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HISTORY

Gladstone's first government

Jonathan Parry

Gladstone's first government, 1868–74 A policy overview

John Powell

A Chapter of Autobiography as campaign document

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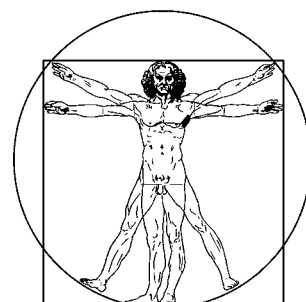
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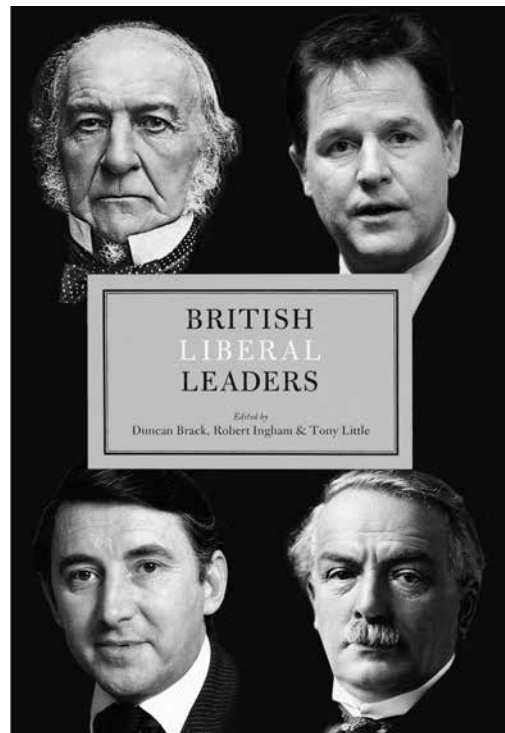
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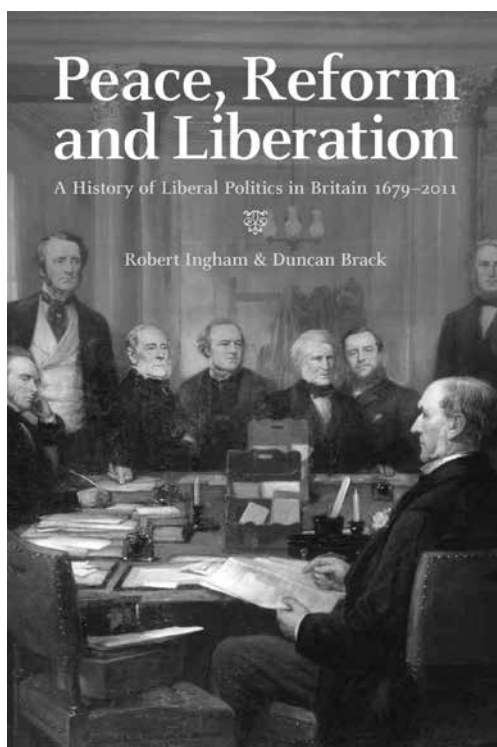
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Sincere thanks to Tony Little and Professor John Powell, who guest-edited this special issue of the *Journal of Liberal History*.

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Introduction

Eugenio Biagini introduces this special edition of the *Journal of Liberal History*, marking 150 years since William Ewart Gladstone's first appointment as Prime Minister.

Gladstone's First Gov

A radical new departure?

The first Gladstone government (December 1868 – February 1874) has been widely regarded as one of the great game-changers in modern British political history. Few other administrations are in the same league, and they include the 1841–6 Peel government (which introduced a peacetime income tax and ushered in free trade), the Liberal governments of 1906–16 and the Attlee governments of 1945–51. From the start, observers were impressed. In 1872 Disraeli himself compared the Liberal frontbench to 'a range of volcanoes' (albeit, in view, already exhausted). In 1898, one of Gladstone's early biographers entitled the chapter which dealt with his first government, 'The Golden Age of Liberalism'.

In a sense it was. Overseeing the British economy at the apex of its power, in an age when *laissez-faire* and free trade seemed to pave the way to unlimited progress ('improvement') and social peace, it seemed to mark the culmination of Gladstone's own career. As the late Colin Matthew argued:

Looking at the architecture of the State in the late 1860s, Gladstone saw the grand design largely fulfilled ... [He] saw his first Government not as the new dawn of thoroughgoing liberalism emancipated by democracy, but as the setting of the sun at the end of the day on the building of the mid-century edifice. The long-term implication of the household suffrage was, no doubt, the destruction of this creation ... But ... Gladstone ... had promoted limited franchise reform in 1866 as a means of consolidating the mid-century order of State, Party, and politics, not of undermining it.¹

However, by 1868 the 'pale of the constitution' had been dramatically enlarged by the Second Reform Act, which extended the franchise to a substantial number of artisans and workingmen



Government, 1868 – 74



(albeit only those who were resident in boroughs). Whatever complacency Gladstone might have felt about his past achievements, he quickly came to see the need to 'update' the country's legal framework. He faced some of the challenges which were to become familiar to twentieth-century politicians who would be operating under a full democratic dispensation. Trade union legislation, the improvement of elementary education, further electoral reform (the secret ballot) were just some of the burning issues of the day. In foreign policy, in the 1850s Palmerston had indulged in aggressive rhetoric and posturing which Gladstone had repeatedly denounced as both unwarranted and counterproductive.² Once in power, Gladstone insisted on international arbitration as the means to avoid escalations of tension between major powers (this was first applied to the resolution of a conflict with the Americans in 1869–72, to settle compensation claims for the damages inflicted on US trade by the British-built Confederate raider, the *CSS Alabama*). In this way, he helped to establish a practice and a model which would inspire liberals around the world for generations to come.³

Moreover, with his drive to 'pacify Ireland', Gladstone alerted the country to the seriousness of ethnic conflict, which was to prove far more intractable than class struggle (as John Stuart Mill had predicted in 1868).⁴ While Gladstone's 1869 Irish strategy was still 'Unionist', already in the mid-1870s – having experimented with land reform, religious equality, and 'Coercion' (anti-terrorist legislation) – the Liberal leader was slowly moving towards the idea that Ireland needed devolution. Eventually he adopted this strategy in 1886, and, though he failed in his attempts to implement it, devolution set the agenda of UK constitutional reform until the end of the twentieth century. He understood that the challenge was how to reconcile parliamentary government with the rise of democracy

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Gladstone's Cabinet
of 1868, by Lowes Cato
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in a multi-national state, which was, simultaneously, the head of a much larger and more diverse global Empire and 'Anglo-World'. Ireland stood at the heart of this system, hence 'pacifying' it was a matter of critical importance. In the process, Gladstone initiated a tradition of high-powered statesmen – including H. H. Asquith, D. Lloyd George, A. J. Balfour, Winston Churchill, John Major and Tony Blair – who devoted some considerable proportion of their credibility, energy and time to answering 'the Irish Question'.

