

Paddy Ashdown is the most significant Liberal leader since Jo Grimond. It is probable that the party would have collapsed entirely without his leadership – instead, it recovered from a standing in the opinion polls within the statistical margin of error of zero to win a higher number of Commons seats than at any time since 1929. Although his ultimate aim – to change the system of government in Britain – failed, it was worth the attempt (and some aspects of Labour’s constitutional reforms would probably not have been implemented without the pre-election agreement with the Liberal Democrats).

This book is of substantial importance to the history of the

Liberal Democrats and to the study of Liberal leadership. And more than that, it is a highly engaging and readable record not just of a remarkable political career but of an entire life lived at a furious pace – as Ashdown himself says in conclusion, quoting Lao Tse, ‘with the speed of a galloping horse’.

*Duncan Brack is the Editor of the Journal of Liberal History, and the author of ‘Liberal Democrat Leadership: The Cases of Ashdown and Kennedy’, Political Quarterly 78:1, 2007.*

1 Tony Greaves, ‘Audacious – but fundamentally flawed’, review of *The Ashdown Diaries – Volume 1: 1988–1997*, *Journal of Liberal History* 30 (spring 2001).

led him to the books he bought and read? What was it about him – his personality, aspirations, anxieties – that made him read?’ (p. 3)), and partly historical, such as the author’s systematic and usually successful attempt to decipher the way specific books influenced Gladstone’s attitude to political and social problems, such as the Pope’s claims to infallibility or Irish Nationalist demands for Home Rule. Her analysis of the GOM’s annotations and diaries is revealing even when applied to apparently unpromising works: for example, his collection of travel guides discloses that ‘Gladstone was an inquisitive, independent-minded, and interactive traveller. His reading and use of tourist guides and maps ... reveals both his desire to be informed about the foreign environments in which he found himself, and also his determination not to be passively reliant on such information’ (p. 75).

## Reading the man through his books

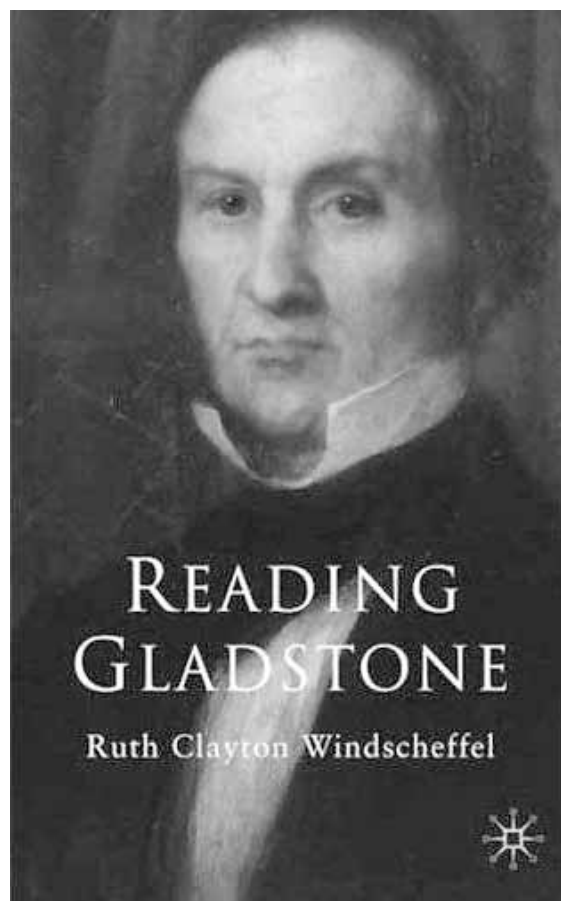
Ruth Clayton Windscheffel, *Reading Gladstone* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008)

Reviewed by Eugenio F. Biagini

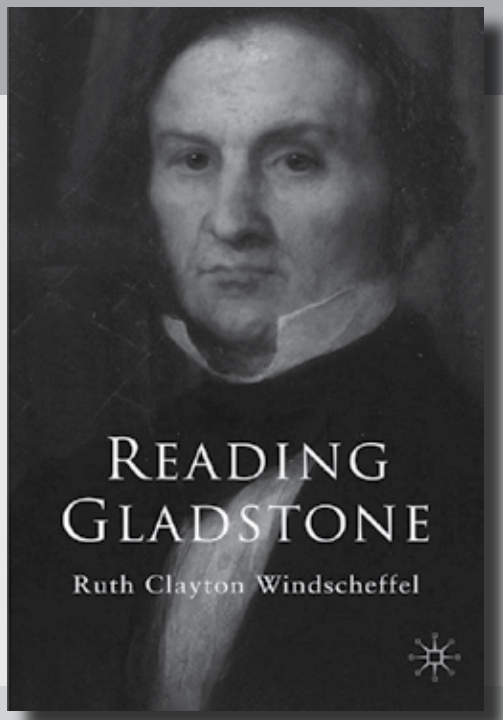
THE GRAND Old Man (GOM) has inspired so many biographies and monographs that writing something new about him is – one would be justified in believing – pretty hard. Yet, Dr Windscheffel deserves to be congratulated on producing one of the most original and thought-provoking books to have appeared on this subject since Colin Matthew’s 1998 masterly biography. Her strategy is simple: ‘read’ the man through the books he read. Such method would not necessarily work with politicians who were less intellectual than ‘Mr G.’ – although the reading habits of, let us say, Thatcher or Major might yield enough materials for interesting *short* articles. By contrast, in Gladstone’s case there is an embarrassment of

riches, and even this substantial monograph does not fully exhaust the subject (indeed, Windscheffel herself has recently produced a further important paper on a related topic, which she delivered at the Chester Bicentenary Conference in July 2009).

