

quest for position, the most usual accusation; all the evidence points in another direction. Rather, these were the actions of a leader who knew he didn't have much more time at the top, and who also knew that, the rhythms of politics being what they are, if this was ever going to happen, it would have to happen quickly. The window was always about to close and, after this brief period, it duly did.

Still, we can certainly see why – after eleven years of leading his

party at Westminster – Ashdown was ideally prepared for the even more interesting job of presiding over the squabbling factions of Bosnia-Herzegovina.

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'The world is different because she lived'

Jane Jordan: *Josephine Butler* (John Murray, 2001)

Reviewed by **Paddy Beck**

Why did I previously know so little about this woman and her achievements? I asked myself as I read this book. The gaps in my knowledge have certainly been filled in by Dr Jane Jordan in this extremely interesting and informative biography of Josephine Butler – a woman described by Millicent Fawcett, founder of the Fawcett Society, as 'the most distinguished woman of the nineteenth century'.

Josephine Butler was born Josephine Grey, in Northumberland 1828, into a large family with strong Whig, Liberal and Methodist connections. Earl Grey (Prime Minister 1831–34) was her cousin. Her father, John Grey, was both a Liberal activist and a political confidant of Earl Grey until he had to abstain from active politics when appointed the manager of Greenwich Hospital Estates, Northumberland, in 1833. Jane Jordan recounts some delightful family anecdotes about the Grey family's continuing Liberal allegiance – her younger sister, Hatty, when asked her name used to add that she was 'a good fig' (a good Whig). Her

mother came from a Methodist and Moravian Brethren background, and ensured that all her children received a good education incorporating a strong moral sense that recognised and abhorred injustice. The family were deeply religious and, although Josephine continued to attend an Anglican church, she considered herself a Wesleyan both by upbringing and by inclination. In 1847 Josephine visited Ireland. What she saw there was to haunt her for the rest of her life although she suppressed this publicly for another forty years.

In 1852 Josephine married George Butler, Public Examiner in the Schools at Oxford University. From the outset of their courtship George made clear his concept of marriage as 'a perfectly equal union, with absolute freedom on both sides for personal initiative in thought and action and for individual development' and this he maintained throughout the following thirty-seven years. From the start, he and Josephine studied together and continually discussed the issues of the day. Josephine's nascent 'feminism' is apparent from the

birth of their first child at the end of 1852. She refused to have a physician present in part as a 'protest against wicked customs' that denied professional status to female midwives.

Perhaps it was this background that is the clue to answering the fascinating question of what made Josephine – from the privileged upper middle class, deeply religious, modest in manner, delicate in health – take on the establishment of the day on behalf of 'fallen women'. What courage it must have taken for a woman who initially felt unable even to voice the word prostitution to stand up in public to describe and denounce the degrading treatment enforced by the Contagious Diseases Acts on working-class women who could not prove their virtue.

Josephine had been helping prostitutes, whom she called 'outcasts', and engaging with European women about the iniquities of the regulated prostitution system on the continent when the three Contagious Diseases Acts were passed between 1864 and 1869. These Acts covered eighteen British towns that had nearby army camps or naval ports. They were partly modelled on the European system of regulated prostitution and were designed to control the spread of sexually transmitted disease. Women believed to be prostitutes were not only forced to register as such but were subjected to fortnightly internal examination to ensure they were disease free. If women were found to be diseased, they were detained in 'lock' hospitals for up to nine months. The purpose of the Acts was in part – to quote Austin Bruce, Liberal Home Secretary in 1872 – to allow men to 'sin with impunity'.

Perhaps the most harrowing part of this book is the description of what these Acts meant in practice. Women could be labelled prostitutes on the word of policemen or magistrates with no further proof required. They were forced to undergo

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REVIEWS

examination even when pregnant or just after childbirth. If they refused examination they were imprisoned in conditions even worse than the dreaded 'lock' hospitals. Many of the women were illiterate – putting their cross on forms they did not understand and which had not been explained. Consequently Josephine campaigned more against the violation of individual rights than on the basis of any medical violation. First she published a book called *The Constitution Violated*. Then she concentrated on getting the Acts repealed: this meant tackling parliament.