For all these reasons, I agree with Derek Beales that Gladstone's programme of 1868, far from being merely a continuation of mid-Victorian liberalism, 'by comparison with the pledges of Palmerston and others before him, and Disraeli after him, and with his own plans of 1859 ... was vast and radical.'³ Over the next few years, such pledges resulted in a frantic process of drafting and passing new legislation. The government introduced 92 bills in 1869, 84 in 1870, 111 in 1871, 89 in 1872 and 104 in 1873. Despite the extraordinary pressure on parliamentary time, only a minority of these bills were abandoned (for example only nineteen in 1869, and twenty in 1873). Most of these were dropped because they were thought to be poorly drafted, though others were sidelined because they were serving 'sectional' interests (for example those of Scotland).⁶ Many of the bills which were passed were complex and controversial, and took up an extraordinary number of nights as they went through second reading and the committee stage. Despite all the difficulties, the government pushed on relentlessly, resorting to unorthodox practices when necessary (most famously, Army Purchase was abolished by Royal Warrant, rather than Act of Parliament).⁷

While Gladstone ended constantly concerned about Ireland, his copious diaries disprove the often-repeated claim that he was a man of 'one idea at a time'.⁸ As Beales has written, 'he ... [presided] over the cabinet with uncommon efficiency, unexpectedly good temper and surprising balance. He [was] to be found promoting legislation and making policy in areas, like law reform and the affairs of Fiji, far removed from his specialisms. He [showed] himself ready to compromise even on issues affecting his deepest convictions, like the Cowper-Temple clause of the Education Act of 1870. So enormous [was] his capacity that almost the entire river of the country's business [seemed] to flow through his mind and pen.'⁹ As the contributors to this issue make abundantly clear, the result of such prodigious efforts were not consistently and unequivocally successful. Yet, again, in a wide range of policy areas the 1868–74 government identified and addressed problems which would remain crucial for the next 150 years.

Posterity was duly impressed, with politicians of diverse orientation claiming aspects of his legacy. In the late twentieth and in the twenty-first

century, the centre-left admired his vision and resolve, 'ethical' foreign policy, openness to the labour movement and ability to appeal to a wide cross-section of the population.¹⁰ By contrast, free-market purists argued that he was a pioneer of the idea of a 'fiscal constitution'. This is the notion that effective limits to government expenditure (and thus reform programmes or foreign policy initiatives) can be enforced through the Treasury when the tax system limits rigidly the revenue, and makes it impossible to raise more taxes without renegotiating the terms in which the country is run.¹¹

Allegedly, Gladstone's 1874 election manifesto, with its offer to repeal the income tax, encapsulated the spirit of such strategy.¹² However, this experiment was never enacted, because he lost the election and the incoming Conservative government (under Disraeli) was not prepared to deprive the government of the flexibility afforded by income tax (which allowed for the rapid increase of the revenue whenever central government expenditure demanded it, by simply adding to the rate of the taxation). In any case, in Victorian Britain a large proportion of public expenditure depended not on central government taxation, but on local rates, which town councils and school boards could increase to meet expense or raise funds for local needs. *Pace* the Virginia School, the Gladstonian 'fiscal constitution', such as it was, remained very vague and was primarily constrained by the electors' and ratepayers' willingness to pay – which was a *political process*, rather than a *constitution*.

Religion

Religion was the single most important source of controversy in Victorian politics. In particular, reforming the established Irish Protestant church had always been difficult and divisive. Britain was a solidly Protestant country, with the Loyal Orange Order flourishing in parts of England and Scotland as much as it did in Ulster. In Ireland taken as a whole, over one quarter of the population was Protestant. Though they were militant wherever they represented a local majority, Irish Protestants were aware of their vulnerability, had a collective memory of sectarian persecution and were very suspicious of the intention of their Catholic neighbours. Anti-Catholic, anti-Irish feeling had traditionally been strong especially in the North West of England – where Irish immigration was heavier.¹³

As John Powell writes in his perceptive and revealing analysis of Gladstone's *A Chapter of Autobiography*, it was difficult to persuade a staunchly Protestant electorate that the disestablishment and disendowment of the Episcopal Church in Ireland were desirable measures, at a time when the Roman Catholic Church was militantly anti-Liberal, and Liberalism was closely associated with anti-clerical, anti-Catholic

politics both at home and abroad.¹⁴ It was even more difficult to reconcile such measures with Gladstone's own tortuous record on Church and State matters. While much of the British electorate was ready for a radical new departure in this area, as Tim Larsen has shown in his recent, outstanding study of John Stuart Mill,¹⁵ Irish Church disestablishment was divisive and encouraged the voters who had hitherto supported the Liberals to consider instead Disraeli's reinvigorated, centrist Conservative Party, the self-styled defender of the 'English Constitution'. In 1868, despite the party's success across the United Kingdom, Gladstone himself lost his seat in South West Lancashire, where he came third, with two Tory candidates being returned. The Liberal party leader had to seek another seat (he moved to the London constituency of Greenwich).

Within such a difficult context, it is to his credit and that of his cabinet that they pressed ahead with their Irish reforms. And if some of the latter were inadequate to address the relevant problems, we should not forget that Gladstone operated under a parliamentary system in which the Tory party controlled the majority in the House of Lords, and the latter had effective veto powers.

