

REVIEWS

Dizzy and the Grand Old Man

Richard Aldous, *The Lion and the Unicorn: Gladstone vs Disraeli* (Hutchinson, 2006)

Reviewed by Dr J. Graham Jones

OVER THE years both William Gladstone and Benjamin Disraeli, Earl of Beaconsfield, the political giants of the mid-Victorian age and bitter (political and personal) arch-enemies, have inspired several biographies and other studies. But Richard Aldous's absorbing volume is the first joint biography of these two larger-than-life characters. Although an array of individuals flit across the canvass of this book, the focus is throughout kept on the two central characters.

The author has clearly quarried avidly all previous biographies and political histories of the period, and has made widespread use of Gladstone's own most extensive diaries as well as those of John Bright, Lord Derby, Lord Grenville and Albert, the Prince Consort. He has even consulted the letters from Queen Victoria to her beloved daughter Vicky. He also makes extensive use of the published volumes of speeches of Gladstone and Disraeli and has consulted widely the volumes of the new *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004). It is notable, however, that he makes no use of primary manuscript source materials.

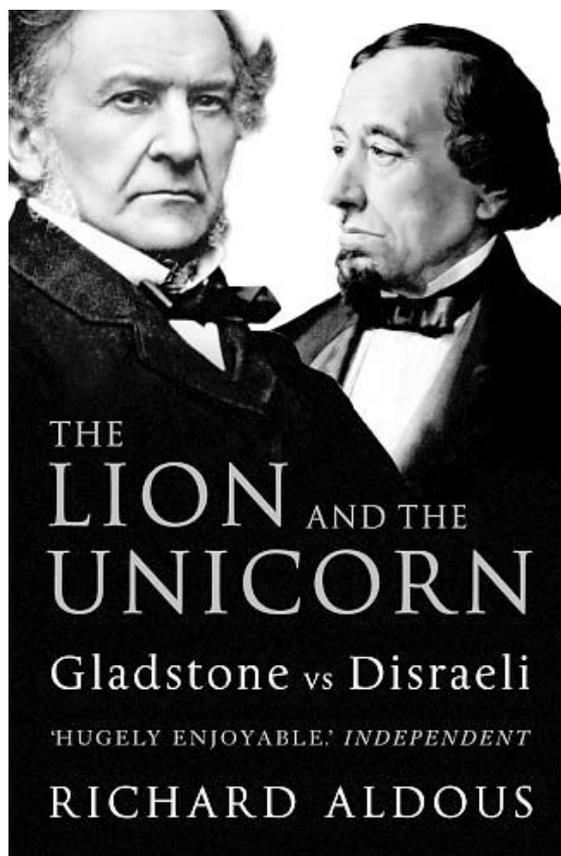
The book begins with a 'Prologue' which looks at Gladstone's reaction to the long-anticipated death of his political rival Disraeli in April 1881. Thereafter it follows a strictly chronological approach, beginning in January 1835 when the two men met for the

first time as guests at a dinner party given by Lord Lyndhurst. Their first real clash was during the Budget debate in February 1852, an altercation cemented by a nasty dispute over the wearing of the Chancellor's robes. There is a brief epilogue, 'In Memoriam' (pp. 320–26), which jumps to Gladstone's death in May 1898, seventeen years after his arch-rival's. Ironically, he was laid to rest at Westminster Abbey at the foot of Disraeli's monument; Disraeli himself had been buried at his Buckinghamshire home.

There is a real sense of tension and drama in each chapter as this political drama unfolds over several decades. Each section throughout the text is most helpfully introduced by a heading giving the date and place of its setting – 'Hawarden Castle, 19 April 1881', 'St. George's Chapel, Windsor, 1861', or 'Cabinet Room, 13 March 1873'. Each scene is then set in detail, and at times there is at least a small element of poetic licence beyond the point of historical certainty. This provides the narrative with great pace and absorbing interest.

