

Reviews

The Two Mr Gladstones

Travis L. Crosby:

The Two Mr Gladstones: A Study in Psychology & History

(Yale University Press, 1997)

Reviewed by Tony Little

As we pass the centenary of his death, we are finally beginning to get to grips with Gladstone. Not the great statesman, the outstanding orator and reformer, but the fallible human. Gladstone, the great Victorian idol, 'The People's William', was celebrated in the newspapers of the day – he was an early exploiter of the mass media and was one of the first major politicians to campaign among the people 'out of doors'.¹ Gladstone the statesman was entombed in Morley's monumental biography.² But it was not until Magnus in the 1950s³ that we began to get an insight into the man behind the mask, and it was not until the publication of the diaries that the evidence was clearly and publicly available for analysis. Jenkins' recent book⁴ added the insight of a practising modern politician, highlighting, for example, the stress-related illnesses. Are there more insights to be found?

Travis argues that there are. His is not a gimmicky Freudian expose of the Grand Old Man, as has been practiced by Leo Abse on Mrs. Thatcher, and it does not focus exclusively on the unknowable aspects of the rescue missions among fallen women. Rather, it is a serious analysis, drawing on Freudian work where necessary, but concentrating on stress and coping strategy. The mass of material generated by Gladstone, his rivals, colleagues and observers means that if any historical figure can be subject to a psychological analysis, Gladstone must be the prime candidate for treatment.

The duality of Mr G's personal-

ity is expressed in many ways. The collector of porcelain may be contrasted with the ill-tempered debater. The fearless statesman is also the man who longs for escape. The century's greatest mass orator is also the neat administrator, the amateur theologian was also a man of excess physical energy whose main hobby was the felling of trees and who thought nothing of a twenty-mile walk. Are these just random aspects of the same character, or are they linked into a coherent whole by this psychological inspection? If psycho-history is to add value it must add to our understanding of the personality, and, more importantly, it must help ex-

plain some of the more perplexing episodes of a career not satisfactorily resolved by more traditional techniques.

Travis argues that at heart Gladstone was a carefully organised man who reacted negatively when that order was disturbed – only a carefully organised man could have produced so much written material in his life. His ambition was to bring order to the country. This is readily seen in the great reforming budgets and the reforms of his first premiership. In smaller things it is seen in his frequent re-ordering of his books and papers and in the methodical process of the diary. When people or events conspired to prevent Gladstone achieving his targets, how did he cope with the resulting stress? One answer, already given, was to run away until a solution presented itself or until Gladstone devised a new strategy. Into this category may be put the Ionian Commissionership in the frustrating officeless mid-1850s. Similarly, his reaction to the 1874 defeat by throwing up the party leadership; and the retreat to France in the crisis of 1894. During the period in which he decided to bring forward Home Rule, Gladstone may be accused of skulking in Hawarden and keeping colleagues in the dark. Throughout his career, when in subordinate positions, he threatened resignation, as Peel and Palmerston found to their exasperation, and when in the highest office, he used retirement for the same purpose of enforcing his will or providing an escape route.

The G.O.M. always found attractions and temptation in the company of pretty women – a nickname among the demi-monde was Gladeyes – and if there was a religious angle, the temptation was especially strong, as Laura Thistlethwayte proved. While there was always more in the rescue missions than Christian sympathy for Magdalenens, it was less than Gladstone's enemies hoped, as he adopted strategies to sublimate the temptation. Nevertheless it is clear that the streetwalking was itself a means of coping and was at its high-

est when he was under severe stress with problems in his family or political life.

Fifty years ago, this book would have come as a great revelation. Now no biographer can escape an exploration of his hero's motives and Gladstone has not escaped the attentions of Jenkins, Matthew, Shannon *et al.* Travis has added valuable new insights, but they are too often points of detail rather than breakthroughs. Importantly, the

book is not laden with jargon and acts as a good short introduction to the life for those who already have some understanding of the politics – and adds that little extra understanding for the specialist.

Notes

- ¹ H. J. Hanham: *Elections and Party Management* (Longmans, 1959), p. 202.
- ² J. Morley: *Life of Gladstone* (1903).
- ³ P. Magnus, *Gladstone* (Murray, 1954).
- ⁴ R. Jenkins, *Gladstone* (Macmillan, 1995).

Some Gladstonian Attitudes

Peter J. Jagger (ed.):

Gladstone

(The Hambledon Press, 1998)

Reviewed by Tony Little

The opening illustration of Peter Jagger's book shows a cartoon of Gladstone at work in the Commons, but it is the other meaning of attitudes which comes over in this book. Any book with essays on Gladstone and Acting, Ireland, Rhetoric, America, Disraeli, the working man, Ruskin, Railways, to name some of the topics, and with authors as good as Asa Briggs, Lord Blake and David Bebbington, to select just some of those whose names start with B, is bound to offer some little treat. This book offers a whole feast.

When he died Gladstone left his library at St. Deiniol's, Hawarden, for the use of scholars. Each year a Founder's Day lecture is held to commemorate some aspect of Gladstone's life. All but two of these essays were first given as lectures at St. Deiniol's over the period 1968–96 and all but a (different) pair appear for the first time in this volume. The Blake piece on the rivalry with Disraeli was first published in the now out of print first volume of Founder's Day lectures and is well worth the reproduction, though not without the unworthy thought that it would be hard to imagine a similar book on the Tory leader that en-

compassed such a wide range of interests.

In his introduction, Peter Jagger describes Gladstone as a 'Victorian colossus: a man of boundless energy and varied and great gifts'; here we are given a glimpse as to just how wide these gifts were, and an introduction to the magnitude of the problems he was prepared to tackle. Some, such as Ireland, the Balkans and management of the railways are still unresolved. The problem with a colossus is its sheer scale. The Gladstone diaries, as published, take up fourteen volumes, and the Gladstone papers have now been published on 262 reels of microfiche,

of which the thirty reels of general correspondence and associated letter books alone cover more than 15,000 letters. As Peter Jagger makes clear in his own contribution on 'Gladstone's Library', Gladstone's 30,000 books were a working library and there is evidence from the diaries and the books themselves (heavily annotated) that he read around 20,000 of them. It is not surprising that biographers as practiced as Lord Jenkins have approached their subject with some trepidation.

It is also no surprise that many prefer to specialise, tackling just some part of Gladstone's contribution to the nineteenth century. It is in this specialisation that this book finds some of its strength. For example, Glynne Wickham is not just a great grandson of the Grand Old Man but also a professor of drama, well-placed to demonstrate the influence of classical oratorical skills on both Victorian politicians and actors, to illustrate Gladstone's love of the theatre (once he had overcome his evangelical fears of its sinfulness) and his willingness to promote the profession in society. He persuaded Victoria to offer a knighthood to Irving (refused at the time but accepted later) and invited him to breakfast at Downing Street – luvvies and politics go back a long way.

David Bebbington offers one of the most sparkling pieces on what might at first be thought an especially obscure subject – 'Gladstone and Grote'. 'Who he?' would probably be the reaction of most readers, but this merely illustrates the strength of Bebbington's essay. Grote was a somewhat idealistic radical MP, utilitarian, strongly in favour of democracy and fanatical about the secret ballot, at a time when Gladstone (who later ironically introduced the secret ballot), a rising Tory, opposed each of these views. Grote is now more famous for his pioneering history of Greece, but into this history he imported his philosophical ideas, placing temptation in the path of that amateur classicist Gladstone, who was temperamentally incapable of resisting the call to respond, toss-