

Beliefs and the 1868 election

John Powell examines the role the publication of a pamphlet by Gladstone played in the 1868 election

A Chapter of Autobiograph



“The Martyr Church”
Mr Gladstone
succeeded in
Disestablishing the
Irish Church’ (*Judy*, 28
July 1869)
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y as Campaign Document

WILLIAM GLADSTONE'S SIXTY-THREE-PAGE *A Chapter of Autobiography* is an unexpected gift to political historians. It was, according to Colin Matthew, 'the best written of Gladstone's pamphlets.'¹ It supported one of the boldest and most significant policy initiatives of the nineteenth century – the disestablishment of the Irish Church. And it was produced in the heat of one of the most dramatic general election campaigns in British history, with important implications for Anglo-Irish relations, the emerging Liberal Party, and Gladstone's own political reputation. Yet because historians have treated it as a personal apologia for his transformation from the staunchest defender of the Church of Ireland to its leading assailant – a theme long-rehearsed since the Maynooth crisis more than two decades earlier – Gladstone's pamphlet has been taken as a high-minded footnote to an eccentric course of action and series of explanations that left friends and foes alike bewildered in 1845.² Apart from the accidental concurrence of its publication in the waning days of the general election of 1868, historians have found little to link it to the campaign. This article will examine the political context of the composition of the pamphlet and the unusual course of its publication, and will demonstrate the ways in which both composition and publication were influenced by electoral considerations.

Background

When the Representation of the People Bill passed its third reading on 15 July 1867, Gladstone was subdued and smarting from the cynical but successful political manoeuvring of the Tories. Gladstone was the presumptive Liberal leader, but in a letter to Lord Dufferin on 6 September, he observed that he could hardly open his mouth 'without giving offence to sections of the Liberal Party.'³ Later that month, at perhaps the lowest point in his public career, a police officer was killed in an attempted rescue of Fenian insurgents being detained in Manchester. As Gladstone travelled from Liverpool to Holker Hall the following day, he read an account of the attack and finally determined that the Irish Church's 'day of grace' had come to an end.⁴ By this time he had nearly completed 'The Session and its Sequel',

a long post-mortem on the 1867 session for the *Edinburgh Review*. After twenty pages of minute excoriation of Tory tactics in the reform debates of 1866–67, he appended a brief observation that 'reform for Ireland' was necessary, and that 'even a week's postponement' on 'the flimsy pretext of Fenian disaffection' was unacceptable. He also boldly declared the 'certainty' of a Liberal victory in the near future.⁵ Gladstone did want justice for Ireland, but his political instinct was also strong. Three weeks after the murder he wrote to Henry Manning, that except for the lives that were lost, 'I could almost be pleased with the Manchester outrage, for the English people are deep sleepers, and no voice will awaken them except one that is trumpet tongued.'⁶ By the end of November he shared with John Bright his willingness 'wholly to suppress the State Church in Ireland' and on 9 December he was arranging books and making his room 'tidy for the coming crisis'.⁷ Three days later the more deadly attack at Clerkenwell Prison unfolded, but by then Gladstone had already developed the main lines of the disestablishment campaign. On 18 December he spoke openly at Oldham about the importance of attacking the 'roots' and 'causes' of Fenianism rather than its manifestations, and the following day at Ormskirk went a step further in proposing an Irish policy on Irish lines – a 'bold and just speech' according to Manning. On 16 March 1868, he declared against the Church of Ireland in the House of Commons, presenting 'a plain object in view worth fighting for', and laying the foundation for an unlikely coalition of liberal Anglicans, radicals, Dissenters, and Roman Catholics.⁸

But legislative reform was not Gladstone's primary interest in 1868. As he told Manning in April, 'My business is to point out evils and ask for their removal. I am not bound to point out the mode of doing it. ... My responsibility consists simply in this that the Government may disappear & others may take its place.'⁹ While his campaign involved discussion of some specific details, Gladstone did his best to retain legislative independence. His focus, instead, was foremost on winning a political victory that would enable him to form a government. Neither the Liberals nor the Tories could be certain which direction the newly enfranchised voter would turn, nor were the new electoral registers ready for a proper canvass.

William Gladstone's sixty-three-page *A Chapter of Autobiography* is an unexpected gift to political historians.

A Chapter of Autobiography as campaign document

Gladstone was confident of the justice of disestablishment and believed 'the times' were on the side of the Liberals. Tories counted on a strong anti-Catholic feeling in the country and broad support from the clergy.¹⁰

As Gladstone began his formal campaign on 3 August, he faced three broad challenges: how to convince ardently Protestant electors of his own constituency of South-West Lancashire that it was in their interest to support a policy that aided the Roman Catholic Church and potentially threatened the Established Church in England; how to craft a campaign that worked well both locally and nationally; and how to deflect personal accusations of inconsistency, radicalism, and crypto-Romanism that threatened disestablishment and other policy issues. The first of these he managed by attempting to bury disestablishment, sometimes as much as an hour into his addresses, hoping by then to have won over his listeners. The second issue was more complex, for the more he preached disestablishment, the less likely he was to win over churchmen who might admire his noble attitude but fear the result, Whigs who preferred moderate solutions, and Nonconformists who disliked his Catholic tendencies. The personal accusations, which he generally cared little about, became his greatest challenge, for they were often false, almost always misleading, and relentlessly spread through the national and provincial press. Gladstone's St Helens speech of 5 August, published as an election manifesto, set the tone, with Gladstone admitting that he was 'acting in concert with the Roman Catholic population of Ireland', but doing it in line with 'principles of natural and civil justice'. For all Gladstone's high-minded rhetoric, however, he found himself continually addressing questions about his commitment to the Church of England and his sympathy for radicalism. As campaigning progressed in August, Tories inundated the press with tales of a secret meeting between Gladstone and the infamous pro-Fenian James Finlen, who had led a Working Man's deputation to Gladstone's house in Carlton House Terrace on 18 July. As chairman of the Hyde Park Demonstration Committee, Finlen's name was attached to handbills circulated the following day which read, 'down with the Irish church; away with the bench of Bishops', implicating Gladstone in radical methods as well as policies. More explicit and damning handbills were being circulated in campaigns across the country.