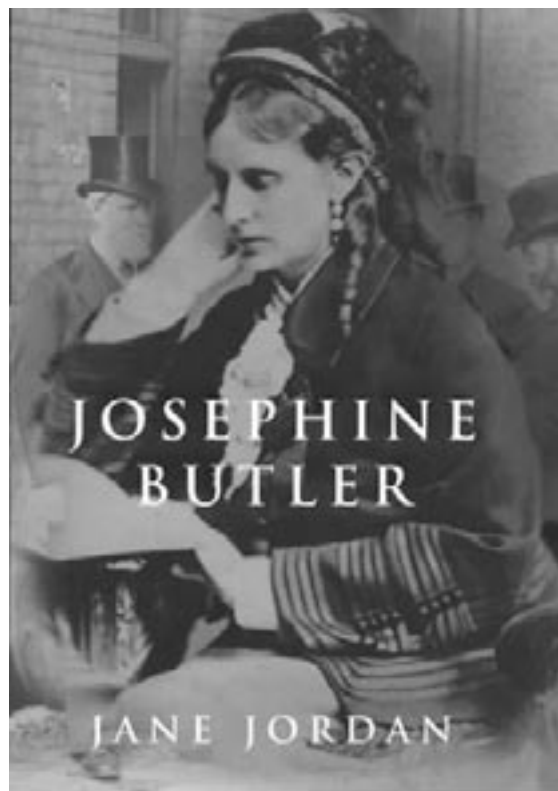
From birth Josephine's natural allies were the Liberals. She continued to have close links with many Liberal families especially when the Ladies National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts (the LNA) was formed in 1869. The four Priestman sisters, Quakers, were among her closest allies. One, Elizabeth, was married to John Bright MP and their daughter Helen Bright Clark was to become a leading figure in the LNA. The Radical MP for Halifax, James Stansfield, was to sacrifice a promising political career through his unwavering support of Josephine and the LNA. However some of the contradictions within the Liberal Party and its ambivalence towards women's issues – particularly its attitude to women's suffrage – first became evident through the fight over the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts. A rival Liberal candidate and supporter of repeal, Dr Langley, was put up to oppose a Liberal arch-supporter of the Acts, Sir Henry Storks, at the Colchester by-election in 1870. Josephine and the ladies of the LNA campaigned vigorously against Storks. This split in Liberal ranks resulted in a Conservative victory. The tactic was to be used frequently during the fight over woman's suffrage.

Another issue that greatly disturbed Josephine was the low age

of consent in Britain – twelve years old. This she regarded not only as abhorrent but as leading directly to the trafficking to mainland Europe of large numbers of girls we would now regard as children. Josephine was pan-European. Not only did she have extensive family links around the continent but she founded a European federation of societies dedicated to abolishing the state regulation of prostitution. Jane Jordan covers Josephine's travels and both the successes and tribulations she and her European federation encountered. But she does not mention that the federation still exists under the name 'International Abolitionist Federation' based in Copenhagen. This organisation continues to campaign for the abolition of the state regulation of prostitution – rather than the abolition of prostitution per se, as many think – and for equity of treatment to both sexes. Neither does she mention that there is still an active Josephine Butler Society that is a direct descendent of her campaigning groups, and which continues to fight for much the same causes.

Dr Jordan provides many insights into Josephine's character. Passionate, independent and very strong willed in public, Josephine's doubts, religious turmoil and often despair were not generally known outside her closest confidantes and her husband. Her ardent speeches, often to working men, were renowned. 'Two pence, gentlemen, is the price in England of a poor woman's honour. Under the Contagious Diseases Acts these girls are no longer women but only bits of numbered, inspected and ticketed human flesh flung by Government into the public market.'

That Josephine was fully supported by her husband George, an ordained clergyman and headmaster of Liverpool College, is perhaps as astonishing as Josephine's own career. Jane Jordan is careful to delineate George's ungrudging support and to insist



that Josephine's writing clearly shows that she put her role as wife and mother above that of a political activist. However, on the evidence of this book, I am not sure that I agree this was always the case – particularly not in the last few years of George's life. Certainly their eldest son, also George, would have contested Jordan's view – as can be demonstrated by the arrangements he made for his mother's very small, private funeral and – later – for her memorial window in Liverpool Cathedral.