According to the entries in his diary, by the time he died in 1898, Gladstone had read about 20,000 volumes, written by over 4,500 different authors. His personal library included 30,000 titles, many containing his annotations and comments (which were often refreshingly frank, such as ‘A “rollicking”[.] impudent, mendacious book’ in William Cobbett’s *Protestant Reformation*). The questions on which *Reading Gladstone* focuses are partly biographical (‘What



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## Reading Gladstone

by Ruth Clayton Windscheffel

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Hardback | ~~£55.00~~ £27.50 | 978-0-230-00765-9

'Reading Gladstone is a sophisticated study, written in a remarkably mature and accessible style...Windscheffel is not only good at reading Gladstone: she also has much to tell us about the Victorian Age and its Church.'

- Professor Wheeler, *The Church Times*

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Windscheffel covers the whole span of Gladstone's career as a bibliophile, from his earliest steps in book-buying as a child to his endowing and building of St Deiniol's Library at Hawarden (in North Wales) at the end of his life. St Deiniol's became a centre for theological and historical studies, Anglican in spirit but open to all. It was perhaps the first 'residential library' in the country and became a model for other similar establishments which were founded in the twentieth century, such as the Ancient India and Iran Trust at Cambridge.

St Deiniol's replicated some of the features, and certainly the spirit, of Gladstone's own 'Temple of Peace', his study at Hawarden Castle. The latter was designed and conceived as a space of intense academic and intellectual engagement, and in this respect contrasted sharply with the spirit and function of the conventional 'gentleman's library', where books would not necessarily be used, but rather displayed 'as a matter of form' (as Gladstone lamented (p. 148)). His being so much out of step with convention was at first a political disadvantage: at the time 'gentlemen', and especially politicians, were expected to be faintly anti-intellectual and actively 'practical' in their approach to the public sphere, and Gladstone's scholarly relationship with his library seemed more appropriate to a 'monk' than a statesman. In fact, it attracted embarrassing comments on his masculinity. In a fascinating section of her book, Windscheffel studies how Gladstone responded to such characterisations, especially in the aftermath of the 1846 Conservative Party split over the Repeal of the Corn Laws, when cartoonists contrasted his 'intellectual' and 'feminine' attitude to the crisis with the pragmatic and 'masculine' motives displayed by his colleagues. Over the 1850s and 1860s he

**She has produced a perceptive, sympathetic and brilliant reconstruction of an intimately and yet publicly important dimension of the personality and career of one of the greatest Liberal leaders of all times.**

managed to recast his own public image and, indirectly, the standards by which statesmen should be judged. First, he asserted himself as the 'scholar-politician', the Chancellor of the Exchequer characterised by an undisputed mastery of Treasury facts and figures. In order to cultivate such an image he encouraged the portrayal, in photographs and watercolours, of himself at work surrounded by books, whether in Downing Street or at Hawarden. Thus '[h]is library was represented as a place of useful work rather than as a symbol of privilege or a scholar's ivory tower. The "Grand Old Bookman" was continuing the work of popular liberalism albeit from inside a Castle library' (p. 234). This strategy of turning his alleged clerical shortcomings to his political advantage was further developed in later years; by the late 1870s 'the People's William' emerged as the semi-revivalist statesman. He confused the critics of his monk-like habits by developing what John Vincent described as a 'semi-Episcopal' approach to leadership, and asserted his moral entitlement

to the 'pastoral' care of his flock, including a 'magisterial' approach to their instruction for the purpose of leading them along a narrow path, through fiscal responsibility and political liberalism, to a fuller sense of citizenship and humanity.

Windscheffel's central argument is that '[r]eading was for Gladstone not merely a matter of hermeneutics – the interior art of interpretation – it was significantly also the springboard for his exegesis – or expository discourse – to others' (p. 236). In this superbly researched book she has fully established her case. In the process she has produced a perceptive, sympathetic and brilliant reconstruction of an intimately and yet publicly important dimension of the personality and career of one of the greatest Liberal leaders of all times.

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## A neglected party

David Dutton, *Liberals in Schism – A History of the National Liberal Party* (Tauris Academic Studies, 2008).

Reviewed by **Malcolm Baines**

**F**OLLOWING THE publication of *A History of the Liberal Party* in 2004, Professor David Dutton of Liverpool University has now turned his attention in this new publication to the party's neglected ugly sister. In doing this, he has shed a perceptive and sympathetic light on the Liberal Nationals (after 1945, the National Liberals) who broke away from the

Liberal Party in 1931 over the extent to which the National Government could abandon the traditional Liberal support for international free trade to deal with the economic and fiscal crisis that marked the onset of the Great Depression.

The Liberal Nationals have been written out of the history of liberalism in the twentieth century. Indeed, many Liberals