The *Coventry Standard* linked Gladstone more directly to Finlen – reporting that members of the deputation cried out 'Bravo, Finlen! Bravo, Gladstone!' – and intimated that Gladstone had praised American institutions and recognised that the spread of democracy in England would eventually undermine the House of Lords and all 'luxurious scoundrelism'.¹¹ Such reports were vigorously contested in the Liberal press, and Gladstone himself denied them in the House of

Commons. The *Saturday Review* nevertheless condemned him for 'taking secret counsel with Finlen', playing a significant part in making secrecy itself a campaign issue.¹² On 8 August the *Saturday Review* again called into question Gladstone's judgment. His 'indiscretion', according to the author, gave occasion to an electioneering placard then being circulated in London – 'Vote for Beales, Bright, and Finlen, Gladstone's friends, and save your country.'¹³ It was one thing to be publicly linked to the president of the Reform League and a radical MP, something altogether different to have potential voters now imagining that Gladstone had been secretly in league with Fenians. Though Gladstone claimed in the Commons that 'his knowledge of Finlen was vague', he was aware that Liberal whip George Grenfell Glyn was secretly seeking political support from the Reform League. In early August Finlen published a sixteen-page tract in his own defence, which linked support for Gladstone's Irish policy to the mass demonstration, and made clear to the public what was imperfectly known before, that he was a lecturer and agent of the Reform League who also believed that 'Fenianism was Patriotism' – a 'damning apology', according to Gladstone.¹⁴

By early September, prospects for electoral success that had a month before seemed 'brilliant' now appeared tenuous. Funding was down nationally, especially among the peers. Whigs were cool on disestablishment. Catholics in South-West Lancashire were less enthusiastic than expected, and it seemed that the more support Gladstone garnered, particularly from immigrant Catholics, the more vitriolic the Orange bigotry became. The Liberal alliance between radicalism, Romanism, and Nonconformity was being presented in the Conservative press as unnatural and dangerous. On 16 September the *Church Times* reported that Bright and L. L. Dillwyn had met with Cardinal Cullen and Monsignor Woodlock to discuss how 'the spoils of the Irish Church could be appropriated by the Irish Roman Catholics', and in response to Lord Overstone's letter opposing disestablishment, radicals unhelpfully labelled him 'a timid capitalist' and 'a nouveau riche and a parvenu peer', stupidly indecent assertions according to the *Standard*, that were not likely to help Liberals at the polls.¹⁵ On 17 September, Glyn wrote that 'all is new & changed & large & I fear I must say in some respects dark.'¹⁶ With the prospects of the party then at a low ebb, mainly because of Gladstone's complex and evolving attitudes toward the Irish Church, the medium of the tract seemed a ready and natural friend.

Composition

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understanding of historical development and Butler's 'balance of probability', but even these philosophical aspects of the work were harnessed to the political circumstances and needs of the moment. Party agents had agreed to delay active campaigning while registers were being prepared and canvassing undertaken, affording Gladstone a period of relative leisure between the close of the session on 31 July and his first major campaign speech at Warrington on 12 October.¹⁷ Though he had been thinking about publishing a defence 'throughout the year', the tract that emerged was shaped by at least four specific elements of the public campaign in the late summer of 1868.¹⁸

First, Gladstone felt that he had not quite won over the electorate to the cause of justice for Ireland, and feared that if he did not explain his own 'real or supposed delinquencies' regarding the Church of Ireland, the 'great cause' of disestablishment would be hindered. His specific wording – so that 'the progress of a great cause' would not 'suffer' – was adapted from language used in a long letter he had written to the editors of the major daily papers in April, categorically denying six widely circulating rumours suggesting his Romanist tendencies.¹⁹

It was thus in the 'general interest' that he offered a personal account of his 'offence':

I, the person who have now accepted a foremost share of the responsibility of endeavouring to put an end to the existence of the Irish Church as an Establishment, am also the person who, of all men in official, perhaps in public life, did, until the year 1841, recommend, upon the highest and most imperious grounds, its resolute maintenance.²⁰

Gladstone then spent thirteen pages rehearsing his staunch defence of the Church of Ireland, *The Church in its Relations with the State*, published in four editions between 1838 and 1841, and explaining how the ground of his commitment had been shaken by the increase of the Maynooth grant. This gave him the opportunity, and his opponents the pleasure, of recalling Macaulay's famous review of 1839, in which he observed that Gladstone's 'whole theory rests on this great fundamental proposition, that the propagation of religious truth is one of the principal ends of government, as government. If Mr. Gladstone has not proved this proposition, *his system vanishes at once*.'²¹ Gladstone conceded this. 'Scarcely had my work issued from the press,' he wrote, 'when I became aware that there was no party, no section of a party, no individual person probably in the House of Commons, who was prepared to act upon it. I found myself the last man on the sinking ship.'²² Gladstone still supported the principle that the Church of Ireland should be established in order to maintain and extend truth, but he believed that an increased grant to the Catholic seminary at Maynooth – anything more than

