative affairs, securities being taken for the representation of minorities, and for an equitable partition of all Imperial charges.’

The first leader was much stronger, and set the tone for all the more raucous comments from the right in the weeks to come. It drew its readers’ attention to its first news item, and went on: ‘That it is an attempt to detach the Irish vote from the Conservatives before Parliament meets is too obvious to need any demonstration.’ Again, ‘Mr.



Gladstone and Chamberlain; even after the Liberal Unionists split from Gladstone’s Liberals, they continued to occupy the same benches in the Commons.

of the Irish difficulty ... The plan, therefore, which he has in view provides for the establishment of a Parliament in Dublin for dealing with purely Irish affairs.’ There were lots of safeguards; ‘very large limitations’, ‘effective guardianship of Imperial interests’, and the rest; but the main cat was out of the bag: Mr

GLADSTONE'S anxiety to reseal himself in office is almost passionately intense.'

Quite why an aged man who did not really enjoy politics should be so passionate in his desire to be flung back into the thick of them remains, to one of his later admirers at least, unclear.

He replied to the kite in a telegram to Central News – a snub to the National Press Agency – on the 17th; most newspapers carried it next day. He said, fairly simply: 'The statement is not an accurate representation of my views, but is, I presume, a speculation upon them. It is not published with my knowledge or authority, nor is any other beyond my own public declarations.' This is borne out – if Herbert's letter to Lucy might yet once more be quoted – by his son's remark, 'With all these matters my Father had no more connection than the man in the moon, & until each event occurred he knew ... no more of it than the man in the street.'²⁷

Other politicians were more forthright. 'My view is,' Chamberlain wrote to Dilke, 'that Mr G's Irish scheme is death and damnation; that we must try and stop it.' In his next letter he remarked, 'What a mess Mr. G. has made of it! What will be the end of it all? Why the devil could he not wait till Parnell had quarrelled with the Tories?'²⁸ Chamberlain's immediate preoccupation was that he was scheduled to make a big speech in Birmingham on the night of the 17th. He had Labouchere staying with him the night before, but was disinclined to take his advice to hedge. When it came to the point he had to hedge – he had no data on which to do anything else. He had been warned by the same friend, two months earlier, that Parnell 'never makes a bargain without intending to get out of it, and that he has either a natural love of treachery, or considers that promises are not binding when made to a Saxon.'²⁹ So unstable was the bog through which politicians had to march.

Moreover, politicians were not

supermen; they were as liable to fault as everybody else. Labouchere, in a note of condolence to Herbert Gladstone – dated no better than 'Sat', but conjecturally of Saturday 19 December – pointed out that 'the most rare thing in the world is to be able to keep a secret. People tell them in the strictest confidence to others, in order to increase their own importance. They are like tubs with a hole at the bottom. It is not their faults. Nature made them so.'³⁰ This provides an alternative explanation of the leak to the *Standard*.

Now was it the case, as Herbert Gladstone always maintained, that flying the Kite was entirely his own idea; or was the almost universal assumption at the time, that his father had put him up to it, correct? A little light can be thrown on this from the Gladstone diaries.

Might a moment's excursus be allowed? When it was made public that the diaries were at last to see the light of day, and that I was to edit them, I was interviewed by (among others) the literary editor of the *Daily Express*. Remembering Herbert Gladstone's troubles with the kite, I took great care to settle with him beforehand that we were to go through every word, every comma of his article before it appeared. It was perfectly innocuous. What, I asked, about headlines? 'Oh, that has to be left to the sub-editors on the night.' So the article came out, in the wake of the Profumo affair, under the headline: THE PRIME MINISTER WHO SPENT £80,000 ON GIRLS.

One of the first points I looked up in the diaries was what evidence they contained about the Hawarden Kite. To explain what I found, it is necessary to remark that they are written, almost all the time, in a sort of private telegraphese; heavily condensed, and not at first glance at all a piece of flowing prose, easy to read. After the Gladstones' marriage in 1839, the commonest entry is probably 'Ch 8½ AM', meaning that he had walked up the hill from the great house to the church at Hawarden, heard matins, and walked down

again – forty minutes' walk and about as long at prayer. Next to that, the most frequent entry is probably 'Saw C': that is, had a talk of some importance with Catherine his wife.

