‘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.

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

The 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 painstaking 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-papery 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.
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 mille-quettoast, 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.


Art at the National Liberal Club

Reviewed by Eugenio F. Biagini

The 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