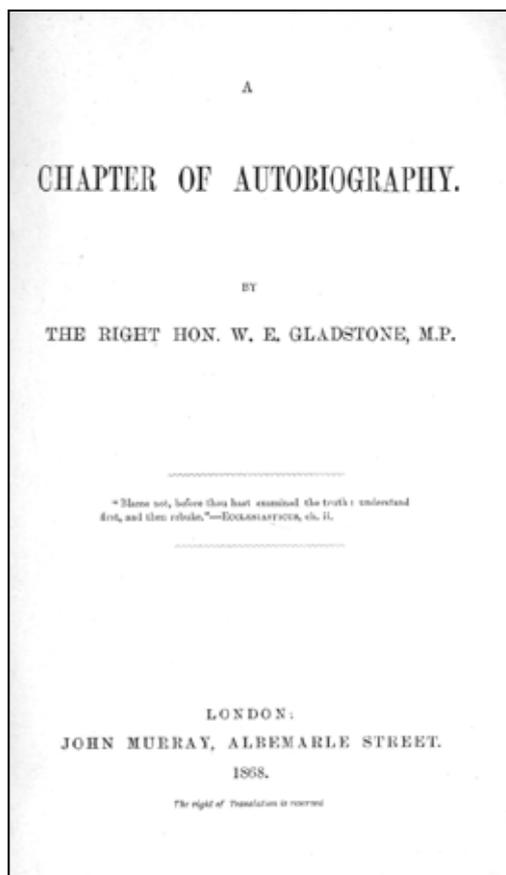
the earlier 'covenanted obligation' – effectively destroyed 'the main principle on which the Established Church was founded.'²³ Gladstone made clear to his readers that by 1844, he intended to support Peel's increased grant to Maynooth, in effect acknowledging that the conditions for supporting the Irish Church establishment no longer existed. 'My ground, right or wrong it matters not for the present purpose, was this: the Church of Ireland must be maintained for the benefit of the whole people of Ireland, and must be maintained as the truth, or it cannot be maintained at all.'²⁴ When Peel's government resolved to increase the Maynooth grant in January 1845, Gladstone resigned from the cabinet, then promptly voted with the government, knowing that he would 'inevitably be regarded as fastidious and fanciful, fitter for a dreamer ... than for the active purposes of public life.'²⁵ With his resignation, Gladstone felt that he had regained the freedom which had been compromised by his earlier support for the Church of Ireland in his speeches and publications.²⁶

A second element of the campaign that shaped Gladstone's composition in September was the lingering suspicion that hostility toward the Church of Ireland might extend to the mother country. Early in August he had been warned by former chief Liberal whip and campaign strategist Henry Brand that even among his friends there was 'apprehension that the Church & the rights of property' were not safe in his hands. For the sake of the national campaign, a simple declaration against the Irish Church would not do, leaving open the question of disendowment. But instead of 'agitating' the question of the Irish Church as Brand recommended, Gladstone buried disestablishment.²⁷ In his first campaign address at St Helens on 5 August, Gladstone dealt with electoral reform, taxation, and finance before arriving at what Brand was pushing to the fore, the state of the Ireland. Gladstone was happy enough to bring disestablishment forward, but knew from innumerable public criticisms that he was vulnerable to charges of inconsistency, especially for his 1835 speech on the appropriation clause and his strident defence of the established church in *The State in its Relations with the Church*. Before dealing with the Irish Church more directly in front of large campaign crowds, he needed a well-reasoned and nuanced defence, and this simply was not possible in the form of a letter to the editor, which he had employed many times in addressing obviously false statements up to that point in the campaign, or in the reporting of a speech that had to touch on many subjects. *A Chapter of Autobiography* enabled him to directly address Brand's concerns, both to convert his opponents and to convince his wavering friends. It may well be questioned whether a sixty-three-page pamphlet was the best medium for achieving this end, but Gladstone was almost altogether shaping his own electoral strategy in 1868.

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Third, and closely related to Brand's concerns, Gladstone took advantage of mid-August publications of letters by two long-time friends and political supporters – both high church Anglicans – defending Gladstone's claim of an early conversion to Irish disestablishment. In a 19 August speech at Exeter, Edward Coleridge had declared that during the heated contest for Oxford in 1847, when 'moderate supporters' were seeking a pledge on behalf of the Irish Church, Gladstone had 'distinctly refused'. Three days later, in the course of a two-hour speech at Richmond, Roundell Palmer defended Gladstone against charges of opportunism. Gladstone had surprisingly confided to him in 1863 that he 'had made up his mind' that the Irish Church establishment must go.²⁸ Gladstone, knowing how statements to this effect had been doubted and twisted by detractors, found these independent accounts of his earlier positions a useful frame in which to present a cogent defence of his signature policy. Palmer, too, was precisely the kind of wavering friend that Brand was worrying about, admiring Gladstone personally but uneasy with the implications of his Irish policy.²⁹ In South-West Lancashire, where optimistic estimates had the Liberals up by 500, this might not have seemed necessary, but Brand had only reluctantly agreed with Liverpool electoral agents in their optimistic assessment, and in any case he had to worry about the effect of Gladstone's addresses in close districts in other parts of the country.

Finally, less than a week before Gladstone began writing *A Chapter of Autobiography*, Captain Hans Busk had printed and distributed an anonymous handbill in Berwick entitled 'Gladstone the Apostate', labelling him 'an object of derision and contempt' to those 'who maintain that integrity of purpose and consistency ought not altogether to be discarded from public life.' This highly personal attack Gladstone found useful, as an extreme example of the criticism being levelled at him during the campaign, in introducing his published defence for fair-minded readers.³⁰ But Gladstone was just as selective in citing Busk as Busk had been in quoting him. In addition to Busk's exaggerated campaign rhetoric – utilising what he called 'the licence usually accorded and freely exercised in speeches, squibs and handbills' – he had drawn further attention to telling and direct passages from Gladstone's appropriation speech of 1835 and the *State in its Relations with the Church*. It is impossible to say precisely why Gladstone chose to cite Busk among the hundreds of derogatory evaluations to be found in contemporary newspapers, journals, and tracts. Busk's selections were neither worse nor better than the general run of selective extracts, but they did demonstrate how easy it was, even at that stage of the campaign, for critics to manipulate Gladstone's own words in order to suggest his 'apostasy'.



