

REVIEWS

Politics and theology

David W. Bebbington, *The Mind of Gladstone: Religion, Homer, and Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2004)

Reviewed by **Peter C. Erb**

In the early twenty-first century, when political theory is increasingly understood as the art of compromise or – perhaps, more often – of power brokerage, politicians such as Gladstone are deemed, at best, oddities or, at worst, dangerous to public life. ‘Theories of political economy, well and good,’ one might say. ‘Practical risk assessments regarding this or that right-of-way, legitimate – as long as decisions remain uncontaminated by private matters: above all by religious or philosophical pre-judgements.’ In such a setting Gladstone must appear enigmatic. Even the least cynical among us recognises that political leaders will be inconsistent and sometimes lie (or at least prevaricate); the only difficulty we have is with their rationalisations. Thus possibly the most remembered comment regarding Mr Gladstone is Henry Labouchere’s: he had no objection to Gladstone’s habit of concealing an ace up his sleeve, but he did object to the politician’s claim that the Almighty had put it there.

The problem inherent in Labouchere’s commonplace – how to separate a political ace from theological explanation – has troubled biographers of the Grand Old Man from John Morley, at the beginning of the twentieth century – who handled it by deliberately omitting reference to Gladstone’s theological and cultural analyses – to more recent writers who, with much of the rest of the century, tend to reduce religious life to psychology and either raise it in some salacious and elusive manner

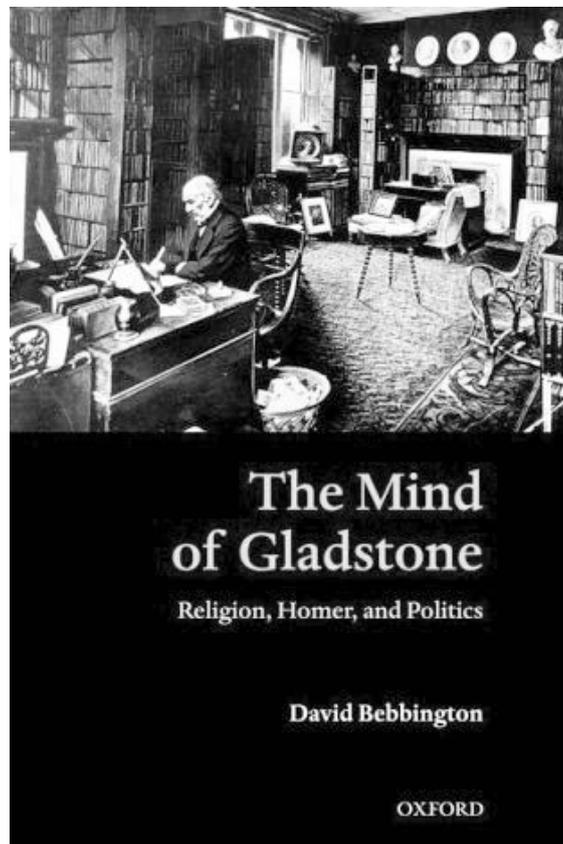
(usually with reference to Gladstone’s use of the scourge or his attention to rescuing prostitutes) or in a slightly more sophisticated fashion place the Prime Minister’s long-decayed corpse in a therapeutic session, certain they can reintegrate his broken personality.

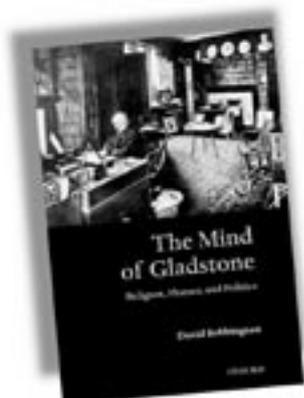
Bebbington’s study is, as a result, exceptional, attempting to meet the criterion of Gladstone’s Anglo-Catholic contemporary and fellow-believer, Henry Parry Liddon, that ‘when a “literary statesman” with applied skills of government does arise, “it is reasonable to combine the book with the policy of ... the minister, on the grounds that both are products of a single mind”’.

