

legacy.’ Attacking the question whether Peel’s reforms as Home Secretary, especially the establishment of the Metropolitan Police, were signs of his liberalism and humanitarianism, Gaunt for example discusses the interpretations of several historians and concludes that none of them is completely compelling. Yet he does not take up a position of his own. If Hilton is wrong in assuming Peel to have been motivated by an evangelical belief in the natural harmony of every political order, what then was Peel’s motivation? Gaunt does not say. Indeed, there is no ‘reinterpretation’ in this book, and the reader must wonder why the author did not make a stab at a close reading of Peel’s speeches and letters as the only way to understand his ‘attitudes to what he was doing’.

Gaunt thus missed a good chance to draw a little bit nearer to the thought of this important but somehow enigmatic politician. A close reading of Peel’s writings could have led him to underline even further that all existing interpretations are flawed in one way or another. On the one hand, Norman Gash was right to criticise Hilton for ascribing ideas to Peel that were essentially his own and not Peel’s: this non-ideological statesman, who used the word prudence in his letters nearly as often as Edmund Burke had, was not a dogmatic economic liberal driven by evangelicalism. On the other hand, where Hilton overstates the role of ideas, Gash has too little use for them. That Peel was marked by moderation and prudence does not necessarily mean that he was merely a Conservative in the party sense. It is difficult to assess Peel in terms of this party label. Looking at Peel with continental eyes, I daresay that he was the quintessential model of the fusion of liberalism and conservatism that the French and Germans think to be typical of nineteenth-century Britain. For a better understanding of Peel and his actions, therefore, we should resort instead to the history of ideas in a broad sense rather than to party history. Like Canning, Peel was a nineteenth-century successor to the ‘Old Whig’ tradition, a politician in the wake of Burke and Robert Walpole.

But this is a perspective Gaunt is not interested in. By the end,

**‘He was the father of modern Conservatism and of modern Liberalism. He was too great for one party.’ Peel was a kind of conservative liberal or, to be more exact, a liberal with a conservative disposition.**

he gives the impression that all attempts to classify Peel within a longer tradition are in vain: ‘To designate him a false “Tory”, a renegade “Conservative”, a “Liberal Tory”, a “Liberal Conservative” or a proto-Gladstonian Liberal, is to play, semantically, with the career of a shrewd, ambitious and complex political operator and try and give it helpful characterisation within a sometimes limited political vocabulary.’ Nevertheless, more than one hundred years ago, the writer and Liberal MP Herbert Woodfield Paul showed in *Men and Letters* that it is indeed possible to characterise Peel in a balanced but significant

manner: ‘He was the father of modern Conservatism and of modern Liberalism. He was too great for one party.’ Peel was a kind of conservative liberal or, to be more exact, a liberal with a conservative disposition in the Oakeshotian sense. And though he founded a party as an instrument for his ambition, he never was a confirmed party man.

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## Son of the Grand Old Man

Ros Aitken, *The Prime Minister’s Son: Stephen Gladstone, Rector of Hawarden* (University of Chester Press, 2012)

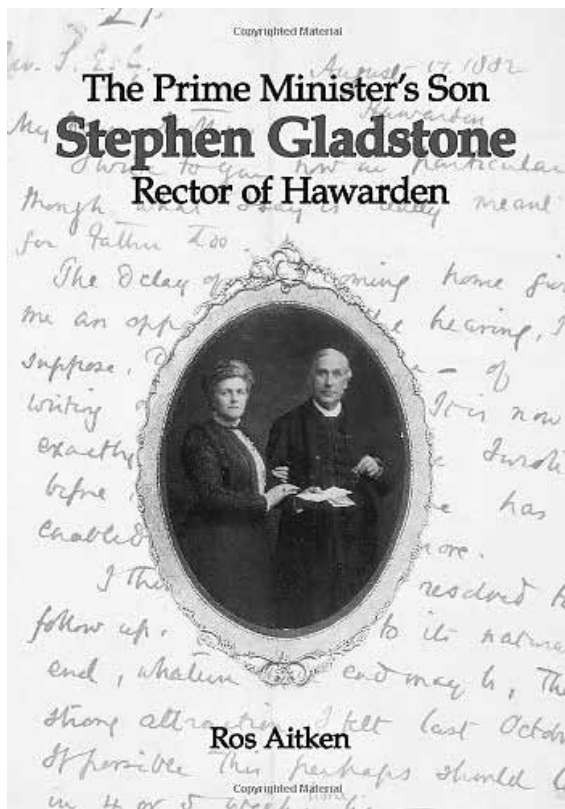
Reviewed by **Ian Cawood**

**T**HE SONS OF prime ministers are almost fated to endure lives of disappointment and relative failure. David Lloyd George’s son, Gwilym, went on to be the most forgettable Home Secretary of the post-war years, while Winston Churchill’s shadow managed to eclipse the careers of both his son and grandson. Of all eminent Liberal families, only the step-brothers Austen and Neville Chamberlain exceeded their father, Joseph, in the seniority of their appointments, but even their careers ended in ignominy, with Austen one of the few Conservative leaders never to become prime minister and Neville one of the few who ought never to have been allowed to do so. William Gladstone, at first glance, seems a relatively benign political parent in comparison, as his youngest son, Herbert, was apprenticed as private secretary to his father before going on to be a highly influential chief whip, a moderately successful Home Secretary and the first governor general of the new Union of South Africa. An enthusiastic supporter of the superb Gladstone’s Library in Hawarden, Ros Aitken, has, however, revealed a much less complimentary side to Gladstone,

the family man, in her biography of Stephen Gladstone, the G.O.M.’s second and eldest surviving son.

