

Gladstone dominated both the Liberal Party and Ireland in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Alan O'Day analyses his legacy.

Gladstone and Ireland: the Legacy

Gladstone I could listen to and look at for ever, and even in his Coercion days he had the utmost fascination for me. The lion-like head, the flashing eyes, the mobile mouth, the variety and grace of gestures that involved his whole body, the mutability of his voice, now fire, now silk, now honey, now gall, the perfect clearness of even his whispered accents, the perverse style that often, to quote his great rival, 'intoxicated him with the exuberance of his own verbosity' and led him into endless parentheses from which he extricated himself with apparent ease, and his final peroration that left his audience spell-bound, so that there was an appreciable interval between the end of his speech and the tempest of applause, that followed from friend and enemy. [Francis Fahey, c. 1891]¹

Division of Ireland into Protestants and Catholics, Nationalists and Unionists would die out under home rule, thus producing a state of amity between Ireland and Britain. [*Manchester Guardian*, 1912]

Gladstone, as Roy Jenkins observes, 'for the first fifty-eight years of his life had applied himself very sparingly to Hibernian problems'. However, from 1868, 'my mission is to pacify Ireland', he said though it was an aim that even his fondest admirers would not claim was fulfilled. More accurate was his profession that he was 'as fast bound to Ireland as Ulysses was to his mast'.² Perhaps W.C. Sellar and R.J. Yeatman's legendary *1066 and All That* most successfully encapsulates the problem: Gladstone 'spent his declining years trying to guess the answer to the Irish Question; unfortunately whenever he was getting warm, the Irish secretly changed the Question'. In 1868 Gladstone began the Hibernian enterprise that occupied so much of his remaining political career.

Gladstone's mast was erected in 1868 and it did not finally come down until he retired in March

1894. Generations of students and teachers equally have been dedicated to the task of explaining why Gladstone chose to champion the cause of Ireland's Catholics and what effect his various schemes had. No doubt Irish difficulties were sufficiently immense to warrant a good deal of attention but Gladstone's obsession with Ireland fully warrants the close analysis it receives.

Gladstone's Irish reforms are imposing in number. During his first Ministry (1868–74) he was chiefly responsible for the Irish Church Act, disestablishing the [Episcopal] Church of Ireland. This legislation removed the state from the realm of religion in Ireland by also ending subsidies for Catholic and Presbyterian theological training. Less successfully, he grappled with the treacherous land question in the Land Act of 1870; still less happily Gladstone responded to the demand of the Catholic Church for a state-funded university under its control in his abortive Irish University bill in 1873. On this last he was deserted by the Catholic Hierarchy and many Irish MPs in the House of Commons. Gladstone released many of the imprisoned Fenians with the intent 'to draw a line between the Fenians & the people of Ireland, & to make the people of Ireland indisposed to cross it'.³ His very exacting efforts were dogged by the opposition of Conservatives and a section of his own party, but excepting the instance of the University bill, Gladstone enjoyed the support of Irish Liberals, the Catholic Church and the nascent Home Rule movement. Following the electoral defeat in 1874 Gladstone resigned the leadership of the Liberal party and threw himself into writing tracts against the Vatican decrees of the Catholic Church. Nevertheless, despite the ill-feeling his writing engendered among Irish Catholics, he remained for them the most revered English politician. Francis Fahy's idealisation cited above is but

one of innumerable tributes to the fascination he exercised on Irish Catholics. In 1877 Gladstone made his only substantial visit to Ireland (he returned to Dublin briefly in 1880), receiving the Freedom of Dublin as a mark of respect for his Irish labours.

Gladstone's second government extending from 1880–85 was, if anything, even more immersed in Irish problems and he had to pursue these with less reliable support from Irishmen than he had during the first Ministry. He attempted to mitigate the growing land agitation across the Irish Sea in 1880 with the Compensation for Disturbances bill, a measure defeated in the House of Lords. The following year he piloted the Land Act of 1881, generally regarded as a seminal piece of legislation and secured a further land act in 1882 as part of the bargain known as the Kilmainham Treaty, described in more detail by Ian Machin in his article which follows. In 1883 the Liberals passed the Agricultural Labourers' Act, legislation close to the heart of the Irish party. In 1885 he was part of the Cabinet minority who wanted to implement more extended local government in Ireland. Other legislation, though not directed exclusively at Ireland, had enormous effects there. The Corrupt and Illegal Practices Act of 1883 along with the Franchise and Redistribution Acts of 1884 and 1885 are such instances.