From 1870 the government was progressively weakened by disagreements about the way further reform could be reconciled with different understandings of the moral and religious duties of the state and the relationship between the churches and the educational facilities funded at public expense. Most Whigs upheld the traditional Erastian view, according to which only parliamentary control of the Church could shelter the country from the clash of opposing enthusiasms. By contrast, Gladstone, the Nonconformists and the High Churchmen defended the cause of ecclesiastical autonomy against state interference. As Jon Parry put it in an important article in 1982:

[the] former group felt that the vital function of Liberalism was to spread enlightenment and progressive sentiment against the obstructiveness of clerical or dogmatic influence; Gladstone defined its most crucial task very differently. It was to allow all religions sufficient equality before the law, and sufficient independence from it, to enable them to undertake their spiritual responsibilities in mutual harmony, without restriction, and to the certain benefit of all peoples.¹⁶

In his contribution to the present issue of the *JLH*, Parry revisits a topic which he did so much to define over the past generation. His current reassessment of the Liberal statesman is more generous than his previous analysis. He now tends to see some of Gladstone's failures as due to a wide set of circumstances, more than to specific tactical or strategic mistakes. However, when dealing with Ireland and religious disputes in Britain, it

proved impossible for him to establish the government's 'disinterestedness' – i.e., that claim to impartiality and therefore to 'justice' and moral authority – which had been so important in the making of Liberal power in the 1850s. Furthermore, disagreement about how to face the altered situation in continental Europe (following the Franco-Prussian war) contributed to weakening his ability to assess and handle the situation.

And then there was Ireland, again, with its multi-layered problems. Kanter skilfully unpacks the 'original sins' of Gladstone's approach to Ireland. However, such flaws did not prevent him from securing a resounding success with the disestablishment of the Episcopal Church, which became the self-governing Church of Ireland, run by synods of lay and clerical representatives as well as by bishops and Archbishops. While this turn toward synod-based self-government anticipated changes which later transformed the governance of the Church of England too, partial disendowment came at the last possible time when Irish Protestant could have coped with its economic consequences. From the late 1870s, the drop in agricultural prices and the start of the Irish Land League agitations seriously undermined their economic position.

Land reform was at the time largely intractable. But the 1870 Act had the merit of making a start and laying down some broad principles – including the need to qualify the power of the landed gentry and move towards some system of land purchase. Could more have been achieved? This is a counterfactual that cannot be tested, but Kanter rightly shows how Gladstone's margin of manoeuvre was constrained by both domestic and international events, including the Pope's proclamation of infallibility, which provoked Protestant outrage and a new wave of anti-Catholic feeling in Britain. The only catastrophic and avoidable mistake was the University Bill, which nearly killed off the government in 1873. Though the bill might have secured the support of the Catholic bishops, even had it passed parliamentary scrutiny, it would have been difficult to implement.

Next to Irish-related issues, primary education was the greatest source of controversy, as Geoff Chorley explains in his article. In charge of drafting the bill and navigating it through parliament was W. E. Forster, the Lord President of the Council. He was an Anglican of Quaker background, who had served in Ireland with the Friends' ambulance during the Great Potato Famine. Ireland had been given a very effective, but deeply sectarian, school system as early as 1830. The model of school management which Forster adopted was instead borrowed from the United States, and in particular the Massachusetts school board system. In their English version, school boards were elected by both ratepayers of both sexes through a complex voting system, which benefited female candidates as well as local minorities. This, together with the triennial

Religion was the single most important source of controversy in Victorian politics. In particular, reforming the established Irish Protestant church had always been difficult and divisive.

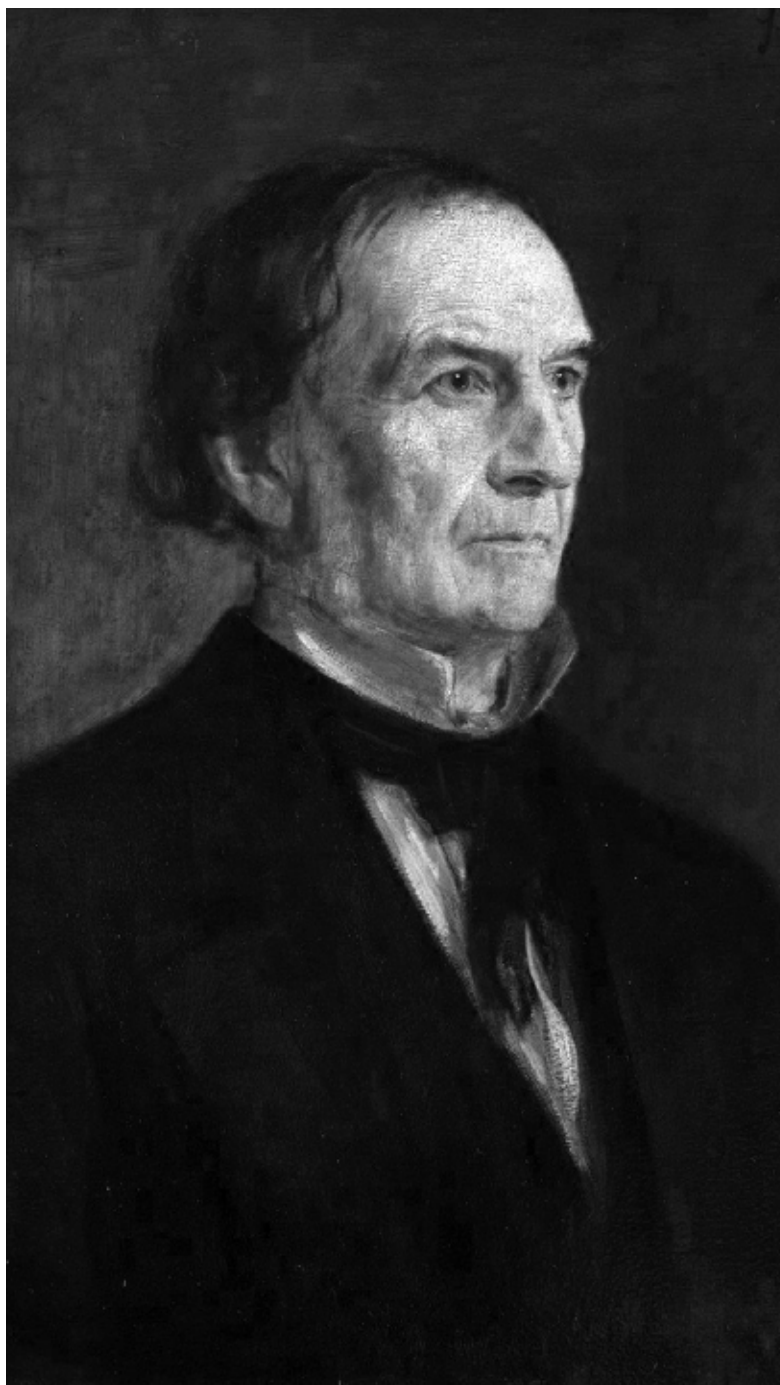
Gladstone's first government, 1868–74

elections, helped to defuse religious animosities in the long run.¹⁷ However, the immediate aftermath of the act was characterised by internecine fights among Liberals in board elections, while W. E. Forster was viciously attacked by radical Nonconformists.¹⁸