Nevertheless this remarkable woman should be remembered as someone who changed the course of events. As Prof. James Stuart said in a tribute after her death, 'The world is different because she lived'. But perhaps not yet different enough: many of the issues she campaigned on remain with us.

She fought against the trafficking of young girls for sexual purposes. She fought for equality of treatment between men and women in sexual matters and for the right of women to make their own decisions and own their own bodies. The whole terrible business of trafficking,

especially within Europe, has resurfaced over the last few years to the extent that an Inspector in the Metropolitan Vice Squad recently said that it is fast becoming more profitable and less risky than drug trafficking. The dramatic recent growth of HIV/Aids as a gender issue in sub-Saharan Africa, where 60% of the people infected are women, is partly attributable to a cultural tradition where women cannot say no. As Peter Piot, head of UNAIDS, said at that organisation's annual conference: 'The face of Aids is becoming the face of young women'. The fight must go on.

Like all biographies there are some sections that are more interesting than others. Nonetheless I would strongly recommend this book as both an enjoyable read and a fascinating delve into the more murky and less well-known areas of Victorian Britain.

Paddy Beck has been a local councillor, agent and parliamentary candidate. She is a member of the Josephine Butler Society and of the Women Liberal Democrats' Executive. She represented the National Union of Women at the UN Conference Against Racism in Durban, 2001.

'Not So Much A Question of Greatness'

Sheila Gooddie: *Mary Gladstone: A Gentle Rebel* (John Wiley & Sons, 2003)

Reviewed by **Tony Little**

The dustjacket describes Mary Gladstone as 'a woman at the heart of politics nearly half a century before women had the vote', silently carrying the implication that, without the vote, Victorian women had no place in politics. This was never true but we are only gradually rediscovering what that place was, and it is good to see a commercial publisher finding space for a biography of a woman whose importance relates principally to her family's political position.

For some women, their place in Victorian politics was, as might be expected, merely decorative, the little bit of colour seated quietly among the black frock coats on the platform. For others, such as Josephine Butler, it was campaigning in the front line on unpopular women's issues. Among the aristocracy, it was often participation in the family business – the hostess who used entertainment as part of political man-management like

Lady Palmerston – or the covert messenger such as Mrs O'Shea intriguing on behalf of her lover Charles Stewart Parnell. Political women were, naturally, faithful confidantes of their menfolk and a trusted few were left to manage local campaigns in the absence of their husband or brother who was down in Westminster. But were there other more operational roles open to the right woman?

The Gladstones were a recently rich family, but the money earned in trade by Mary Gladstone's grandfather, Sir John, was invested in political opportunities and a place for the family among the ruling elite. Sir John himself played a prominent part in the politics of Liverpool as a friend and supporter of Canning and Huskisson. Mary's paternal uncles stood for parliament, as did her brothers. Her father, W. E. Gladstone, forced to abandon his clerical vocation, was of course the 'People's William', the dominant Liberal politician

of the Victorian era who, by the time Mary was born in 1847, had already achieved cabinet office. Like it or not, Mary was destined to a life surrounded by politics at the highest level.

There were three main thoughts with which I approached this book. Naturally it would contain the history of the dutiful daughter in a privileged Victorian family. I also looked forward to the insight into female political activism promised on the dustjacket and hoped in addition for a few side-lights on the life and career of the Grand Old Man.

Sheila Gooddie gives the impression of being most comfortable with the family life. The introduction, setting the scene from the Great Exhibition onwards, and the first chapter with Mary listening devotedly to her father's Midlothian speeches, might be skipped by the impatient reader with some knowledge of the era, but when the book gets going we get full details of family life among the elite. I almost wrote 'typical family life' but, while Mary's upbringing was conventional, it would be hard to assert that the Gladstone family was typical. Mary's father was an extraordinary mixture of political endeavour, literary tastes, religious controversy and a physical energy whose surplus expended itself in long walks and tree felling. He had proposed to her mother Catherine Glynne in a letter containing a (just about grammatically correct) sentence of 141 words in eighteen clauses and sub-clauses.¹ Catherine was both very different from and well suited to her husband. Graceful but full of fun, forgetful, impulsive and unpunctual, she achieved an independent life with the charities she promoted and yet was fully her husband's confidante, supportive of his ambitions. They married in a joint ceremony with Catherine's younger sister Mary who married George, Lord Lyttelton. The Lyttletons had twelve children

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