Most famously, he became Prime Minister for a third time in February 1886 in order 'to examine whether it is or is not practicable to comply with the desire...for the establishment...of a legislative body, to sit in Dublin, and to deal with Irish as distinguished from imperial affairs'.⁴ His answer was in the affirmative; Gladstone's plan was encapsulated in the Government of Ireland bill which he introduced on 8 April in speech lasting three hours and twenty-five minutes that held the House of Commons spellbound throughout. Now often seen as a limited half-way house, it was a bill which the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir William Harcourt, when he first saw it in draft, thought qualified Gladstone as a 'criminal lunatic'.⁵ Few on any side saw his scheme as anything less than a bold stroke for good or ill, a point sometimes

lost in the modern literature. He promoted home rule at the cost of splitting his parliamentary ranks and party. Though the bill was defeated and the Liberals lost heavily in the general election of 1886, it provided the basis of the bills of 1893 and 1912. His influence was to be evident up to and beyond 1921. In what must be one of the great ironies of Anglo-Irish history, Gladstone's reasoning about the distinctive character of Ireland and the necessity of founding institutions to reflect this reality was assumed by Andrew Bonar Law, Austen Chamberlain and Walter Long between 1919 and 1921 when they, along with Lloyd George, were midwives to post-1921 Ireland.⁶

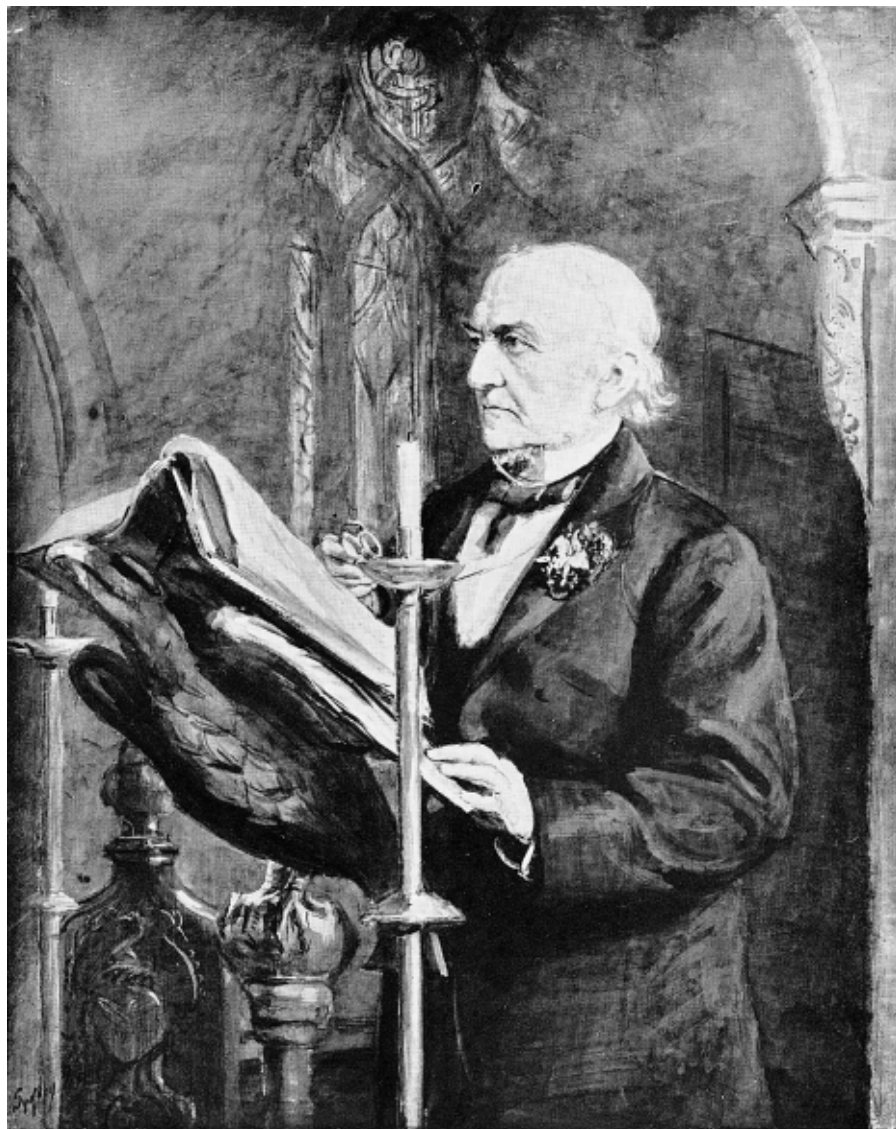
Defeated and with the Liberals out of office for perhaps as long as seven years, Gladstone might have gone into an honourable retirement. Following the election the Tory front bench, W. H. Smith, thought: 'the G. O. M. seems to me to have become something very like a dangerous lunatic. Of him probably there is an end'.⁷ This, like so much about Gladstone, proved a false prophecy. In spite of advanced age he stayed bound to the Irish mast. Had Gladstone retired in 1886, it is entirely probable that his party would have moderated its Home Rule commitment. Most of his important colleagues held reservations about the project. A rising young Liberal, Richard Haldane, remarked in the late 1880s that while it was legitimate for Gladstone to 'regard the establishment of a Parliament in Dublin as the be-all and end-all of Liberal policy', it was also the case that 'his colleagues are hardly justified in adopting substantially the same course'.⁸ The violence engendered by the Plan of Campaign in Ireland, the infamous allegations by *The Times* of Parnellite complicity in crime took a heavy toll on many Liberals' faith in their Irish commitment, yet none of these things deterred Gladstone. During the crisis over the Parnell divorce Gladstone played an instrumental role, having perhaps the single greatest impact on Parnell's fall by insisting that if Parnell remained at the head of the Irish party his own leadership of the Liberals would be 'almost a nullity'.⁹ In the crunch the majority of Irish party MPs and the preponderance of Ireland's Catholics opted for Gladstone.