Backbench rebellions, three-cornered contests in by-elections, the challenge of both trade-union parliamentary candidates in England and the Home Rule Association in Ireland kept bleeding the majority. Such impatience among both the British left and the Irish was due to overconfidence, as Parry notes. By 1870 many reformers behaved as if they believed that the Tories were in terminal decline, and the UK was about to leap into a democratic 'brave new world', in which the real struggle would be between radicals and Whigs. The extraordinary bitterness generated by the Education Act in Nonconformist circles was a function of such overconfidence. Many believed that Gladstonian improvements were not the *maximum*, but the *minimum* to which true reformers should aspire under the forthcoming 'democratic' dispensation. After all, the almost millenarian vision of the Chartists – who had been a power in the country as late as 1848 – was still fresh in the radical memory. Contemporary observers – including Disraeli and Karl Marx – shared this essentially post-Chartist expectation that working-class voters were naturally oriented to the left. With so many of them being enfranchised, the 'forward march' of radicalism would break up the Liberal Party and dwarf the Tories. The case with the desertion of the Irish Liberals was different, but was nevertheless based on the assumption that the government should have done more for them. Gladstone had to find a way to hold the party together under such peculiar circumstances. A snap election on a 'safe' platform – driven by the Treasury, as in the good old days – was one option. Yet, as Mahel has written:

Until December [1873], Gladstone did not conceive of the budget proposals as an election cry. Rather, he thought of the financial programme as a mechanism, consistent with political principle, by which to obscure the issues that were dividing the liberals and to unite the party once more on a measure of overriding importance. He planned to rally the Liberals for the 1874 session around their fundamental policies of retrenchment and economy, after which he intended to appeal to the country on the basis of the party's accomplishment in finance, a field in which many of its past glories lay. Only as he encountered the resistance of Cardwell and Goschen did the idea of dissolution appear and slowly grow into a resolve.¹⁹

These two ministers were in charge, respectively, of the Army and the Admiralty, whose activism was now almost out of control. For Gladstone, the real challenge was not how to stop Conservatism,



whose resurgence he grossly underestimated, but how to contain the 'profligate' ambition of the military departments, emboldened by the need to rearm after the recent wars in Europe and excited by opportunities of further colonial expansion in Africa.

William Ewart Gladstone in 1874; portrait by Franz von Lenbach

Defeat

Brooks' article on 1874 approaches this important election – when the Conservatives first established their ability to win a very large share of the popular vote under a (quasi) democratic electoral system – by focusing on two key factors: Disraeli's rebuttal of Gladstone's rather nebulous election manifesto, and the backlash against Liberal reforms in small and medium-sized boroughs. It is

questionable whether either of these factors would have been so important, had it not been for the way the distribution of seats over-represented small borough constituencies, resulting in the Tories securing a substantial majority of seats with a minority of the popular vote.

Brooks offers an important contribution to our understanding of how British political discourse had changed between 1868 and 1874. Yet, rather than a radical rejection of Liberalism, Disraeli offered continuity, or rather a return to Peelite reform in social and economic politics, Palmerstonian assertiveness in international relations, and, for the rest, constitutional consolidation and continuity.

Some of the public concerns that Disraeli exploited were about the Liberals' alleged intention to curtail the powers of the House of Lords. The latter's relationship with the Gladstone government is the theme of Tony Little's contribution. It is well known that the 1868 Liberal administration included many peers: in fact, fourteen out of thirty departments had hereditary noblemen as their head, with some holding more than one office. However, the Liberals had steadily been losing support in the Upper House. In the long run, this was bound to pose serious constitutional questions for the country as a whole, especially once Lord Salisbury reinterpreted the Lords' remit and encouraged them to be more assertive. However, as Little shows, the situation began to deteriorate as early as 1869, and soon the government fell back on the old Whig strategy of requesting the monarch to create new peers, who might help to rebalance the position of the government in the Lords. Even this proved inadequate to bend the Lords on the issue of the Army Purchase, as noted above. Likewise, the Secret Ballot Bill was so difficult that at one stage Gladstone contemplated dissolving parliament on a 'Peers *versus* the People' platform.

While all of this has contemporary resonance in our Brexit world, it is important to bear in mind that the Upper House with which Gladstone dealt was very different from its namesake in 2018. It consisted exclusively of hereditary peers, most of them being large landowners. Their wealth and territorial roots made them more 'representative' (because farming was one of the largest employed of labour in the country), but also more narrowly focused on issues which could be divisive and excite class antagonism. However, the main constitutional problem was

that – at a stage when the country was slowly becoming more democratic – the House of Lords seemed determined to resist popular pressure and frustrate the House of Commons. This in turn pushed Gladstone and part of the Liberals towards more radical positions, and certainly more populist rhetoric. If in 1872 such populism was largely a matter of posture, the conflict resumed from 1880, when the Gladstone was returned to power, and lasted long enough for the Liberals to conclude that drastic reform was necessary. As Gladstone himself was to indicate in 1894, in his last speech in parliament, 'the question [was] ... whether the judgment of the House of Lords is not only to modify, but is to annihilate the whole work of the House of Commons'.²⁰ He would not live to see how such question would eventually be answered. But the challenge that it implied was picked up by Asquith and Lloyd George, whose 1911 act secured the single most radical reform of parliament since Oliver Cromwell.

