

The Historical Gladstone and the Contemporary Gladstone

GLADSTONE'S LIBRARY is the national memorial to Gladstone containing his books and his private papers as well as offering twenty-five bedrooms for visitors to stay in. We support and encourage research into Gladstone himself and his three main areas of interest: history/politics, literature and religion.

Gladstone studies will benefit from our latest project, which is now well underway. We are digitising his private papers and the annotations he made in many of his books. Externally funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the three-year project will result in a fully catalogued digital collection of 15,000 nineteenth-century manuscript letters and 5,390 annotated printed books. These will be partially transcribed and hosted online in a free-to-access CMS, making one of the world's most significant Gladstonian collections available to scholars, teachers and students.

Just as the publication of Gladstone's diaries threw new light on the Grand Old Man, so too we expect to glean greater insight into him from these personal letters – perhaps the letters will introduce a 'Gladstone' that contrasts with the accepted portrait of this formidable political giant of the nineteenth century. Certainly, these private papers have been an underused resource and this project is the start of ensuring that the world gets to know a more rounded and accurate image of the man.

If that requires looking back at the past, then our other subsequent project will demand that we look at the impact of Gladstone today. A visit from the man who is now the president of Armenia to the library in 2017 has been transforming. He was moved by everything we showed him, which included a visit to Gladstone's study in Hawarden Castle, the Armenian Martyr's window in the neighbouring church, and a beautiful illuminated Armenian gospel that was



The Old Rectory, Hawarden
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given to Gladstone by an Armenian delegation. We showed him, too, the annotations in books that Gladstone read and which informed his speeches and attitude to the massacre of Armenians in the 1890s. He asked us to take an exhibition to Armenia, which we hope to do in the near future. He referred to Gladstone as 'the man who saved our country'.

What has become clear to me is that you cannot understand Gladstone without understanding his attitude to Armenia. His empathy was partly a sense of solidarity with Christian martyrs, partly humanitarian and partly his profound belief in liberty. The Hamidian massacres were horrific: 88,243 Armenians were massacred, 546,000 were made homeless, another 100,000 died of famine and disease; 2,493 villages were burnt to the ground, the residents of 456 villages forced to convert to Islam and 649 Christian sites were either destroyed or

converted into mosques.¹ This evidence, when presented to Gladstone, brought him out of retirement, although terminally ill, to deliver two of his most impassioned speeches at Chester in August 1895 and Liverpool in September 1896. It was during this period that Gladstone coined the phrase 'to serve Armenia is to serve civilisation'.

The depth of feeling that Gladstone felt for Armenia is shown especially at his death on 19 May 1898. His body lay in his study in Hawarden Castle where his feet were covered by a large red kerchief, the gift of Armenians, and the Armenian illuminated Gospel rested on his chest. When his body was placed in the coffin, an Armenian cross was also placed in the coffin. The coffin was taken from Hawarden to Westminster Hall where he lay in state until the funeral. It was draped with a silk pall in the colours of Armenia, which is extraordinary for a

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British prime minister accorded the honour of a state funeral.

The president of Armenia's desire for an exhibition took on a contemporary twist as we discussed with him three Gladstonian themes that he wanted represented in the exhibition. The first theme will be human rights, which were Gladstone's passionate humanitarian concern from the 1850s onwards – Italian political prisoners, British prostitutes, Ireland, Bulgaria and Armenia. The second theme will be the evolution of democracy which looks at Gladstone's continual attempts to move British democracy forward – in present day Armenia democracy has evolved and is still evolving after the Soviet era (as the president reminded us, in the west our democracy has ceased to evolve and 'you need a new Gladstone'). The third and final theme was freedom of belief – which is all too easy a casualty when reviewing human rights abuses and instances of genocide.

For the last year I have been speaking and writing on these three themes and drawing out their contemporary resonance. Gladstone's prime concern today would be humanitarian, not only about atrocities overseas but also at home. Gladstone would, I am sure, demand action over the appalling treatment of the Rohingya Muslims by the Myanmar government. He would advocate support of those suffering in Syria and Yemen. Each life, said Gladstone, is as 'inviolable in the eye of Almighty God as can be your own'. These words, from a foreign-policy speech in 1879 (the 'Midlothian campaign'), are resonant today, not

only for overseas atrocities but for justice at home where he surely find it hard to believe that food banks are needed in such a wealthy nation. He would be appalled at tragedies like the Grenfell Tower fire in 2017 or the Windrush immigration scandal, which underscore gulfs between rich and poor, the powerful and the powerless. In his own day, he personally risked ridicule for his work to help London's prostitutes and to ensure health care for their children.

Looking at democracy in this country and overseas he would be disheartened by the rise of 'fake news' and the deriding of experts. For Gladstone, reliable research and thorough knowledge from experts on each subject was essential. One of my colleagues was tracing Gladstone's recorded reading before opening a flower show in Chester. For two months before the opening he read everything he could find on flora and fauna and gave an hour-long speech imparting his knowledge – I guess they really only wanted him to declare it open and cut the ribbon. Detail gained from extensive research was all-important – how very different from today's noisy and hollow political discourse.

If looking at today's broken democracies in the UK and USA, Gladstone's political instinct for cooperation between leading nations and European cooperation for peace, and for the rule of law and democracy, has powerful things to say. He would be disheartened, too, by the lack of evolution in our democracy. He was a man who constantly reformed democratic institutions and would be perplexed as to why this was

not happening today. His parting shot to the House of Commons after more than six decades on its benches was to bequeath to his successors the necessity of reforming the House of Lords.