All that the diaries have to say about the Hawarden Kite is compressed into six letters: 'Saw HJG'. Herbert's own diary goes as far as six words, for the same date – 17 December: 'Saw Father. He was quite compos.'³¹

Morley, when he came to write the official life of Gladstone after the old man's death in 1898, felt he had to administer a formal rebuke to Herbert: 'Never was there a moment when every consideration of political prudence more imperatively counselled silence.'³² Indeed the Liberal Party did split, as a result of the Gladstones' espousal of the cause of Irish home rule; both ends fell off it. Chamberlain, whose strength of feeling has been noted already, has long had the credit for having 'wanted to kill the bill' when home rule came before the Commons in the summer of 1886.³³ It failed to get a second reading by thirty votes. Yet analysis of the division lists shows that even if Chamberlain and all his personal tail had voted for it, the bill would still have been lost; the defection of Hartington's Whiggish wing was more weighty, if less noisy, than the defection of the Birmingham radicals.

Moreover, Mr Gladstone survived in politics to lead 190 other home rulers into the next Parliament; the cause of home rule, of reconciliation with the Irish, stayed alive, and after the general election of 1892 even brought the old man back into office as Prime Minister for the fourth time: to fight his home rule bill through every detail in the House of Commons, and then see it destroyed in the Lords by the largest majority ever recorded there until their lordships approved British entry into the Common Market.

Anti-Gladstonian diatribes abounded then, abound now. Let me end by quoting two contemporary opinions that tell the other way, nei-

ther by a mean man: one Irish, one English (or Anglo-continental). The Irishman is Michael Davitt, who wrote to Labouchere on 29 January 1886 about Gladstone: 'No English Statesman has ever had so splendid an opportunity of settling the Anglo-Irish difficulty.'³⁴ The other view is Lord Acton's. He summed up to Herbert Gladstone on 18 March 1886 where the elder Gladstone's Irish struggle stood in historical perspective: 'From the point of view of the ages, it is the sublime crown of his work, and there is a moral greatness about it which will, I hope, strengthen and console him under any amount of difficulty and even disaster.'³⁵ Difficulty and disaster indeed lay ahead; for Mr G, the sense of moral grandeur was enough. Had Herbert Gladstone's talks with Wemyss Reid and Dawson Rogers never taken place, the infant project of home rule might have been quietly strangled in the cradle.

There is no need for historians to go in for counterfactual speculation, beloved by journalists and novelists. There is no need, either, to treat honourable men as if they were rogues. When Herbert Gladstone came eventually to sum up in print his recollections of the Hawarden kite, he prefixed to the chapter the old tag, 'A poor thing but mine own.'³⁶ May we not believe him?

This article is based on a lecture delivered by M. R. D. Foot in Leeds on 2 December 1985 and published in the University of Leeds Review 1986–87 Vol 29. It is reprinted by kind permission of the author and the University of Leeds.

M. R. D. Foot is the editor of the early volumes of the Gladstone Diaries and the author, with J. L. Hammond, of Gladstone and Liberalism (1952). He has also written on military affairs, particularly the SOE.

Notes

- 1 J. L. Hammond, *Gladstone and the Irish Nation* (1938), pp. 449–50.
- 2 Lady Gwendolen Cecil, *Life of Robert Marquis of Salisbury* (1931), vol. iii. pp. 283–84.
- 3 *Ibid.*, iii. p. 313.
- 4 Lionel Curtis, *Civitas Dei* (1937), vol. ii. p. 356.
- 5 Cf Crewe, *Lord Rosebery* (1931), vol. i. p. 194.
- 6 *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*. 3s cccvi. 1199–2000, 7 June 1886.
- 7 Hardinge, *Carnarvon* (1925), vol. iii. pp. 178–81.
- 8 BL Add MS 46015. fo 87: Labouchere to H. J. Gladstone, 19 December 1885. Cf R. J. Hind, *Henry Labouchere and the Empire* (1972), pp. 111–22.
- 9 W. E. Gladstone, *Address to the Electors of Midlothian* (1885), p. 21.
- 10 Cf M. R. D. Foot, and H. C. G. Matthew, *The Gladstone Diaries* (9 vols, 1968–86), vol. i. p. xlii.
- 11 Cf W. E. Gladstone, *Political Speeches in Scotland* (intr. Leicester, 1973).