Eugenio F. Biagini is Professor of Modern and Contemporary History at the University of Cambridge, and has written on the history of liberalism, nationalism, religion and democracy, focusing on Britain, Ireland and Italy. His most recent book is The Cambridge Social History of Ireland (edited with Mary Daly, 2017). He is the general editor of the Bloomsbury Cultural History of Democracy (six volumes, 2020), and is currently writing a monograph on religious minorities and national identity in twentieth-century Ireland.

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The General Election of 1868: the Results

THE 1868 GENERAL election gave Gladstone and the Liberal Party an undisputed landslide victory, such that Disraeli accepted the outcome by resigning when the results became clear rather than waiting to meet the new parliament. See Table.

The apparent pattern, of a net Liberal advance everywhere except in the English counties, belies some interesting regional cross-currents.

Most notably, there was a sharp Conservative advance in the North-West region, where Conservatives won both all the new county divisions created by the 1868 redistribution and some existing Liberal boroughs. Notable Liberal casualties there included Gladstone himself in the redrawn South-West Lancashire division and Milner Gray

(MP since 1857 and President of the Board of Trade in the previous Liberal cabinet) in Ashton-under-Lyne. Though other factors were involved, this was widely seen as a response to Gladstone's policy of disestablishment of the Church of Ireland in the part of England most affected by Irish immigration, where anti-Catholic sentiment had recently been aroused by a Protestant Evangelical Mission (see Chapter 14, 'A Lancashire Election: 1868', especially pp. 304–08 regarding the Mission, in H. J. Hanham, *Elections and Party Management* (2nd edition, Harvester, 1978)).

Elsewhere there was a small Conservative gain of three seats in the London area, that in the City of London being due to the introduction of the limited vote, a crude form of proportional

The 1868 general election result in seats				
	<i>Boroughs</i>	<i>Counties</i>	<i>Universities</i>	<i>All</i>
England	Lib 197 Con 89	Con 127 Lib 45	Con 4 Lib 1	Lib 243 Con 220
Wales	Lib 13 Con 2	Lib 9 Con 6	n/a	Lib 22 Con 8
Scotland	Lib 28	Lib 24 Con 8	Lib 2	Lib 52 Con 8
Ireland	Lib 28 Con 11	Lib 37 Con 27	Con 2	Lib 65 Con 40
House of Commons total	Lib 267 Con 108	Lib 243 Con 220	Con 6 Lib 3	Lib 382 Con 276
Change compared with 1865				
	<i>Boroughs</i>	<i>Counties</i>	<i>Universities</i>	<i>All</i>
England	Lib -1 Con -33	Con +28 Lib -3	Lib +1	Lib -3 Con -5
Wales	Lib +1	Lib +3 Con -3	n/a	Lib +4 Con -3
Scotland	Lib +3	Lib +6 Con -4	Lib +2	Lib +11 Con -4
Ireland	Lib +5 Con -5	Lib +5 Con -5	n/c	Lib +10 Con -10
House of Commons total	Lib +11 Con -38	Lib +11 Con +16	Lib +3	Lib +22 Con -22

The figures in this table are taken from C. Cook & J. Stevenson, *A History of British Elections Since 1689* (Routledge, 2014), using their Table 5.1 for 1868 and Table 4.9 for 1865. There are inevitable minor differences between the sources for summary totals of mid-nineteenth-century elections. Apart from uncertainties about the party designation of some MPs, there were occasional double returns (both of individual MPs returned for more than one constituency, and of constituencies for which an excess of candidates were declared elected, since prior to 1872 there was no casting vote in the case of a tie). Sources also differ in the treatment of results altered following election petitions and the allocation of Monmouthshire (then in England, now in Wales). F.W.S. Craig (*British Parliamentary Elections 1832–1885* (MacMillan, 1977)) gives the overall 1868 result as 387:271 and the overall 1865 result as 370:288 (Table 2, p. 622), writing: 'There were always a number of candidates who could equally well have been classed as Liberal or Conservative' (op. cit. p. xv).



representation, but another in Westminster (where John Stuart Mill lost his seat) reflecting the start of the clear movement to the Conservatives in the metropolis that was to become more evident in 1874. These regional exceptions mean that in most of urban England, as in Scotland and Wales, the Liberals clearly gained ground between 1865 and 1868.

This, however, cannot easily be measured in the votes cast. First, there were no votes cast in nearly one-third of the constituencies: 212 of the 658 MPs were returned unopposed. This had been normal in mid-century elections; in 1865, there had been 303 MPs returned unopposed, and of the 141 by-elections since then, only 45 had been contested. The 1868 election marked the start of a trend to more widespread contests, as unopposed returns dropped to 187 in 1874 and 109 in 1880.

Then, most constituencies were multi-member until 1885. In 1868, 196 MPs were returned for a single-member constituency, 422 for a double-member one and 40 for 13 multi-member constituencies in which the limited vote was used. In many of these, parties put up incomplete slates, most often the Conservatives fielding a single candidate against two (or more) Liberals. Consequently, Liberal electors were enabled to cast more votes.

This differential opportunity includes several constituencies, generally the more populous working-class ones, where all the candidates standing were regarded as Liberals – i.e. the actual contest was between different strands of Liberalism, or over the choice of a candidate in a strongly

Liberal area. The 1868 election was the last with public voting, in which a continuous tally could be kept of votes cast during polling day, and it was still not unusual for a candidate to drop out when it became apparent that another, of the same political family, was better placed to win.

If the actual votes cast are added up, there was a massive Liberal superiority. The figures used by Roy Jenkins – Liberal 1,355,000 to Conservative 883,000 – in *Gladstone* (Macmillan, 1995) are typical of those quoted. That equates to a popular voting lead of well over twenty points, far greater than Thatcher’s best (nearly 15 points in 1983) or Blair’s (12.5 in 1997). However, Gladstone did not truly win such a lead.

If that lead had reflected the actual balance of party strength among voters, then the well-known exaggerative character of the first-past-the-post system should have produced a Commons of over 500 Liberal MPs to only some 150 Conservatives. The difference between such an imbalance and the actual balance indicates that if due allowance were made for uncontested seats, multiple votes and the greater number of Liberal candidates available, the real balance of popular support at the 1868 election was very much closer than the simple voting figures suggest.