A Chapter of Autobiography as originally published by John Murray in 1868

Gladstone wrote and revised the autobiography between 17 September and 22 September, pasting in accounts of the speeches of Coleridge and Palmer that he had clipped from the *Manchester Examiner*; he circulated and discussed the manuscript among friends and family members between 23 September and 5 October; and he finally sent it to Murray to be put in type on 8 October.³¹ On 12 October he gave the first of his scheduled seven October campaign addresses that extended through to 23 October. While on the campaign trail he corrected proofs, letting Russell, Granville, and Glyn review them between 13 October and 16 October. Granville recommended publication, but found the treatment of Macaulay exaggerated and perplexing.³² Gladstone listened to the advice of his political advisers, but kept his own counsel.

Meanwhile, a number of trends were emerging in the press. Gladstone was often criticised for his 'retrospective' views, focusing too much on the reform debate of the previous year and paying too little attention to specific details necessarily associated with disendowment. Second, accusations of Gladstone's crypto-Catholicism were becoming more prominent. *The Globe* revisited the old story of Manning being godfather to Gladstone's son. Manning's indignant response to this 'new trick', published in the liberal *Liverpool Mercury* on 16 October, had the unintended effect of calling attention to Gladstone's warm friendship with the archbishop.³³ Finally, the characterisation of Gladstone as decorous and meek was beginning

An author in the *Saturday Review* had then set a tone that persisted throughout the campaign, that Gladstone and his friends had somehow convinced themselves that even ‘a single word or phrase reflecting on Mr. Gladstone’s character, still less “charges”, or a single hint of a charge, of anything improper’ was somehow an unpardonable campaign sin.

to bite. On 4 June, his brother Robertson had publicly defended him against ‘the grossest statements affecting his character’ and observed that he had ‘only held office for the purpose of doing good’. An author in the *Saturday Review* had then set a tone that persisted throughout the campaign, that Gladstone and his friends had somehow convinced themselves that even ‘a single word or phrase reflecting on Mr. Gladstone’s character, still less “charges”, or a single hint of a charge, of anything improper’ was somehow an unpardonable campaign sin. When Gladstone complained in his speech at Leigh on 20 October of Tory licence in placards and letters having ‘gone beyond the just limits of political warfare’ and his private life having been ‘insolently invaded’, this simply gave occasion for Conservative publications to mock his sensitivity and raise the previous whining defences by Robertson Gladstone and Manning.³⁴ Ever sensitive to attacks on his character, Gladstone angrily responded to the lead article from the October number of the *Quarterly Review*, threatening in a letter to publisher John Murray to end his longstanding relationship with the journal. Written by Louis Jennings but published anonymously, ‘The Public Questions at Issue’ raised every criticism of Gladstone that had surfaced during the campaign – his close ties to Romanism; the defection of moderate Liberals; the linking of Gladstone’s Irish policy with radical ‘apostasy’; Gladstone’s retrospective speeches, inconsistency and previous support for the Irish Church; the ‘invented’ plan for uniting Dissenters and Roman Catholics; his personal waywardness and instability. The most prominent feature of the article, however, was a string of accusations, intimations, associations and insinuations regarding Gladstone’s radicalism, a particularly sensitive topic as critics, including Jennings, were continually raising questions regarding the legitimacy of the Liberal Party. ‘Who can describe the policy of the Liberal confederation? ... its very honesty is questionable.’ This attack on Gladstone’s integrity was the subtext for the statement Gladstone directly complained of – that ‘great leaders condescend to receive deputations of which the off-scourings of the community were the spokesmen’. Readers ‘ought to know’, Gladstone wrote, ‘the circumstances under which Mr. Finlen came to my house during the last Summer. ... I submit that this passage calls for some apology.’³⁵ Gladstone got his apology, but the *Quarterly’s* editor, William Smith, could only regret that ‘the paragraph in question should appear to go beyond the fair grounds of political controversy’.³⁶ Like many observers, Murray and Smith thought that Gladstone was being unduly sensitive.

The decision to publish

In the meantime, the corrected proofs for *A Chapter of Autobiography* had been with John Murray since 17 October. Gladstone gave his final

scheduled speech at Wigan on 23 October, and on 25–6 October he spoke at length with the Bishop of Oxford, who recommended against publication.³⁷ By 26 October the canvass was complete, and that day Gladstone decided to withhold the apology he had written in the dark days of September. But why on 26 October? And what were his reasons for writing to Murray on 5 November, asking him to publish on 23 November; then a week later writing to confirm the publication, but asking Murray to send presentation copies as early as 16 November?³⁸

These questions may be answered in different ways, as Gladstone neither confided in his political advisers nor left a record of his thinking. They cannot be adequately addressed, however, without recognising that he was trying to win an election in South-West Lancashire, and at the same time speaking to the nation at large in every speech, letter, and publication. The electoral landscape was in flux, and no one could know in October 1868 how the reform of 1867 would play. No one could know the effect of a major politician appealing to large crowds of working men – though Gladstone’s oratorical skills here seemed to work in his favour – nor could they know the efficacy of local addresses crafted for national audiences. This uncertainty was compounded by the controversial issue of Irish disestablishment, which drew together Nonconformists and Roman Catholics who were suspicious of one another on other grounds, and led many otherwise liberal Churchmen who admired Gladstone personally to dissent strongly from his Irish policy. In the absence of a strong national organisation, there was no formal plan of campaign. Glyn and Brand gave advice on national needs, but Gladstone made virtually all of his own decisions. By the end of October it was clear that Liberals nationally would enjoy a large victory, so in the waning days of the campaign he was fighting mainly for his reputation and a victory in his home county. Scholars almost universally have attributed Gladstone’s defeat to an irresistible anti-Catholicism in Lancashire, but that certainly was not apparent to Gladstone at the end of October. The canvass of old voters and the requisition of new ones were suggesting success. Towards the end of the campaign, some local Liberals were uneasy, but Gladstone was confident that he would win in South-West Lancashire.