To achieve this, Bebbington leads his reader through a close, gracious, and clearly written analysis of Gladstone’s major writing on political theory as an undergraduate, the young Conservative parliamentarian’s bulky volumes on Church–State relations and ‘Church Principles’, the growing and vital importance for him of Tractarian views on the Incarnation, the development of his sympathy for Broad Church ‘liberality’ from the mid-1840s, the Prime Minister as a student of Homer and Olympian religion, and his late-life battles with unbelief. Although he seldom draws direct conclusions to explain any particular political decision, Bebbington does provide the reader with a firm sense of Gladstone’s life-long developing theoretical concerns and their implication for his political life.

In a concluding chapter on ‘The Nature of Gladstonian Liberalism’, Bebbington offers a summary depiction of Gladstone’s conservative liberalism, noting the ways in which the central marker of his Liberalism – his ‘sublime faith in freedom’ and his willingness to use the language of rights among other Liberal principles – was mediated by an emphasis on ‘loyalty, obedience, order, and tradition’. Likewise, Gladstone’s language of equality was balanced by a strong sense of community, as reflected in the family, municipal politics, the Church, the nation, and attention to a peaceful balance of the various sectors within society as well as between nations. Interests were to be tested by duties, selfishness controlled, justice practised in law and general life.

Alongside community, Bebbington points to the concomitant principle of ‘humanity’ in Gladstone’s Liberalism. This latter he interprets as shaped initially by the politician’s appropriation of the Tractarian





The Mind of Gladstone

Religion, Homer, and Politics

David Bebbington, Professor of History, University of Stirling

- Shows the interweaving of Gladstone's religion, Homeric studies, and political thought
- First analysis of Gladstone's ideology throughout his whole career
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William Ewart Gladstone, four times Prime Minister of the United Kingdom under Queen Victoria, was not only the most celebrated British statesman of his day but also a respected theologian and a dedicated scholar of the ancient Greek poet Homer. By examining the development of his ideas, this book reveals that his political thought as leader of the Liberal party intertwined with his religion and classical scholarship.

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[sic] theology of the Incarnation (particularly as manifested in the work of Robert Wilberforce), and developed in Gladstone's shifting perspective on Homer from the mid-1850s on. Bebbington's point here is striking: in his early work on Homer through his *Studies on Homer and the Homeric Age* (3 vols., 1858) Gladstone, enunciating divine grace over nature, pressed a traditional and conservative doctrine of primitive revelation as manifested among all cultures from which they later declined, and opposed the argument that the non-Jewish religions arose 'naturally,' that is as extensions of reverence for major heroes or nature worship. A decade later, however, with *Juventus Mundi: The Gods and Men of the Heroic Age* (1869) the first-time Liberal Prime Minister had partially reversed himself, acknowledging human potential and allowing the possibility of progress.

In a volume attempting to outline the work of so energetic and wide-ranging a reader and writer as Gladstone, readers with different specialisations will inevitably offer readjustments to Bebbington's overall narrative. Thus, one might have wished for a more nuanced distinction between Gladstone (and Wilberforce), as an Old High Churchman, and the Tractarians and Pusey, and for a fuller explanation of Gladstone's 'catholic' (not only Tractarian) doctrines of the Incarnation and of nature and grace (against a strictly Protestant nature *against* grace), which will provide an additional and 'conservative' explanation for Gladstone's 'liberal' change of emphasis on human potential in *Juventus Mundi*.