Michael Steed wrote (or co-wrote with John Curtice) the analytical appendix to the Nuffield series of general-election studies 1964–2005. and stood as a Liberal parliamentary candidate seven times between 1967 and 1983.

Cartoon drawn by J. Priestman Atkinson, one of a series that appeared weekly during the 1868 election, subsequently collected and re-published in book form in *East Derbyshire Election Cartoons, 1868*. The contest for East Derbyshire was a hard fought affair, with the Liberal candidates, Francis Egerton and Henry Strutt, victorious over their Conservative opponents by narrow margins. Cartoon reproduced by kind permission of the University of Leicester.

Policy overview

Jonathan Parry analyses Gladstone's government's record of achievements

Gladstone's First Government



“Self and Partner.” Mr Gladstone: “My dear First Lord, I have the utmost confidence in you.” Mr. Gladstone: “And I in you, my dear Chancellor of the Exchequer, and if our colleagues were only like us, we should all be as one man!” Gladstone appointed himself his own Chancellor of the Exchequer in August 1873 (*Punch*, 20 September 1873)

ment: a Policy Overview

THE GOVERNMENT THAT William Gladstone formed in December 1868 has often been seen as the first real Liberal government in Britain, following the formation of a 'Liberal party' in parliament in 1859 and in the constituencies in the 1860s.¹ The passage of the 1867 Reform Act is still generally viewed as a major dividing line in British political history, on account of the extension of the franchise to urban working-class male householders, and the consequential development of mass political organisation.² These changes certainly had a profound impact on political culture – but they took at least ten years, and in most respects twenty, to work through to parliamentary politics. If we focus on political behaviour at Westminster, a lot of historical work since the 1980s has made it clearer that the Liberal Party that Gladstone inherited in 1868 was shaped by the perspectives of the previous thirty or forty years. There was no major discontinuity in 1867. Throughout the nineteenth century there had been a strong Whig tradition and a strong Radical one in parliament, but these groups were used to cooperating, and already in the 1830s and 1840s, the term 'Liberal' was frequently used to describe the non-Conservative parliamentary party.³

The historical writing on the policy initiatives of the Whig–Liberal governments of 1830–66 allows us a better perspective on the opportunities and difficulties faced by Gladstone as prime minister between 1868 and 1874.⁴ He was a new leader of an old parliamentary grouping, albeit operating in a changed post-Reform Act setting. He wanted to do bold things as party leader; indeed he saw this as the politician's social and moral obligation. But his supporters were a coalition of independent-minded gentlemen of different traditions and approaches, unused either to discipline or to tight policy agendas. In 1868 Gladstone had a majority of 110, but this emphatically did not make his party easy to manage. This essay tries to explain why government policy took the form that it did, and why the ministry started so well and ended so badly. It suggests that the crucial explanatory factor is the context in which it

operated – both its inheritance, and contemporary international events.

There had been three stages to Whig–Liberal government between 1830 and 1866. The first was a broad coalition of various parliamentary groups formed under Earl Grey in 1830 in a climate of severe national crisis to pursue parliamentary reform and cuts to government spending, both of which seemed essential for political and social stability. These reforms established the basic principle of Victorian Liberalism, of pragmatic adjustment of parliamentary representation so as to allow matured public opinion to have an effective voice, especially in protesting against excessive taxation and other forms of 'oppressive' government. This government also responded to a massive middle-class petitioning campaign for the abolition of slavery and for Poor Law reform, but in the process used official investigations to reshape social policy on poor relief and criminal punishment in line with prevailing elitist enlightenment assumptions about how to 'improve' and moralise the lower classes. The second stage, between 1835 and 1841 and again from 1846 to 1852, was a more party- and creed-based government dominated by Lord John Russell (though with Viscount Melbourne as prime minister during the first period). Though Russell had been one of the main authors of the 1832 Reform Act, and was to take up the cause of Reform again in the 1850s, during this period he tried instead to organise Liberal MPs around a pluralistic religious, Irish and educational strategy designed to conciliate the Irish (especially the Catholics) to accept the Union with Britain, to reconcile Protestant Nonconformists to the Anglican Church Establishment in England, and to integrate Anglican and Nonconformist elementary schools in something approaching a state-assisted system. These policies conciliated Daniel O'Connell and his Irish followers but alienated many former Reformers, of whom some, led by Lord Stanley (the future 14th Earl of Derby), defected to the Conservatives. From 1841 the leading Liberals also moved towards the free trade policy adopted by Richard Cobden, the Anti-Corn Law League,

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and many urban MPs, initially slowly, but much more decisively once they inherited government in 1846 from Robert Peel after he had split the Conservative Party on the issue. And in the late 1840s Russell and like-minded ministers also extended state regulation of public health and reduced hours of factory labour.

The third stage was a reaction against activist Russellism – a reaction against the idea that Liberalism required a vigorous policy of concession to Nonconformists and Irish Catholics, a contentious extension of state power in social and educational matters, or – above all – the return to parliamentary reform that Russell floated in response to the European revolutions of 1848. This stage saw the dominance of Viscount Palmerston, who used his populist liberal foreign policy to wrest control over the Liberal side of the House of Commons from Russell in the early 1850s, and to see off the threat from the leading Peelites, and who was prime minister for most of the time from 1855 until he died in 1865. Palmerston relied for success on an assertive foreign policy, free trade and the complacency arising from national prosperity. He was also less of a party man than Russell, determined to project a national appeal and willing to draw support not only from the Peelites (formally integrated from 1859) but occasionally from the Conservative opposition (led by Derby and Disraeli) when it helped him to avoid uncongenial demands from radical Liberal MPs. Thus Palmerston managed to define himself against Russell and against the opposition while using both for his purposes. His most consistent opponent, arguably, was Cobden, leader of the Manchester school radicals who advocated peace and a low-spending foreign policy and sought to expose Palmerston's bombast. Even so, these radicals stayed within the capacious Liberal tent. Within months of Palmerston's death, his sprawling coalition lost office in 1866 when Russell, his obvious successor, was defeated in an attempt to bring in a Reform bill, a telling example of how Palmerston had purchased stability for so long by avoiding contentious policy. In 1867 a new minority Conservative government drove through a Reform Act of its own, outmanoeuvring and splitting the Liberal Party and leaving it in uncharacteristic turmoil. It was obvious to everyone, except perhaps Russell himself, that the 75-year-old needed to be replaced by a new party leader, and equally obvious that this would be Gladstone, the former Peelite and chancellor of the exchequer. In March 1868 Gladstone took the initiative by using the issue of Ireland to reunite the Liberals and to undermine the Conservative government; an autumn election on the new franchise confirmed and indeed increased their majority. The result was no surprise, but over two million people voted (more than twice the number in 1865), giving his new government an extra legitimacy.

