

None of that, alas, can disguise the fact that Gladstone's career ended in failure.

Had Gladstone's first 'retirement' in 1875 been final, he would be hailed as the Liberal genius who launched Britain on its peaceful transition to democracy, kept dangerous imperialist tendencies in check, and secured the foundations of a flourishing free market economy. Instead, he died with his Irish Home Rule ambitions scuppered, his Liberal Party in tatters, imperialism at its zenith, and relative industrial decline already evident.

Ireland is the pre-eminent charge on the sheet. "Now one prayer absorbs all others: Ireland, Ireland, Ireland," runs the diary entry for Easter Day 1887. With that guilty plea to obsession, it is easy to side with majority English opinion of the day, from Chamberlain on the left to Salisbury on the right, and dismiss Irish Home Rule as the supreme hubris of an old man in a hurry.

Easy but mistaken. For in conception and timing, Gladstone's Irish policy was profoundly enlightened, as the desperate tale of 20th century Ireland signifies. His land and church reforms had defused bitter social tensions in the 1860s and the early 1880s. The proposal to devolve government to Dublin in 1886 flowed naturally from the earlier reforms, and from the rise of a nationalist but secular and responsible - Irish parliamentary elite under Parnell.

The Act of Union had been imposed eight years before Gladstone's birth for security reasons. Gladstone has long sensed its impermanence if Ireland was to be governed by Liberal principles: in the mid-1880s he seized the opportunity presented by Parnell's leadership, and a lull in nationalist agitation, for an orderly progression to Irish self-government within the British state. As he correctly forecast after the defeat of the first Home Rule Bill by the Commons in 1886: "There is but one end to that matter: if what we ask is refused, more will have to be given."

Gladstone failed in 1886 not because his policy was wrong but because his party management was lamentable - particularly his handling of Chamberlain, a wealthy entrepreneur from outside the aristocratic Whig coterie. Gladstone always placed too much faith in incompetents because they were aristocrats - today's Tories do the same with businessmen. What would otherwise have been a partial Whig secession from the Liberal Party became a full-scale rupture.

The defeat of Gladstone's second Home Rule Bill in 1893 was essentially Sod's Law: the spectacular collapse of Parnell in the O'Shea divorce case of 1890 fatally undermined Middle England's confidence in the Irish leadership, and left Gladstone with a hung parliament after the 1892 election with which he was incapable of coercing the Conservative-dominated House of Lords. Encouraged by the Tories, the ugly face of sectarian conflict was already rearing its head in Ulster: it has not dimmed since.

In typical Gladstonian fashion, it was not the Irish failure which most galled the former prime minister in final retirement, but his treatment by Queen Victoria. The attention Gladstone

devoted to the interests of the Royal Family is truly astonishing: with the fate of Ireland and Africa in the balance, he was writing endless futile letters to the elderly widow and slaving over a financial settlement for one of her dim-witted sons. In return he got unremitting hostility, and not even the courtesy of a decent 'thank you' on his final resignation.

The complexity of Gladstone's mind and life pour out from every page of the diaries. Yet we glimpse only. "I do not enter on inferior matters. It is so easy to write, but to write honestly nearly impossible," are among the last words.

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## The High Summer of Victorian Liberalism

Book Review  
by Duncan Brack

Ian Bradley:  
*The Optimists: Themes and Personalities in Victorian Liberalism*  
(Faber & Faber, London, 1980)

*The Optimists* provides a counterpoint to the essentially non-ideological approach to Victorian politics adopted by those such as Professor John Vincent (whose *The Foundation of the British Liberal Party 1857-1868* was reviewed in Newsletter No. 4). "It starts from the premise that ideas, emanating from conviction and conscience, were central to Victorian Liberalism ..." and "that it was no accident that Liberalism flowered during the half century between the first and third great Reform Acts when there had ceased to be a narrow franchise but was not yet a mass electorate, and when Britain came nearest in its history to banishing vested interest and class from determining its politics and establishing the rule of ideas and principle instead."

The single characteristic that most clearly united the different strands of Liberalism throughout these five decades was an all-pervasive optimism. For G. M. Trevelyan, Gladstone was "at once the most optimistic and the most Christian of statesmen"; even the Conservative Lord Salisbury confessed his admiration for Gladstone's "gorgeous reckless optimism". The political beliefs and actions which this optimism led to form the bulk of Bradley's book.

Liberals were above all optimistic about human nature, holding the belief that, once given political power, people would use it to promote high ideals rather than to further their own immediate material interests. Hence the Liberal support for the gradual extension of the franchise - not, it should be noted, through any attachment to mass democracy, but as a proper reward for those sections of the working class that displayed "self-command, self-control, respect for order, patience under suffering, confidence in the law and regard for superiors."