At the conclusion of his study Bebbington offers some stimulating reflections, associating Gladstone's political (and by implication, religious) theory

with that of late twentieth century 'catholic' communitarians – above all, Alastair MacIntyre – with whom he associates, perhaps too closely, Charles Taylor. The argument will be especially interesting for readers of this journal for whom the communitarian/liberal debate continues in its 'post-liberal' form among British political theologians such as Oliver and Joan O'Donovan, John Milbank and the Radical Orthodoxy programme, and the American Stanley Hauerwas with his revival of interest in the work of John Howard Yoder. (For a brief review see Daniel M. Bell, Jr., 'State and Civil Society,' in *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, ed. Peter Scott and William T. Cavanaugh [Oxford: Blackwell, 2004], 423–38.) What Bebbington demonstrates in these final reflections is the significance of his work not only for a fuller understanding of Gladstone, but for the challenges faced in the

deracinated and increasing multi-ethnic and multi-cultural liberal democracies of our own day.

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versity, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada and is presently completing a three-volume critical edition of the correspondence of Henry Edward Manning and William E. Gladstone, 1833–90.

Former politicians remembered

Iain Dale (ed.): *The Politico's Book of the Dead*

(Politico's, 2003)

Reviewed by **Dr J. Graham Jones**

Our debt to Politico's over recent years is enormous. Since its foundation in the late 1990s, the press has published a steady stream of political analyses, biographies and volumes of memoirs and reminiscences. Now that the company has recently joined forces with Methuen, it is to be hoped that this astonishing publication record will long continue. This recent offering, *The Politico's Book of the Dead*, is the work of the company's guiding light, Iain Dale, who has edited this work with his customary accuracy and distinction. He has previously edited a number of political works (many concerning Baroness Thatcher), is well known as a political commentator and is currently Director of the recently formed Conservative History Group.

In this work no fewer than forty-one writers have contributed to the hundred entries on a motley assortment of political figures. Some are eminent national figures; others are relative unknowns. About three-quarters of the book is devoted to people who have died since 1993. Many of the entries have appeared in print before, some in the highly acclaimed *Dictionary of Liberal Biography* (1998) (including the two entries by the present reviewer: E. Clement Davies and Lady Megan Lloyd George) or in its companion volume the *Dictionary of Labour Biography* (2001).

Others were originally penned as newspaper obituaries and tributes. Some were written specifically for the present volume. Inevitably, they contain several factual errors, misjudgements and minor misprints.

Equally inevitably, they vary considerably in style, slant, length and detail. By far the longest entry (over ten pages) is reserved for Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson (1916–95). The volume also has a conspicuous up-to-date air. Several of the entries are on individuals who died during the first half of 2003, among them prominent former Liberal MP Richard Wainwright, former Labour Cabinet minister Mrs Renée Short and prime ministerial consort Sir Denis Thatcher. The most recent of all is former Conservative MP Sir Gerald Vaughan, who died on 29 July 2003. The first entry in the book is devoted to the little-known Dadabhai Naoroji (1825–1917), the black MP for the Finsbury Central division during the 1892–95 parliament and the first ever non-white to sit in the Commons – long before the much publicised election of four coloured Labour MPs in the 1987 general election.

It would be easy to cavil at the editor's choice of worthies for inclusion. Former Prime Ministers like Churchill, Attlee and Eden do not feature in this book. Nor do Liberal leaders from a bygone age like Samuel,

Simon and Grimond. Neither Aneurin Bevan nor Jennie Lee are included. Some are included who made their main contribution outside parliament, among them highly distinguished historian and writer Robert Rhodes James, NCB boss Lord Robens (both also former MPs) and trades union leader Moss Evans. Oliver Baldwin is here, but not Stanley. The Welsh are certainly under-represented: only the two entries by the present reviewer relate to Welsh people.

One feature of particular interest is the inclusion of the fictional characters Prime Minister Jim Hacker and his top civil servant sidekick Sir Humphrey Appleby – their obituaries skilfully crafted by their creators in *Yes, Minister*. There is an entry, too, for fictional Labour Prime Minister Harry Perkins, most engagingly written by Chris Mullin, author of *A Very British Coup*.

Strangely, some of the politicians listed as entries in the publishers' information sheet are not featured in the book itself! These include Jo Grimond (hailed as 'maverick Liberal leader'), Sir Gerald Nabarro ('bon viveur and