In many ways the most demanding part of Gladstone's commitment still lay ahead in his final period of office from 1892 to March 1894. Following an electoral outcome that would have warranted postponing a Home Rule bill, Gladstone soldiered on. He gave notice to the friends and opponents of Home Rule alike that 'the question of Ireland is almost, if not altogether, my sole link with public life'.¹⁰ He did not ignore the threat posed by the House of Lords to home rule, warning later in the same speech that if the Peers acted against the will of the House of Commons over Home Rule, it is 'impossible for such a [Liberal] government to regard the rejection of such a bill as terminating its duty'. His introduction of the second home rule bill on 13 February 1893 lasted two and a quarter hours and, according to Henry Lucy the doyen of lobby journalists, 'the explanation of the intricate measure was a model of lucidity; the opening passages of the speech soared on lofty heights of eloquence; the stately peroration that closed it will take rank with its most famous predecessors'.¹¹ The parliamentary struggle in 1886 was short and sharp, but in 1893 it dragged on for months. After the Easter recess Lucy observed, 'both sides mean business, the business of the opposition being obstruction'.¹² He could not 'call to mind any epoch of obstruction exceeding in deliberation and pertinacity that which clogged the wheels of Parliament during the past eight weeks'. The bill finally passed in the House of Commons on 2 September. Individual divisions on clauses often had turnouts numbering more than 600. The physical endurance required was enormous. Throughout the episode Gladstone remained tied to his Irish mast. After what can only be called a Herculean effort, Gladstone himself was prepared to revive the bill in the next session of the House of Commons. His colleagues resisted. A few months later in March 1894 he laid down his burden and no further home rule bill came before the House of Commons until 1912.