It is impossible to say why, exactly, Gladstone first decided to withhold publication of *A Chapter of Autobiography*. He left no record of his overall campaign strategy, and his suggestion that it was withheld due to ‘the stress of the general election’ is not convincing, for we know that the draft was completed by 22 September and put into type by 8 October. Nor had the campaign itself been particularly demanding. Gladstone had taken a five-week holiday at Penmaenmawr between 10 August and 14 September, doing political work only half the time. He did deliver seven major

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election speeches between 12 October and 23 October, but otherwise devoted much of his time to Homeric studies and non-political reading. The most plausible answer for the delay is that Gladstone was confident of the outcome, as he suggested to Manning on 29 October.³⁹ Publicly admitting errors and addressing charges of capriciousness and sensitivity might do more harm than good.

Between 26 October and 5 November, however, the 'no-popery' campaign gained fresh and unexpected momentum that was given a point in a 24 October letter to *The Standard* from G. R. Gleig, author of the *Blackwood's* article that had attracted Gladstone's attention in July. In his initial speech at St Helens in August, Gladstone had scarcely mentioned Feniansim. Two months later at Liverpool he had introduced for the first time a careful defence of just reform by showing Fenianism to be a patriotic outgrowth of the sincere grievances of ordinary Irishmen, and not simply an unlawful organisation of the 'scum' of Ireland. By late October, however, it was becoming clear that Gladstone's message of justice for Ireland had not yet 'permeated the masses' as Brand had hoped it would early in the campaign.⁴⁰ In pointing to Gladstone's dubious defence of Fenianism as a legitimate form of political patriotism, Gleig suggested that their desire for independence was not rooted in a love of their own religion, but rather in 'open warfare' with religion itself, thus reinforcing the charges of radicalism and apostasy that had been consistently levelled at Gladstone.⁴¹

About the same time, three separate stories were gaining currency in variegated and confusing forms in the national and provincial papers, each giving credence to accusations of Gladstone's crypto-Catholicism. One of these had begun in early October with a simple question from an anonymous reader of the *Standard*, wondering about the accuracy of a quote from an 1859 publication in which it was claimed that Gladstone had along with Cardinal Weld of Rome been named executors of a £200,000 bequest by the late Mr Blundell of Ince for the purpose of promoting 'Popery in England'. Gladstone jokingly denied it on the stump, noting that he 'happened to be 60 or 70 years younger than Mr Charles Blundell of Ince'.⁴² Though the report was false so far as Gladstone was concerned, his father had in fact been an executor of the bequest with Weld, and the story dangerously threatened to direct attention to meetings with Catholic landowners which had been kept secret for fear of alienating dissenters.⁴³ The second story, of Manning being godfather to Gladstone's son, had been raised and answered earlier in the month. By early November it was being combined with the 'patron' story. Under the title of 'Mr. Gladstone's Traducers', the liberal *Liverpool Mercury* continued to print all 'contradictions' and 'explanations', which nevertheless kept the stories before the public. We would not have continued to notice this 'contemptible trick', the

author wrote, but that defaming handbills first seen in Liverpool were now circulating in other parts of the country. By the end of October, the two stories had been suspiciously conflated into a single letter by 'A Protestant' to the editor of *The Rock*, and was being circulated throughout the country under the heading 'Mr. Gladstone the Champion of Popery in England'.⁴⁴ Gladstone's supporters believed this to be a deliberate plant by the Tories, 'for the former contradiction of it was published from John o' Groat's House to Land's End'.⁴⁵ Finally, a report began to circulate in Lancashire that Gladstone was 'secretly' and 'at heart' a Roman Catholic. This was not in itself much different from claims that had been frequently made since the 1840s, and which had been common in the immediate wake of Gladstone's Irish resolutions. But combined with the other more specific stories, and the fact that the 'slanderers' had been 'particularly industrious' among Liberal electors in Southport, it seemed to threaten what had been perceived as a strong majority there.⁴⁶

Gladstone responded to this deteriorating situation in three specific venues: in the daily press, on the platform, and in the pamphlet press. On 9 November he responded to a letter from a Southport elector noting Tory complicity in spreading the rumours, professing his commitment to the Church of England, and, surprisingly, announcing his 'return to Lancashire' at the end of the week. Gladstone's letter reframed the stories in the context of disreputable Tory 'slanders' and promised a 'declaration' on the 'ritualistic question'. On 12 November, the *Liverpool Mercury* published Gladstone's letter, and noted in a separate article the 'alarm' that had been created 'in the Tory camp'. Conservatives in turn attributed Gladstone's return to the platform as a desperate attempt to 'redeem his declining fortunes'. Each party had accurately assessed the fears of their opponents. The Tories were alarmed, and Gladstone was trying to bolster his support – no one had a clear idea where the electorate of South-West Lancashire actually stood. Following the published letter, Gladstone then gave hastily arranged speeches at Crosby and Bootle on 13 November, at Garston and Wavertree on 14 November, and at Widnes and St Helen's on 16 November, directly addressing the false claims with a good deal of humour, and calling attention to the sad state of the Conservative Party.⁴⁷

Even before Gladstone launched his late offensive, on 5 November he had changed his mind about *A Chapter of Autobiography*, and decided to have Murray publish it on the day before the election. Murray received his revised proof sheets on 6 November, agreeing to publish on 23 November, and to refrain from advertising until after the election. On 12 November Gladstone adjusted the timetable once more, adding additional names to the presentation copy list and urging Murray to begin sending out presentation copies as early as 16 November, and presumably allowing Murray