Gladstone's parliamentary Liberal Party essentially comprised the same groups of MPs as had Palmerston's large coalition. However Gladstone, like Russell, believed that the party could best be kept together by pursuing an active policy agenda – though for Gladstone, as for Russell, this activist preference was driven by personal temperament at least as much as by calculation.

Gladstone's parliamentary Liberal Party essentially comprised the same groups of MPs as had Palmerston's large coalition. However Gladstone, like Russell, believed that the party could best be kept together by pursuing an active policy agenda – though for Gladstone, as for Russell, this activist preference was driven by personal temperament at least as much as by calculation. It would be wrong to think that the election campaign had provided him with that unifying, policy-based agenda. The idea that elections should be fought in order to bind a party around an extended policy programme was not to be accepted for decades – it was controversial even when the Liberals tried it with the Newcastle Programme in 1891–2. Local candidates fought on a great array of issues, mostly related to the various policy traditions sketched above, resulting in many different expectations for the new ministry. However Gladstone's speeches in his South-West Lancashire constituency were extensively reported in the press and set the main terms of debate. He concentrated almost exclusively on two subjects which he claimed marked the difference between Liberals and Conservatives: the Irish Church, and economy in public spending.

Gladstone argued that Ireland required the urgent attention of British politicians, because of the recent re-emergence of a constitutional reform movement there, and Fenian outrages in Manchester and London. He asserted that it was a moral imperative to remove a Tory government which could never solve the Irish problem because of its institutional religious biases and general shortsightedness. (His passion in making this argument was surely swayed by his dislike of Disraeli, who had recently succeeded Derby as prime minister.) The British state needed to win Catholic respect by pursuing a policy of disinterestedness as between the religious sects in Ireland, removing the Protestant Establishment and abolishing state funding for religious institutions at university level. Tories, however, were trying to buy Catholic support for the Anglican Church Establishment by subsidising Catholic college education. Gladstone's emphasis on disestablishment and the removal of funding for university religious teaching was a good strategy for unifying the Liberal Party because it was a reworking of the assault on the Irish Church Establishment which had bound the Whigs and Irish Catholics together to form the government of 1835, with the addition of an explicit commitment to disestablishment which excited Protestant Nonconformists as a general principle, plus a rejection of the policy of state funding of Catholicism, which had been a running sore in British politics since the grant to the priestly seminary at Maynooth was increased in 1845. At the election Gladstone claimed that the difference between the parties was that the Liberals wanted no Church Establishment in Ireland and the Conservatives 'three or four'.³ Gladstone thus asserted that his Irish policy

would deal a blow to Roman Catholic political pretensions in Ireland. Indeed many Liberals drew parallels between their Irish policy and their recent support for the unification of Italy as a secular liberal state, which had diminished the temporal power of the Pope on that peninsula.

This disinterestedness as between sects, together with a nod towards upholding the different historic traditions of land tenure in Ireland, was what Gladstone meant by 'justice to Ireland'. (His lack of any commitment to Irish reforms beyond the religious sphere is striking.) The principle of state disinterestedness could equally be applied to public spending, the other great theme of Gladstone's election speeches. He warned repeatedly that there were vested interests – 'knots and groups, and I may say classes' – who were constantly trying to take public money for themselves, and that the Tories' bargain with these groups explained the increase of £3 million in public expenditure during their short government. This was un-English and unsafe – a 'Continental system of feeding the desires of classes and portions of the community at the expense of the whole' – and was directly related to their absence of a popular mandate.⁶ Only Liberals could manage the public finances fairly as between the classes and interests of the country. The purpose of economical government was to leave the nation's financial resources free to grow and be productive, but there was a more fundamental political objective, which was to demonstrate to the working classes, to Radicals and to any other potential critics that the state was in good hands and no longer a tool of elite oppression and 'Old Corruption'. This was a way of bringing the Cobdenites in from their Palmerstonian exile – most symbolically with the admission of John Bright to the 1868 cabinet – but also of shooting the radicals' fox and indeed of exterminating the whole vulpine species which radicals had summoned to threaten the political elite for the last century. Just as the Peelites had done with the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, this was a strategy of removing contentious financial impositions that generated dangerous complaints at the class bias and general corruption of the state. The absorption of so many workingmen in the constitution made it viable to claim that the state was now finally in popular ownership. Bright announced in 1868 that by the Reform Act 'power ... has been given henceforth and for ever to the people ... we have no longer charges to bring against a selfish oligarchy; ... we no longer feel ourselves domineered over by a class ... the responsibility of the future must rest with the great majority of the people'.⁷

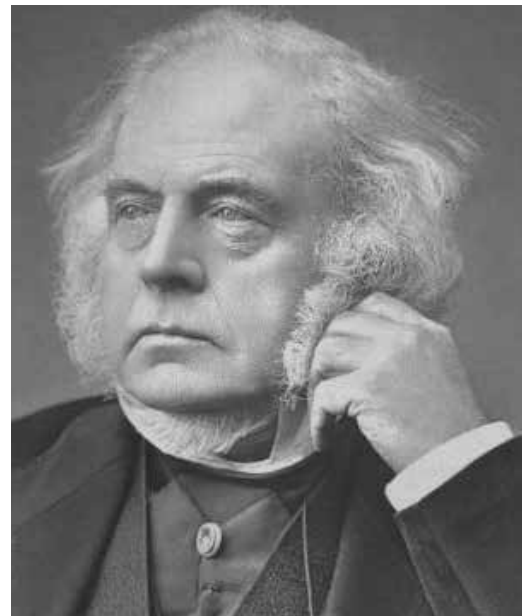
As prime minister Gladstone delivered on these promises by disestablishing the Irish Church in 1869 and passing the Irish Land Act in 1870, and by reducing defence expenditure by 15%. Moreover in 1870 his government made two administrative changes which were designed to show that vested interest politics had ended. The