By any measure Gladstone's input into Irish affairs up to his final days was huge. Paradoxically, the effort was not commensurate with the results. Of his

several exclusively major Irish proposals, only the Irish Church Act [1869] can be counted an unambiguous success. Over the years 1885 to 1905 Conservatives and Unionists not only passed more legislation for Ireland than he but their acts had immeasurably larger long-term beneficial consequences. It was they who turned Irish tenants into owner occupiers, it was they who dealt with the democratisation of Irish local institutions and it was they who came closest to grappling with the religious dimension of Irish education. Gladstone's land acts may have undermined the sanctity of property rights and set other important precedents but he was never more than luke-warm about tenant proprietorship, an issue to which he responded pragmatically as in 1886 rather than from high principle. F.S.L. Lyons suggests that the Act of 1881 may have delayed the final solution though he also praises Gladstone's intent.¹³ It is certainly the case that the Act, particularly the creation of land courts which set rentals for 15 years, was the unwitting progenitor for the second phase of the land war, the Plan of Campaign which began in 1886.

The two home rule bills may have set back other more pertinent Irish reforms without advancing self-government. Moreover, the bills of 1886 and 1893 had a major and not always helpful effect on the bill of 1912. As George Boyce points out, not until 1920 was a home rule bill skilfully drafted and that came from the hands of Unionist politicians.¹⁴ Gladstone's adoption of home rule, as Lyons notes, exacerbated polarisation of communities in Ireland, pushing, for instance, Presbyterian radicals 'into a unionism which always went somewhat against the grain'.¹⁵ Nor can it be overlooked that Gladstone, albeit reluctantly, implemented coercion in the 1870s and again twice did so in the first half of the 1880s. Though he initiated the release of Fenian prisoners, he was no soft-hearted sentimentalist where rebels were concerned. He treated the military prisoners, Fenians in the British army, without remorse and it was Benjamin Disraeli [the Earl of Beaconsfield]'s government which set the last of these men free. None of these observations is original;



none seriously impairs Gladstone's repute as Ireland's benefactor.

In spite of a lengthy catalogue of Unionist measures and some reservations about what Gladstone actually did in Irish affairs, we are unlikely to be witness to historical revisionism placing any single Conservative or collective of Tories and Unionists on a plane with Gladstone. His esteem in nationalist Ireland is not owed to his accomplishments in a strict sense, does not even hinge on his intentions, but rests on the intangible element of his generosity of spirit. What gives him a unique place in Irish historical memory may be best described by that overworked word, charisma. These same qualities give Gladstone his central place in the history of the Liberal Party and British liberal tradition. He exemplified the spirit that must always animate greatness in the public sphere, nobility of purpose, not just the initiation of con-

crete legislation or remedying grievances. Gladstone possessed the now unfashionable commitment to high ideals and his English and Irish followers responded to his uplifting purpose. He possessed a charisma for nationalists that in the years between Daniel O'Connell's death in 1847 and the Easter Rising of 1916 was second to none excepting perhaps Parnell's - and even the great Irish Chief himself could not match Gladstone's appeal when put to the acid test.

Within the context, the years of the first administration (1868-74) have a special pertinence. In general this period has received less attention than the later years. But it was then that the lines Gladstone subsequently pursued were laid down.

The Church Act in his eyes was never just about appeasing the sensitivi-

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commonly seen as a form of extremism. Yet he unashamedly conducted a service over the grave of Henry Joy McCracken and traditional unionists did not invite him to the Remembrance Day ceremonies in Newtownards even though he was the only ex-serviceman among the ministers of the town.

As the Troubles grew worse, McElroy's task became immensely harder and it began to tell on his health. Yet there can be no doubt that some of the constitutional proposals that he and his Liberal colleagues submitted were to influence the Heath government's plans for what eventually became the ill-fated Sunningdale Agreement.

The failure of the first power-sharing assembly had a very negative effect. Gradually the Ulster Liberal Association began to disintegrate. Some members, as Denis Loretto describes elsewhere in this issue,

became founding members of the SDLP. Others formed the nucleus of the Alliance Party. Yet Albert, like Sheelagh Murnaghan, never thought of joining them and there is no doubt that before his death at the early age of sixty in 1975, he was saddened by the London party's embracing of Alliance as the province's true Liberals. He saw the weakness of Alliance in what he said was its glib assumption that the majority of Northern Ireland people were moderates, and argued with great foresight that only 15 per cent of Ulster people would ever vote for a party that deliberately set out to be 'moderates'. For him Alliance members were not Liberals but 'decent Tories' who would be more use in the Unionist Party. At the same time, he said, 'civilised Tories (were) to be preferred to Tory Rednecks' among whom, no doubt, he included all those who supported Paisley. Certainly McElroy,

though always full of Christian charity, was never a moderate. He was always willing to tackle the ultra-Protestants who had given the IRA their chance and were determined to oppose all civilised measures of reform.