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Election hustings, Angel Hill, Bury St Edmunds, 1868 (or possibly 1865)



to advertise during the election.⁴⁸ With the elections only half over, the *Athenaeum* printed a notice of publication on 21 November, nomination day for South-West Lancashire; other papers published the same information via the *Athenaeum* on the same day, likely fed by the same source. On 23 November Murray was advertising in newspapers across the country, and the London papers were already publishing reviews. Reviewers in the monthly and quarterly press, writing to deadlines days or weeks after the election, saw the pamphlet largely as a personal apologia, but a political intent was clearly recognised in the daily press. *The Times*, in a generally favourable review, applauded his late Lancashire speeches, but questioned the wisdom of replying to ‘electioneering taunts’ in printed form, open as they were to the ‘misconstruction of opponents’.⁴⁹ The *Liverpool Mercury* used it as the basis for demanding ‘the votes of our neighbours’.⁵⁰ The *Standard* saw it as an ‘admission of failure’, and a ‘shrewd and politic manoeuvre’ enabling Gladstone to secure a ‘private hearing’ before election day while ‘depriving his critics any chance of replying in time’ to affect

the election. According to their reporter, ‘it was a paper written simply to turn the votes upon the polling day. ... It could not have been intended as an appeal to truth and justice, for if so, it would have been issued, not in this clandestine manner, but fairly and openly, while there was yet time for a full discussion of the subject matter before the election.’⁵¹ It is hard to say whose votes might have been turned, or in what numbers, but Liberal and Conservative newspapers alike considered publication of the autobiography to be a political act.

One would expect *The Standard* to put the worst construction on the circumstances, but in this case they were likely right. Gladstone did not want his complicated appeal to ‘truth and justice’, likely to be misunderstood by many voters, sifted too carefully before the election. His explanation at the beginning – that the tract had been withheld ‘due to the stress of the general election’ – was immediately disingenuous, but there were other passages clearly calculated to sway voters. For example, Gladstone made a case for being excepted from the general rule

that autobiography should be published posthumously, or at the close of a career. In a characteristic application of Butlerian philosophy, he argued that if he was 'warranted in treating' his situation as an 'excepted case', he was 'bound so to treat it'.⁵² This may or may not have been sound philosophy, but it clearly cast Gladstone's apologia in moral terms that were attractive to Nonconformists and High Churchmen – two groups of voters who were sceptical of his Irish policy – a point frequently noted in later reviews. This reliance on the principle of 'balance of probability' nevertheless left open completely the political *use* of the justification that he was morally 'bound' to produce. Gladstone was viewed by his devoted followers as a man of 'transparent sincerity and purity of intention', the 'man of principle'.⁵³ But even if this were altogether true in his composition of the autobiography, Gladstone still had to decide whether to withhold it altogether, to publish it after the election, or to publish it during the election, and, if during the election, on what day. It should not be surprising that Gladstone was interested in a matter that might have turned the tide in a close contest, just as *The Standard* had noted.

Two specific examples from *A Chapter of Autobiography*, both central to the issue of disestablishment, make clear that Gladstone was not transparent in constructing his narrative, and suggest the kinds of questions that might have been raised by Gladstone's opponents, had they been given the chance. Gladstone characterised the ground of his early support for the Church of Ireland as requiring that it be 'for the benefit of the whole people of Ireland' and as a vessel of 'the truth'. Cast in these terms, his former position was prescient enough to allow for the conditions that had in fact arrived by 1868, arguing that he had not used ('as far as I believe and remember') any of the 'stock arguments for maintaining the Irish Church. ... I did not say, [for instance] "maintain it, lest you should be driven to repeal the Union".⁵⁴ In fact, he maintained that argument in all four editions of *The State and its Relations with the Church*.⁵⁵ Similarly, Gladstone appealed to the saintly Anglican 'sweet singer of Israel', John Keble, for support, writing that he had learned 'upon authority which cannot be questioned, that Mr. Keble acknowledged the justice of disestablishing the Irish Church'.⁵⁶ Within weeks of the publication of the autobiography, however, no less an authority

than Henry Parry Liddon, prebendary of Salisbury Cathedral and Tractarian defender, countered that 'such an assertion' was 'too unqualified to convey a true impression of Mr. Keble's general mind on the subject'.⁵⁷ It is not likely that Gladstone had forgotten his previous position; he certainly had the ready means of reviewing his book, as he had earlier in the campaign. Most likely he had across many years subtly and mentally modified his earlier positions to align them more nearly with his attitude in 1868. Nor is it likely that he wilfully misrepresented his 'authority' regarding Keble, but rather inclined to hear what he wished to hear. But even under the best construction, Gladstone's decision to circulate copies as early as 16 November to friends while publishing for the public on the day before the election meant that such errors and misrepresentations stood in terms of the electorate. Both of these examples were raised against Gladstone in the wake of the election, and certainly would have been brought forward during the campaign had Gladstone published his autobiography in October as originally planned.⁵⁸

The outcome

As it was, on 21 November Gladstone learned that he had lost to a pair of undistinguished Tory candidates by 261 votes. It was a crushing defeat, though he did have the consolation of having been elected for Greenwich four days earlier. According to the local Liberal press, for the Tories 'to defeat him after such a display of interest on his part; to make it appear that Lancashire has been appealed to, has heard, and has judged to condemn the Liberal leader on his own ground ... is a success which the most high-minded of Tory politicians have not the moderation to forego'.⁵⁹ His loss has been attributed to the strength of Orangeism in Lancashire, the degree of Protestant feeling among the masses, the weakness of Liberal district organisation, earlier defeats in South-East and North Lancashire, and the scurrilous Tory press campaign against him. But it also had to do with unrealistic assessments of the electorate, both formal and informal, by local campaign leaders George Melly and William Rathbone, and by Gladstone himself, and the tactics they designed to appeal to voters in the middle. In the course of the election, more than 700 promised votes were transferred to the Conservatives, and some of these must

be attributed to Gladstone's early decision to focus on the reform debate of 1867, and to appeal to the moral sense of voters on Irish issues without laying out a clear plan for dealing with the endowment question. On the other hand, it has been argued that it was only Gladstone's superb campaigning that kept the margin of loss as narrow as it was. The election was close, and it is likely that his last-minute publication of *A Chapter of Autobiography* swayed some votes at the end, especially among more liberal churchmen.