Ros Aitken is a model of the highly experienced history teacher who has never let the renowned snobbery of British academics dissuade her from engaging with serious archival research. Not for her, arcane and jargon-ridden musings on such sophistry as the ‘otherness’ of Stephen’s familial identity; instead she painstakingly describes all of Stephen’s long life in a well-researched and nuanced picture of aristocratic life of the nineteenth century. Superb pen-portraits of the academic failings of the public school system, the residual popular anti-popey that blighted the careers of high churchmen such as Stephen and the sacrosanct importance of letter writing, create a micro-study of upper-class Victorian attitudes, behaviours and preoccupations.

Stephen emerges as a rather tragic character, full of doubt as to his role as a domestic clergyman, constantly pushed into preferments beyond his capabilities, largely as his father had always wanted to take holy orders and, like so many frustrated parents, he vicariously overcame his disappointments



through his children. Gladstone seems to have wanted to control his children and keep them close to him, a trait that seemed to intensify, once he himself lost control of his own party in 1886. That event was largely caused by his appalling mishandling of his Liberal colleagues and he seems to have taken the feelings of his own family for granted, in much the same way. One has to admire his daughter, Helen, who escaped to Cambridge to become vice-principal of Newnham College for nineteen years and who was only dragged back to Hawarden to nurse her ageing parents after William's retirement.

Inevitably, given the author's scrupulous concern for the use of primary sources to support all her assertions, there are frustrations. The question of Stephen's eyesight (he was blind in one eye and suffered restricted vision in the other) is given much attention in the first chapter, but seems to vanish once Stephen goes up to Oxford. Some minor issues, such as Stephen's thwarted plan to move away from his father's ambit in 1893, are explored in rather laborious detail with precious little contextualising, as the defeat of Gladstone's second Home Rule Bill in the same year must surely have been responsible for distracting the prime minister

from this comparatively minor question. By contrast, there is far too little analysis of Stephen's reaction to William's famously ambiguous and posthumous confession to Stephen that he had never 'been guilty of the act which is known as that of infidelity to the marriage bed.' Nor is it made clear enough that this 'declaration' was only opened in 1900, two years after the retired statesman's death, so that John Morley could use it in the authorised biography of Gladstone (Morley wisely chose to steer clear of the whole matter).

Perhaps the text also hurries to a finish somewhat, with the last ten years of Stephen's life condensed into a mere fifteen pages. In this way, Aitken perhaps unwittingly confirms that his importance *had* lessened once his father had died. However, as these years included the First World War in which Stephen's second son, Charlie, was held in a German P.O.W. camp for three and a half years, and his youngest son, Willie, was killed in the British army's successful advance in autumn 1918, it is a pity that more time and reflection could not have been spent in reviewing the impact of the global cataclysm on those hitherto protected from the harshness of everyday life such as Stephen Gladstone.

Ultimately, this is a very well-written and insightful portrait of a minor figure in the orbit of one of the most remarkable men of the Victorian age. Stephen emerges as something of an irritating millenquetoast, nagging at his father, yet unable to act independently, and his treatment of his wife Annie reflects poorly on his character, idolising her in his courtship, yet failing to defend her against the monumental busybody that was his mother, Catherine, once they were married. Remarkably, considering the unabated flow of scholarship on the four-time prime minister, Aitken's biography provides Liberal scholars with a completely original perspective on Gladstone; one which, in this reviewer's eyes at least, seems substantially to confirm Clement Attlee's judgement of William Gladstone as a 'frightful old prig', but which ameliorates it by revealing that Gladstone had, after all, spent his life in the company of prigs.

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## Art at the National Liberal Club

Michael Meadowcroft, *A Guide to the Works of Art of the National Liberal Club, London* (National Liberal Club, 2012)

Reviewed by **Eugenio F. Biagini**

**T**HE ART COLLECTION at the National Liberal Club (NLC) is a great source of pride for its members and a delight for the visitor. This *Guide* is a gift to both, and indeed to anyone interested in the history of British Liberalism. It is lavishly illustrated and well supported by detailed descriptions of the works displayed, with short biographies of the subjects and of the artists who portrayed them.

Since its foundation in 1882, the Club acquired a substantial number of busts, monuments and paintings,

including works by leading British and Irish artists such as Jack B. Yeats and William Orpen. Given the 'pro-Europe' tradition of the party, it is not inappropriate that for over thirty years the person in charge of new acquisitions and the conservation of the existing works was a Dutch citizen, J. E. A. Reyneke van Stuwe (1876–1962), who joined the Club in 1908. The author of this book, Michael Meadowcroft, a former adviser to emerging democracies as well as a Liberal MP for Leeds West, is himself an example of such an internationalist