But he remained to the end a colourful figure, the same old Albert who had sipped a small mouthful of champagne at Sheelagh Murnaghan's victory party but had then insisted on buying fish and chips all round as his own contribution to the celebrations. No wonder figures as wide-ranging as Cardinal Conway and the maverick Unionist MP Jim Kilfedder were to send tributes to the funeral of this humane and liberal man

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ties of Ireland's Catholics, it addressed the far greater need to make the Union a reality, to show the peoples of the nation that they could successfully seek remedies from Parliament, and that the modern British state was able to incorporate differing religions, ethnicities and personal aspirations. It was fundamentally the same message Gladstone introduced more generally into Liberalism. His opponents were less confident that the nation could or even ought to make the leap to inclusiveness.

The Land Act [1870] likewise was something bigger in design than simply giving Irish tenants improved legal status. It did not have the practical outcome anticipated, especially by Irish tenant interest, but the measure, as Gladstone intended, increased the sense that all members of the community held rights and privileges, and so that ownership of wealth also carried responsibility.

Again in 1881 Gladstone approached the Irish land question not from a socially radical point of view, but saw legislation as the means to restore the interconnection between members of the community, a link that appeared to him to have been damaged. By releasing

Fenian prisoners Gladstone displayed mercy but more significantly, he sought to establish the principle that the state was sufficiently strong to be able to weather the torrent of discontent manifested in the Fenian movement, and come out the other end of the tunnel stronger than before. A strong commitment was also a just one.

Finally, Gladstone tried to resolve the thorny question of higher education for the rising Catholic middle classes. As always he had to work within political parameters but again he upheld a principle that in a modern society access to education should be extended more fully to groups previously on the margins.

His later governments amplified and extended the principles of the first years but they always owed a debt to this initial phase of Gladstone's Irish interest. But above all, it is the legacy of Gladstone's spirit that has continued to animate centre-left thinking in Britain on Irish affairs.

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researching the Irish National Party, nationalism and the dilemma of political representation between 1874 and 1921.

- 1 I owe this reference to Dr Clare Hutton, Institute of English Studies, University of London, who has edited Fahy's memoir.
- 2 Quoted in E. D. Steele, 'Gladstone and Ireland', *Irish Historical Studies*, XVII, March, 1970, p. 58.
- 3 H.C.G. Matthew, *Gladstone 1809–1874*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986, p. 192.
- 4 Quoted in John Morley, *The Life of William Ewart Gladstone*. London, Macmillan, 1903, Vol. III, p. 292.
- 5 Lewis Harcourt's Journal, 8 March 1886, Harcourt Papers, Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS 377.
- 6 Alan O'Day, *Irish Home Rule 1867–1921*. Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1998, pp. 294–304.
- 7 Quoted in A.B. Cooke and A.P.W. Malcolmson (compl.), *The Ashbourne Papers, 1869–1918*. Belfast, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, 1974, p. 174.
- 8 Quoted in H.C.G. Matthew, *The Liberal Imperialists*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1973, p. 266.
- 9 Quoted in Morley, *Life of Gladstone*, III, p. 437.
- 10 *Parliamentary Debates*, Fourth Series, 7, 1892, cc. 210–14.
- 11 Henry W. Lucy, *A Diary of the Home Rule Parliament 1892–1895*. London, Cassell, 1896, p. 55.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 93.
- 13 Lyons, *Ireland since the Famine*, p. 172.
- 14 D. George Boyce, *The Irish Question and British Politics 1869–1986*. London and Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1989, p. 62.
- 15 F.S.L. Lyons, *Culture and Anarchy in Ireland 1890–1939*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1979, p. 135.