

Report

Only Connect

Tony Little reports on the international conference held at University College Chester, at the beginning of July, to commemorate the centenary of Gladstone's death.

A conference attended by nearly one hundred people, mostly professional historians, spread over four days, in which some twenty-eight different papers were delivered inevitably presented a diverse view of its subject. Yet the key theme was set by David Bebbington in his introduction to the first session – 'Only Connect'. From the first biography of Gladstone in 1868 to the current day we have a daunting mass of material about the Grand Old Man which has inevitably led to a specialisation particularly between the political studies and the religious – a divide which dates back to Morley's great but largely political biography of 1903. The challenge for future historians is to rebuild an integrated Gladstonian personality, understanding how each part of his life influenced the others.

Colin Matthew, the editor of the Gladstone Diaries, developed the theme by arguing that the diaries represented 'a long piece of string' – 25,300 daily entries over nearly seventy years – 'through the maze'. The diaries were primarily a record of the *process* of Gladstone's life, not an *analysis* of his thought. They were driven by his evangelical background as a preparation for an account to his Maker, and therefore religion and temptations were a key component. They recorded his journeys, his correspondence – an important consideration, as Gladstone practiced 'war by literary attrition' on his colleagues – his reading, his own publications and his recreations. They rarely give his political views, as these were already available in the speeches and correspondence, but the diaries were

used by him and can be used by others as a source of reference for these political views. The diaries are the skeleton on which the body of Gladstone studies will hang, establishing the links between the components, allowing them to form a whole.

The need for this guidance became clear as the conference progressed. The longevity of Gladstone's political life is well known, as is his shift from Tory to Liberal. What became clearer was the consistency of his thought processes and the application of the same principles throughout his life. His economic policy was formed by Peel and Cobden in the 1840s and 1850s. Anthony Howe, of LSE, showed that the commercial diplomacy which informed the treaty with the French

in 1860 still influenced commercial policy-making in the 1880s, with Gladstone fighting against colonial protectionism and retaliatory tariffs against the US or Germany, whose rise to economic power were seen by others to pose a threat to Britain. Retrenchment was a key to his policy as Chancellor in the 1850s, when he fought Palmerston over naval fortifications, and it was the subject of his final battle in cabinet in 1894, when he protested in vain about the expansion of military expenditure. The quarrels with Pam, perceived as holding a lackadaisical attitude to finance and lacking moral principles in foreign affairs, were, Michael Partridge explained, transferred to Disraeli, where they enjoyed an extended life. Sessions on such apparently diverse subjects as Ireland, electoral reform and the Empire showed the influence of Burke on his thinking while making clear the conservative nature of his reforming zeal. In each case, Gladstone was looking to integrate disaffected sections of the community into the whole and in each case seeking to demonstrate that placing trust in the people would achieve responsibility rather than revolution.

Politics by other means

David Bebbington's own contribution was on the superficially unpromising subject of Gladstone and Homer, but was one of the most sparkling, demonstrating the value of thinking across the subject. Classics were part of the education of any Victorian gentleman and many kept up their studies – the library at St. Deiniol's contains a translation of Homer by Lord Derby, the Tory premier. Gladstone's Homeric studies appear initially to have been a distraction from politics but, for a man of Gladstone's energies, idle reading was not an option and serious study was followed by publication of a three-volume 1500-page tome, *Studies in Homer and the Homeric Age*, and a later 'popular' version, *Juventus Mundi*, plus of course numerous articles. Gladstone imported into his

classical studies his political and polemical skills. Homer was used to demonstrate to an increasingly less religious age the true revelation of God, and the continuity of that revelation from pre-biblical times. Similarly, it was used against those Tractarians, such as Newman, who deserted the Church of England for Roman Catholicism. If the use of Homer and ancient Greek religion as weapons in Christian controversies might be seen as a natural extension of Gladstone's urge to integrate both into a single vision of God's plan for humanity, Bebbington also illustrated the more overt political content of ancient Greek history. One of Gladstone's objectives was to attack the theories of Radical MP and Greek historian George Grote, who thought of Homer as mostly myth, while Gladstone saw him as historical and Agamemnon as an early constitutional monarch. Similarly, rivalry for the Exchequer between Gladstone and Sir George Cornwall Lewis is reflected in differences in their Homeric views.

As Ulysses bound to the mast

Naturally, Ireland played a large part in the conference. The settlement Gladstone proposed in 1886 is still seen as the opportunity that Britain missed to resolve what has been the most long-lasting and intractable problem to confront British politicians. Elements of his solution still show in the repeated efforts to devolve power to a local parliament, such as is included in the Good Friday Agreement, and after each demonstration of the ineffectiveness of coercion, which lives on in the debate on internment. The broad outline of Gladstone's insistence on tying his fate with Ireland right from the outset of his first government to his final great feat in the Commons in 1893 are well known, but questions still remain.

Alan O'Day and George Boyce discussed 'Gladstone, Nationalism and Unionism'. Why did Gladstone

choose to champion Irish Catholics despite his hostility to their religion? The article by Colin Matthew elsewhere in this issue gives part of the reason. O'Day suggests that Mr G. was in part trying to take religion out of the state in his Irish proposals, but Boyce quoted a Whig Belfast paper accusing him of exactly the opposite fault. Victorian Irish Protestants did not reject their Irishness – indeed Parnell was a Protestant – but they could not understand Gladstone's Home Rule policy as achieving his objectives of rebuilding the primacy of the gentry and removing bigotry. Gladstone hinted at safeguards for Protestants in a second chamber of the Home Rule Parliament, but gave no explicit guarantees and was unwilling to use fancy franchises. He did not come to terms with the distinctive characteristics of Ulster, with its heavier industrialisation and developed middle class, focusing more on the dysfunctional systems of agricultural tenancies which were less of a problem in the north.

In recent years revisionism has been the source of controversy among Irish historians, but O'Day suggested that Gladstone's reputation had suffered less than that of Ireland's own nationalist leaders. He is still given the credit for making Ireland a critical issue in British politics.

The challenge

The older generation of historians present at the conference began their careers, as Walter Arnstein reminded delegates, when the everyday features of London would have still been recognisable to Gladstone – fogs and street sellers, but no supermarkets and few cars. It was still possible to talk to people who had known Gladstone, but the wealth of written material now available had not been opened up for inspection. However, there was a danger, at least in the US, of history departments being seduced by literary theories and cultural anthropology while neglecting national, constitutional and diplomatic studies. Imperial history

survived under post-colonialism and oriental studies.

How will Gladstone fit into this? Michael Wheeler, Richard Shannon and Philip Bull tried to answer. For Wheeler, revisiting the Gladstonian intellect was the challenge. Bull endorsed this view: we still need to conciliate the contradictory elements in his personality to explore further his efforts to preserve in a period of transition. For example, Gladstone's foresight in tackling the problems of Ireland eased India's colonial transition. Do we need to do more to restore Gladstone's reputation as a patriot? For Shannon, he needs to be rescued from the Morley/secular view of Gladstone as the Godfather of modern Liberalism, and restored to his own time as the inheritor of a tradition that stretches backwards to Cromwell. We need to bring back religion to the centrality it assumed in his own life and see how the role of providential purpose worked consistently through his series of great undertakings.

Liberal Democrats still have much to learn from their Gladstonian tradition. I came away impressed not just by the greatness of the man, but the continued relevance of his approach.

The papers from The Gladstone Centenary International Conference are being edited by David Bebbington and Roger Swift. They will be published in two volumes, the first by the Liverpool University Press and the second, consisting of the shorter papers, by St Deiniol's Library.

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