Upon receiving Gladstone's autobiography, friends and supporters wrote to thank him in terms that were widely repeated in pro-Liberal publications. 'Very touching, truthful, and noble', according to Arthur Helps; 'exactly what a mere man of the world would not have done,' Robert Phillimore observed; and 'most noble' in Newman's estimation. But even Newman hinted at Gladstone's design, with the pamphlet having been 'received so long before publication' that the recipient thought that it must have come 'from yourself'.⁶⁰ Many reviewers felt that the pamphlet was ill advised, not so much for its lack of transparency as for its self-revelation. 'It takes a strong man', observed an author in *The Spectator*, to rely so completely on the moral advantages of his own special bluntness of mind.' Less charitably, *The Express* alluded to Cardinal Richelieu's famous remark, 'Give me two lines of any man's writing and I will hang him'; and of course this challenge was widely taken up by Gladstone's opponents.⁶¹ One of the most common themes of reviews by both supporters and opponents was that *A Chapter of Autobiography* would only affirm what the reader already believed. 'As a manifesto to friends,' according to *The Times*, 'it seems superfluous; as an answer to enemies ... it seems incomplete'; the generally hostile *Saturday Review* considered it practically 'unintelligible', and added that for 'friends and for educated and fair opponents the apology was in no way needed'.⁶² In broad terms, this common formulation accurately assesses the electoral value of *A Chapter of Autobiography*, but when he wrote it, Gladstone was counting on a deeper pool of 'fair opponents'.

John Powell is Professor of History at Oklahoma Baptist University. He is currently working on a study of W.E. Gladstone's early career.