- 12 John Bailey (ed.), *The Diary of Lady Frederick Cavendish* (2 vols, 1927).
- 13 On the murders, see Tom Corfe, *The Phoenix Park Murders* (1968).
- 14 In *Parnell and His Party* (1957), p. 161n.
- 15 BL Add MS 46041, fo 60.
- 16 See A. D. Hamer (ed.), *Joseph Chamberlain et al. The Radical Programme* (1971).
- 17 BL Add MS 46041. fo 72; confidential.
- 18 Cf *Fortnightly Review*, vol. mlii, p. 117. August 1954.
- 19 BL Add MS 46041, fo 72; confidential.
- 20 BL Add MS 46046, fo 58, 31 December 1885.
- 21 *Ibid.*, fo 56.
- 22 John Morley, *Life of William Ewart Gladstone* (1903), vol. iii. p. 239.
- 23 BL Add MS 46046. fo 58v.
- 24 Again from his letter to Lady Frederick Cavendish, 31 December 1885, in BL Add MS 46046. fo 61.
- 25 *Ibid.*, fo 60v.
- 26 On the felling of trees, a post-Freudian audience is referred to W. T. Stead, *Gladstone*, pp. 52–53. 1898. Stead took no part in the affair of the Hawarden kite because at that moment he was doing time for his 'maiden tribute' troubles.
- 27 BL Add MS 46046. fo 60v; version in Morley, *Gladstone*, vol. iii. p. 265.
- 28 Stephen, Gwynn, and Gertrude M. Tuckwell, *Life of Dilke* (1917), vol. ii. pp. 197–98.
- 29 A. L. Thorold, *Life of Labouchere* (1913), pp. 238–39.
- 30 BL Add MS 46015, fo 112v.
- 31 Private information.
- 32 Morley, *Gladstone*, vol. iii. p. 266.
- 33 J. L. Garvin, *Life of Joseph Chamberlain* (1933), vol. ii, pp. 220, 250.
- 34 BL Add MS 46015. fo 174v.
- 35 BL Add MS 46052. fo 39.
- 36 The Viscount Gladstone, *After Thirty Years* (1928), p. 306.

On Gladstone ...

Lord Randolph Churchill

'An old man in a hurry.' (Address to the electors of South Paddington, 19 June 1886)

Winston Churchill

'Gladstone read Homer for fun, which I thought served him right.' (*My Early Life*)

Benjamin Disraeli

'He has not a single redeeming defect.' (Quoted in *Facts about the British Prime Ministers*, ed D. Englefield et al)

'A sophisticated rhetorician inebriated with the exuberance of his own verbosity, and gifted with an egotistical imagination that can at all times command an interminable and inconsistent series of arguments to malign an opponent and to glorify himself.' (*The Times* 28 July 1878)

'Posterity will do justice to that unprincipled maniac Gladstone – extraordinary mixture of envy, vindictiveness, hypocrisy and superstition; and with one commanding characteristic – whether Prime Minister or Leader of the Opposition, whether preaching, praying, speechifying or scribbling – never a gentleman.' (W. Monypenny and G. Buckle, *Life of Benjamin Disraeli* vol. 6, 1920)

Henry Labouchere

'I do not object to the old man always having a card up his sleeve, but I do object to his insinuating that the almighty placed it there'. (Quoted in G Curzon *Modern Parliamentary Eloquence*, 1913)

Queen Victoria

'He speaks to me as if I were a public meeting.' (Quoted in G W E Russell, *Collections and Recollections*, 1898)