Belief in the principles of voluntaryism and self-improvement derived directly from the Liberal view of human nature. Voluntary spontaneous effort by individuals and groups was preferable to compulsory action by the state; and social improvement through individual advancement provided the best foundations for prosperity and happiness. State intervention - in employment, in health, in education - could only be injurious to individual self-reliance and encouraging of dependency.

As C. S. Roundell, one of Gladstone's ministers, put it, *"legislation which encourages the people rather to rest upon state help than to rely upon themselves, however well-intentioned, will prove incalculably mischievous in the end, and to every measure which is brought forward with the object of improving the condition of the people, this simple test should be applied - will it tend to encourage them to rely upon self-help?"* Hence Liberal Governments' reluctance, during this period, to introduce social reform measures which relied upon state action; hence the initial opposition of many Liberals to state education; hence Cobden and Bright's dislike of any legislation in employment, which interfered with the free contract made between employer and worker.

The Liberal love of liberty must be seen in this light. Based on the long Whig tradition, Victorian Liberals' attachment to liberty was a belief in the removal of constraints, freedom from externally imposed restrictions, whether imposed by state, public opinion, religion or custom. The great achievements of Victorian Liberal administrations mostly fall into this category. Parliamentary reform, the abolition of church rates, disestablishment of the Irish Church, land reform in Ireland, the opening of the Civil Service to competitive examination, the abolition of the purchase of Army commissions and of religious tests for entry to Oxford and Cambridge, the act which allowed married women to hold property in their own name .... and so on.

This principle also underlay much of Liberal foreign policy, displayed in support for self-determination of nations and peoples struggling to be free of oppressors. The formation of the Liberal Party in 1859 was sparked by an agreement amongst Whigs, Radicals and Peelites to bring down Derby's Government over the Italian question, and the event which brought Gladstone out of retirement in 1879 to lead the Whigs to victory in the following year's election was the brutal Turkish suppression of a Christian uprising in Bulgaria. The long-standing commitment to Irish Home Rule fits into the same mould. and Liberal economic policy, with its attachment to free markets and free trade, also derives from the belief in liberty. The purpose of all these policies was the same: to set people free to make their own choices and to lead their own lives.

It was not surprising that Nonconformists came to form the backbone of Gladstone's Liberal Party. By the 1850s, Nonconformity had almost as many active adherents as the Church of England, yet in few other respects were the

denominations equal. Dissenters were obliged to pay church rates to support the Anglican Church and Anglican schools, barred from taking a degree at Oxford or Cambridge, and denied the use of their own burial service if their chapels lacked a graveyard. Shut out of established society, they followed precisely those principles of self-help and voluntaryism that Liberals admired, building their own schools and providing, as employers, for their own workers. They shared and admired Gladstone's deep religious convictions, despite his high Anglicanism.

The final chapter of *The Optimists* charts the decline of Victorian Liberalism. By the end of Gladstone's second administration, in 1885, the limitations of his approach were glaringly obvious. Liberty, in the negative sense, had been very largely achieved - but neither it nor the principle of self-help had succeeded in eradicating the appalling poverty of many of Britain's cities. The two million working class voters enfranchised in 1884 displayed a distressing tendency to *"socialism at home and jingoism abroad"* while the middle classes were losing their taste for great works and self-improvement and subsiding into self-satisfied suburbanism.

Many Liberals were unhappy about the response of Gladstone's Government, which seemed to them to be verging on the socialist. The principle of voluntaryism had already been abandoned in the field of education, where Forster's 1870 Education Act was a significant milestone in the recognition of the fact that only the state could effectively provide universal elementary education. The Employers' Liability Act and the Irish Land Act intervened directly in contracts drawn up between employers and workers, and landlords and tenants. Coupled with Gladstone's zeal for Irish Home Rule (which he adopted at least partly to forestall further interventionist demands from the Radicals), these developments split the Liberal Party and drove it out of power, with a brief three-year exception, for the next two decades - until the developing theories of the New Liberalism, of social as well as political, democracy, came to provide a new programme and a new dynamism for the Liberals of the 1900s.

Gladstone himself recognised the end of his era. As he resigned the Liberal leadership in 1894, he told friends that *"to emancipate is comparatively easy. It is simple to remove restrictions, to allow natural forces free play. We have to face the problem of constructive legislation .... I am thankful I have borne a great part in the emancipating labours of the last sixty years, but entirely uncertain how, had I now to begin my life, I could face the very different problems of the next sixty years. Of one thing I am, and always have been, convinced - it is not by the state that man can be regenerated and the terrible woes of the darkened world effectively dealt with."*

*The Optimists* is an easy, excellent, read, linking the bases of political philosophy and thought to the real actions of politicians. It is the best summary of Victorian Liberalism that I have read.