- 1 H. C. G. Matthew, *Gladstone, 1809–1874* (Clarendon Press, 1986), p. 144. Many studies of Gladstone mention *A Chapter of Autobiography* in passing, but it has nowhere received substantial treatment.
- 2 Even in John-Paul McCarthy's subtle reevaluation of Gladstone's evolving position on the Church of Ireland, in which he argues that 'Maynooth appears less a repudiation than an application of the basic argument' in Gladstone's earlier books, McCarthy frequently finds it necessary to minimise the sub-clauses, distinctions, and parentheses, which in turn emphasises the very reasons that Gladstone's contemporaries were so perplexed. 'History and Pluralism: Gladstone and the Maynooth Grant Controversy', in D. George Boyce and Alan O'Day (eds.), *Gladstone and Ireland: Politics, Religion and Nationality in the Victorian Age* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 21, 23, 27.
- 3 Cited in J. P. Parry, *Democracy and Religion: Gladstone and the Liberal Party, 1867–1875* (Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 266.
- 4 The phrase 'day of grace' he introduced in his *Chapter of Autobiography*, p. 121. On timing, see General Grey memorandum, 4 Dec. 1868, in G. E. Buckle (ed.), *The Letters of Queen Victoria*; second series, 1862–1878, 2 vols. (John Murray, 1926); cf. Manning to Gladstone, 22 Sep. 1867, in Peter C. Erb (ed.), *The Correspondence of Henry Edward Manning and William Ewart Gladstone*, 4 vols. (Oxford University Press, 2013), vol. iii, pp. 100–1.
- 5 'The Session and its Sequel', *Edinburgh Review*, 126 (Oct. 1867), pp. 297–8.
- 6 13 Oct. 1867, *Letters of Manning and Gladstone*, pp. 102–3.
- 7 G. M. Trevelyan, *The Life of John Bright* (Constable, 1913), p. 388; M. R. D. Foot and H. C. G. Matthew (eds.), *The Gladstone Diaries* (hereafter *GD*), 14 vols. (Oxford University Press, 1968–94), vol. vi, p. 506 (diary entry of 9 Dec. 1867).
- 8 20 Mar. 1868, in Angus Hawkins and John Powell (eds.), *The Journal of John Wodehouse, First Earl of Kimberley, for 1862–1902* (Royal Historical Society, 1997), p. 216.
- 9 Gladstone to Manning, 9 Apr. 1868, *Correspondence Manning and Gladstone*, iii, p. 118.
- 10 P. M. H. Bell, *Disestablishment in Ireland and Wales* (S.P.C.K., 1969), p. 102.
- 11 *Coventry Standard*, 24 July 1868, p. 4.
- 12 'Mr. Gladstone Descends into the Gutter', *Saturday Review*, 25 Jul. 1868, p. 111.
- 13 'Mr. Gladstone's Statesmanship', *Saturday Review*, 8 Aug. 1868, p. 180.
- 14 *GD*, vi, p. 619 (diary entry of 20 Aug. 1868).
- 15 *The Standard*, 29 Sep. 1868, p. 4.
- 16 Cited in A. F. Thompson, 'Gladstone's Whips and the General Election of 1868', *English Historical Review*, 63 (Apr. 1948), p. 189.
- 17 P. Searby, 'Gladstone in West Derby Hundred: The Liberal Campaign in South-West Lancashire in 1868', *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire*, 111 (1960), p. 156.
- 18 *A Chapter of Autobiography*, p. 98.
- 19 *GD*, vi, p. 592 (diary entry for 14 Apr. 1868); *The Times*, 25 Apr. 1868, p. 9; cf. *A Chapter of Autobiography*, p. 98.
- 20 *A Chapter of Autobiography*, pp. 98, 104.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 111.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 115.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 112.
- 24 *Ibid.*, pp. 112, 116–17.
- 25 Gladstone's 'fanciful' nature was frequently pointed out by reviewers. See, for instance, [W. R. Greg], 'Mr. Gladstone's Apologia', *Quarterly Review*, 126 (Jan. 1869), pp. 130–33; 'Confessions of a Statesman', *Saturday Review*, 28 Nov. 1868, p. 707; 'Mr. Gladstone's Autobiography', *Irish Ecclesiastical Gazette*, 19 Dec. 1868, p. 280.
- 26 *A Chapter of Autobiography*, pp. 117–18.
- 27 Thompson, 'Gladstone's Whips and the General Election of 1868', p. 197.
- 28 'Sir Roundell Palmer on the Irish Church', *Leeds Mercury*, 22 Aug. 1868, p. 8.
- 29 Palmer was explicitly named in the press along with the Duke of Somerset, the Duke of Portland, Lord Overstone, and the Marquis of Bute as 'men of mark and influence' who were 'not only averse to the settled policy of the liberal leader, but are frank and courageous enough to let the fact be known.' *Standard*, 29 Sep. 1868, p. 4; Selborne, *Memorials, Part II: Personal and Political, 1865–1895* (Macmillan, 1898), vol. i, pp. 97–109.
- 30 On the handbill of 11 September, see Hans Busk, *A Reply to the Apology of the Right Hon. W. E. Gladstone, contained in his 'Chapter of Autobiography'* (Lock and Hadwen, 1868); *A Chapter of Autobiography*, p. 100.
- 31 'A Chapter of Autobiography' MS, Murray Archives, National Library of Scotland (NLS), 42271, ff. 28, 30; cf. *A Chapter of Autobiography*, pp. 126–30.
- 32 Edmond Fitzmaurice, *The Life of Granville George Leveson Gower, Second Earl Granville, 1815–1891*, 2 vols. (Longmans, Green, 1905), vol. i, pp. 534–5.
- 33 'Archbishop Manning and Mr. Gladstone', 16 Oct. 1868, *Liverpool Mercury*, p. 5.
- 34 'Gladstone Brothers', *Saturday Review*, 13 June 1868, pp. 777–8; *Standard*, 22 Oct. 1868, p. 4.
- 35 Gladstone to Murray, 20 Oct. [1868], GP BL Add. MS 44259, ff. 238–9. [Louis Jennings], 'The Public Questions at Issue', *Quarterly Review*, 124 (October 1868), pp. 549–50.
- 36 Smith to Murray, 21 Oct. 1868, enclosed in Murray to Gladstone, 21 Oct. [1868], GP BL Add. MS 44259, f. 243.
- 37 Reginald Wilberforce, *Life of Samuel Wilberforce*, 3 vols. (John Murray, 1883), vol. iii, pp. 256–7.
- 38 Gladstone to Murray, 12 Nov. 1868, Murray Papers, NLS 52261, n.f.
- 39 Gladstone to Manning, 29 Oct. 1868, *Letters of Manning and Gladstone*, vol. iii, p. 135.
- 40 Thompson, 'Gladstone's Whips and the General Election of 1868', p. 197.
- 41 *Standard*, 24 Oct. 1868, p. 5.
- 42 'Mr. Gladstone at Bootle', *Liverpool Mercury*, 14 Nov. 1868, p. 7.
- 43 Searby, 'Gladstone in West Derby Hundred', p. 152.
- 44 *Coventry Standard*, 31 Oct. 1868, p. 4. Gladstone saved an article by this title from an unknown newspaper, which provided an explanation of the evolving storyline. Gladstone's Library, Glynne-Gladstone Papers 1554.
- 45 *Liverpool Mercury*, 3 Nov. 1868, p. 5.
- 46 'Catholic?' *Liverpool Mercury*, 12 Nov. 1868, p. 6.
- 47 See *Liverpool Mercury* of 12 Nov. 1868, p. 6; 13 Nov. 1868, p. 7; 14 Nov. 1868, p. 7; 16 Nov. 1868, p. 3.
- 48 Gladstone to Murray, 12 Nov. 1868, Murray Papers, NLS 42261, n.f.
- 49 'A Chapter of Autobiography', *The Times*, 23 Nov. 1868, p. 3.
- 50 'The Man of Principle', *Liverpool Mercury*, 24 Nov. 1868, p. 6.
- 51 *Standard*, 24 Nov. 1868, p. 4.
- 52 'A Chapter of Autobiography', p. 98.
- 53 'The Man of Principle', 24 Nov. 1868, *Liverpool Mercury*, p. 6. Some version of this is found in virtually all pro-Gladstone reviews of the autobiography.
- 54 *A Chapter of Autobiography*, pp. 111–12.
- 55 John-Paul McCarthy, 'History and Pluralism: Gladstone and the Maynooth Grant Controversy', p. 37, n. 77.
- 56 *A Chapter of Autobiography*, p. 141.
- 57 John Keble, 'The State in its Relations with the Church': *A Paper reprinted from the 'British Critic', October, 1839*, pref. H. P. Liddon (James Parker, 1869), p. iii.
- 58 See, for instance, 'Mr. Keble and Mr. Gladstone', *London Evening Standard*, 12 Dec. 1868, p. 5; 'Mr. Gladstone's Autobiography', *John Bull*, 28 Nov. 1868, p. 804; Philip Plainspoken, *Short Notes on a Long Chapter of Mr. Gladstone's Autobiography* (John H. Batty, 1869), p. 9; *Spectator*, 28 Nov. 1868.
- 59 'The South-West Lancashire Election', *Liverpool Mercury*, 24 Nov. 1868, p. 5.
- 60 Helps to Gladstone, 24 Nov. 1868, BL GP Add. MS 44416, f. 236; Phillimore to Gladstone, 29 Nov. 1868, cited in Morley, *Life of Gladstone*, ii, 250; Newman to Gladstone, 25 Nov. 1868, f. 244.
- 61 'The Pall Mall on Mr. Gladstone's 'Soft Stuff'', *Spectator*, 28 Nov. 1868; 'Mr. Gladstone's Chapter of Autobiography', *Sheffield Independent*, 24 Nov. 1868, p. 3.
- 62 'A Chapter of Autobiography', *The Times*, p. 3; *Saturday Review*, 28 November 1868, pp. 706–7.