Throughout there is a neat balance of personal and political history, and the story of the two central figures is narrated against the backdrop of national events. A recurring theme is Gladstone's need for sexual excitement beyond the marriage bed – his search for 'fallen women' to 'rescue', the resultant temptations and bouts of self-flagellation. Aldous deals

competently with the complexities and intricacies of the Second Reform Bill of 1867 and the moves which led to Disraeli becoming Prime Minister in the same year. We read intriguing accounts of the death of Albert, the Prince Consort, in 1861 and the holding of the Great Exhibition the following year, the death of the frail Mary Ann Disraeli in 1872, the decision of Queen Victoria to become Empress of India in 1876 (in part so as not to be eventually out-ranked by her daughter Vicky, the Princess Royal, who was in line to become in due course the German Empress), and the frenzied Midlothian campaigns of 1880. He displays an enviable mastery of the course of nineteenth-century political history. The author also gives Disraeli his due as an accomplished author and writer and refers to many other important literary publications throughout the text. Disraeli's many important and widely read novels are fully assessed in the text.



The author, clearly, has an eye for the memorable phrase. In middle age, an exasperated Catherine Gladstone exclaimed to her trying husband, 'Oh, William dear, if you weren't such a great man you would be a terrible bore!' (p. 52). In 1876 Disraeli thundered to Lord Derby, 'Posterity will do justice to that unprincipled maniac Gladstone – extraordinary mixture of envy, vindictiveness, hypocrisy and superstition – whether prime minister or leader of opposition – whether preaching, praying, speechifying or scribbling – never a gentleman' (p. 274). When it seemed very likely that Gladstone was about to become Prime Minister for the second time following the Liberal victory in the general election of 1880, a distraught Queen Victoria, beside herself with rage, let rip – 'she screamed that she would "sooner abdicate than send for or have any communication with that half-mad firebrand who would soon ruin everything and be a dictator"' (p. 306). Clem Attlee's reaction to reading Gladstone's letter of proposal to Catherine Glynne is recorded in a sublime footnote – 'He really was a frightful old prig ... He was a dreadful person.' (p. 29). Aldous does not, however, weary his reader with over-long quotations in the text.

The volume, although clearly based on meticulous, wide-ranging research and reading, reads like an historical novel from cover to cover. Richard Aldous writes in a captivating, enthralling style which makes it difficult for the reader to put down the book. There are a number of most engaging pen-portraits of the major characters. Of Catherine Gladstone we read, 'She rarely read books or even newspapers, and could be shockingly uninformed. Catherine attended both church and parliament regularly, but had little interest

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in discussing either. When apart, the Gladstones wrote to each other most days. These letters were frank, but also contain more than a hint of emotional detachment' (p. 52). Of her husband we read, 'Gladstone was seen as a difficult, prickly character. He was a habitual resigner, even creating problems for those he admired such as Peel and Aberdeen. His preachy, arrogant manner had often infuriated fellow MPs. Even those who admired him, such as John Trelawny, found him aloof and cold (p. 144).

Of Disraeli in the mid-1850s we read, 'His health had never been particularly robust, but the onset of middle age was taking its toll. He had begun to develop a marked, painful stoop, which ached when he sat in one place for too long. His weak lungs were susceptible to infection in the damp, foggy London winters. Jet-black locks now only retained their colour with the assistance of hair dye' (p. 99). There are similar pen-portraits of key players like Sir Robert Peel, the Duke of Wellington and Lord Palmerston as they flit across the pages of this enthralling tale, though they are firmly relegated to the sidelines of the main story.

The book is enhanced with a large number of most attractive pictures and photographs, most taken from Getty Images. There are detailed endnotes

which give the sources of the direct quotations in the text and other guides to further reading. Although this practice is now academically fashionable, it can be a little confusing, and the present reviewer at least would certainly prefer conventional numbered footnotes which are an easier read. Helpful, too, would have been a full systematic bibliography of all the sources used by the author while undertaking his research.

The book is a gripping read from cover to cover, likely to reawaken interest in the politics of mid-Victorian Britain and in the extraordinary lives and careers of these two central characters. It will appeal to academics, students and lay readers alike. Although Richard Aldous is most objective and scrupulously fair throughout his study, one detects a slight predilection in favour of William Gladstone.

This is Aldous's third major book. His previous publications include a biography of Sir Malcolm Sargent. One eagerly anticipates further volumes from the pen of this brilliant young academic who is currently Head of History and Archives at University College, Dublin.

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Governing Scotland

David Torrance, *The Scottish Secretaries* (Birlinn, 2006)

Reviewed by Ewen A. Cameron

DAVID TORRANCE, a freelance journalist and parliamentary aide to the Shadow Secretary of State for Scotland, has written a collective biography of the thirty-

nine men and one woman (the redoubtable Helen Liddle) who have held the office of Secretary (of State since 1926) for Scotland since 1885. The position is an oddity: a territorial