Looking at the lack of willingness to vote in Britain, he would be alarmed and ashamed at our apparent indifference to politics and politicians. He certainly wouldn't dare to say that the 37.4 per cent of the voting population who voted for Brexit expressed 'the will of the people'. Rather, he would set about evolving our democracy for the present age.

Gladstone would be calling for religious tolerance and freedom of belief. His own spiritual journey started narrowly in an almost fundamentalist Christian household, but widened by the end of his life to embrace all Christian denominations, all religions and ideologies – even expressing his sorrow that the Unitarian James Martineau could not be made Archbishop of Canterbury and defending the atheist Charles Bradlaugh's right to sit in the House of Commons. He was also careful (as we should be) to distinguish between the Ottoman atrocities of the nineteenth century and his admiration for the ethics and discipline of Islam. Freedom of belief is essential in an open, multicultural and democratic country.

To live and work in a building that is the memorial to Gladstone is not only to spend time with his words, with the record of his deeds, with the books he read and the letters he wrote and received, but also to try and imbibe something of his spirit and outlook: to try to be Gladstonian in some small way.

Think history

Can you spare some time to help the History Group?

The Liberal Democrat History Group undertakes a wide range of activities – publishing this *Journal* and our Liberal history books and booklets, organising regular speaker meetings, maintaining the Liberal history website and providing assistance with research.

We'd like to do more, but our activities are limited by the number of people involved in running the Group. We would be enormously grateful for help with:

- Improving our website.
- Helping with our presence at Liberal Democrat conferences.
- Organising our meeting programme.
- Publicising our activities, through both social media and more traditional means.
- Running the organisation.

If you'd like to be involved in any of these activities, or anything else, contact the Editor, **Duncan Brack** (journal@liberalhistory.org.uk) – we would love to hear from you.



Gladstone left the nation his books and papers not just to help us as historians, but to help us to see our own society more clearly, critically and above all, to carry on his humanitarian, religious and political work based on extensive research.

Peter Francis has been warden and director of Gladstone's Library since 1997.

1 David P. Forsythe (ed.), (Oxford University Press 2009).

Reviews

Transatlantic Gladstone

Review of Stephen J. Peterson, *Gladstone's Influence in America* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018)

Review by **Roland Quinault**

IN THIS AGE of Global History, 'Global Gladstone' is an eminently suitable subject for enquiry – his influence and reputation extending beyond the United Kingdom and the British Empire to reach the wider Anglo-sphere. In the later nineteenth century, Gladstone's standing in the United States was unequalled by any other Briton, with the possible exception of Queen Victoria. Thus *Gladstone's Influence in America* deals with an important, though hitherto largely neglected, subject. This study had its origins in a doctoral dissertation, at the University of Stirling, which was inspired and supervised by David Bebbington, a leading authority on Gladstone's ideas. Given the book's provenance, it is not surprising that it is a work of diligent research, both clearly written and thoroughly referenced.

Unfortunately, however, the title of the book is misleading and inaccurate. Little attempt is made to trace Gladstone's influence on American thinking. Instead, Peterson provides good summaries and helpful contextualisation of comments in some twenty or so American newspapers and journals on Gladstone's views. But the claim that those comments provided a portal into contemporary American views on religion and politics more generally is not clearly demonstrated. When those wider American views are considered, as in chapter 2, little reference is made to Gladstone. Moreover crucial areas of Gladstone's outlook and policies

– on issues such as free trade, Irish land reform, international relations and constitutional reform – receive little attention. Instead the study concentrates on American reactions to Gladstone's religious policies from the 1860s to the 1890s. Consequently the subtitle of the book – *Reactions in the Press to Modern Religion & Politics* – gives a much more accurate description of its contents.

In the first half of his political career Gladstone was not particularly popular in the USA. Indeed his claim in 1862, during the Civil War, that the South was making a nation, won him no friends in the North. Yet only a few years later, his successful campaign to disestablish the Anglican Church in Ireland was overwhelmingly supported by American commentators. It was seen as evidence that Britain was following the American example of separating Church and State. At the same time, many American Protestants were suspicious of the growing influence of Roman Catholicism in the United States, which was boosted by Irish immigration. Consequently they shared Gladstone's fear that after the declaration of Papal Infallibility, in 1870, Roman Catholics would put their loyalty to the pope before their loyalty to the state. In the early 1880s Gladstone's response to the Bradlaugh case, which raised the question whether an avowed atheist had the right to sit in parliament, generated a mixed press in America. While Gladstone's initial failure, as prime minister, to take decisive action on the Bradlaugh issue was widely

criticised, his speech on the 1883 Affirmation Bill, in which he made a plea for religious liberty, was generally admired by American Protestants, who were conscious of their own religious heritage.

As Peterson points out, the American religious press, unlike its secular counterpart, paid much attention to Gladstone's dispute with T. H. Huxley over the conflicting creation narratives provided by Genesis and modern geology. Two years later, Gladstone waged another literary war in defence of traditional Christianity in his dispute with the influential American agnostic Robert Ingersoll. Their literary contest attracted huge popular interest and the journals that carried their rival arguments sold in the tens and even hundreds of thousands.

Nevertheless Gladstone's popularity during the Gilded Age owed much to his views on topics other than religion. In particular, his support for Irish home rule, in the last decade of his political career, was welcomed by a wide range of Americans, ranging from Senators to servants. Yet Peterson provides only a short summary of the American reaction to Gladstone's home rule policy. He does point out, however, that many Americans admired Gladstone on personal, as well as on policy, grounds. The young Woodrow Wilson, for example, regarded Gladstone as the ideal political leader. Yet while some American commentators were impressed by Gladstone's probity and intellect others questioned his tact and temperament. In that respect, as in some others, American responses echoed opinion in diverse British circles.

Gladstone's Influence in America says little about America's influence on