Liberal cabinet ministers:

Spencer Cavendish, Marquess of Hartington (1833–1908): Postmaster-General 1868–71, Chief Secretary for Ireland 1871–74

John Bright (1811–89): President of Board of Trade 1868–71

Robert Lowe (1811–92): Chancellor of the Exchequer 1868–73, Home Secretary 1873–74



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introduction of competitive examinations across almost the whole civil service put the last nail in the coffin of 'Old Corruption' by removing the Treasury's remaining patronage powers, addressing the radicals' long-standing charges about political jobbing. In 1871 Gladstone claimed to his constituents at Blackheath that, with regard to clerkships in his Treasury, 'every one of you has just as much power over their disposal as I have'.⁸ Meanwhile, the civil government definitively and boldly asserted its control over the military administration. The Horse Guards, the seat of the power of the Duke of Cambridge, the royal commander-in-chief, were moved to Pall Mall and placed within the War Office bureaucracy, which was restructured into three large divisions.

Had Gladstone been so minded, he could have claimed that his task was done within two years of becoming prime minister. However his executive temperament drove him to organise an ambitious roster of further legislation. Keeping busy was partly a personal need, but it was also his strategy for keeping Liberal MPs disciplined and orderly; he was to write in 1877 that 'the vital principle of the Liberal party, like that of Greek art, is action, [which alone makes] it worthy of the name of a party'.⁹ Much of the legislation of these years was born from official reports and debates instigated under previous governments but not brought to fruition: thus middle-class schools were reformed in 1869, religious tests in universities were abolished in 1871, and trade unions were legalised in the same year. These reforms were important, and contentious in some respects, but they did not undermine party unity or the government's parliamentary position.

Party unity and the government's position were both undermined, however, for other reasons. Between 1870 and the government's electoral defeat in 1874 it suffered many backbench rebellions, it lost over twenty by-elections, and eventually its authority ran into the sand. Fundamentally this was because of a clash within the party between two policy traditions from the Liberal past, embodying different attitudes towards the role of the state. They would have been at odds in any case, but the tensions between them were made worse by a dramatic deterioration of the global situation as a result of the Franco-Prussian war and other international developments.

On the one hand, the far-reaching extension of the franchise in 1867 emboldened those interventionists who, as in the 1830s, wanted to accompany parliamentary reform with a series of measures which aimed to discipline and improve the character of workingmen and thus underpin social stability. This was an approach shared by many Russellite Whigs, Benthamite intellectuals and Christian socialist moralist gentlemen, as well as public-spirited representatives from several large towns. Their flagship policy was the 1870 Education Act, but there were other examples of a similar tendency. In 1869 the government

tightened the workhouse test in order to reduce the poor-rate burden, and passed a Habitual Criminals Act to strengthen its power to arrest frequently offending criminals. The 1870 Married Women's Property Act was a response to anxieties that drink was preventing working-class husbands from protecting the living standards and respectability of their families; it sought to give the wife limited control over her own property, as a check on indebtedness. Public health legislation of 1871 and 1872 created a comprehensive network of local sanitary authorities, each with specific obligations and a medical officer.

On the other hand, many radical MPs expected that the 1867 act would be followed by a final push against those parts of the state apparatus which had resisted popular control up to now. This was partly about cutting expenditure further: at the 1868 election it was common to point to Cobden's plan of 1848 to reduce central state expenditure by £10 million back to the 1835 level, and to rue the fact that instead £10 million had been added since then. More generally the moment seemed to have come to tackle the remaining bastions of class privilege: the diplomatic service, the army and the monarchy. Auberon Herbert claimed that 'an end must be put to those privileges and exclusions which still existed as between different classes in this country'.¹⁰ Peter Rylands secured a select committee to push for drastic expenditure reductions in the diplomatic service. George Otto Trevelyan continued a family battle for administrative reform, attacking army extravagance and inefficiency. Many Liberals felt that behind-the-scenes royal influence in foreign as well as military policy sat ill with the logic of 1867 that popularly elected institutions should determine policy. A number of MPs criticised the cost and utility of the monarchy, all the more so because of the queen's invisibility and the Prince of Wales's involvement in the Mordaunt divorce case in 1869. At the 1868 election, many Liberal candidates took advantage of the Irish Church debate to oppose all new endowments of religion, arguing that it was an outdated and immoral policy to give taxpayers' money to particular religious vested interests. They pointed to Canada, Australia, Scotland and Italy, where voluntary churches were thriving. Some pledged to remove Anglican bishops from the Lords as a first step towards disestablishment in England. More electoral reform would also entrench popular control: the next step was generally thought to be the introduction of the secret ballot. This in fact became law in 1872, while in 1870 the principle of popular election was extended to the new school boards; moreover, single women ratepayers were allowed to vote for these boards, as well as in local government elections from 1869.

It was over elementary education and disestablishment that these two approaches clashed most painfully. The 1870 Education Act was the culmination of years of pressure for a national system

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of elementary education from philanthropists, backbenchers and some frontbenchers, including Russell. The idea had previously foundered on Dissenters' instinctive suspicion of state involvement in religious teaching, combined with ratepayer anxiety about the cost and the principle. The large-scale extension of the franchise in 1867 made it essential, in the eyes of moralistic elite Liberals, for something to be done to 'compel our future masters to learn their letters', as Robert Lowe famously said.¹¹ At the same time it diluted the Dissenters' historic aversion to the exercise of state power sufficiently to allow them to support the basic principle of the 1870 act, the idea that popularly elected school boards would be set up to provide schools where existing provision by the various churches was inadequate. However they were so instinctively worried that the state would favour the interests of the established Church – or, even worse, Roman Catholicism – that they reacted vehemently to section 25 of the act, which allowed authorities to pay the school fees of poor parents at any school of their choice. Opposition to 'Clause 25' drove the so-called 'Nonconformist revolt' against the act, which most Liberal MPs found it impossible to resist; in 1872, only sixty-seven backbench Liberals voted against a motion to abolish the section. In 1871–2 the Dissenting leaders expanded this campaign into an agitation for disestablishment of the Church of England, and in many places also for the restriction of ratepayer school funding to secular subjects rather than religious teaching, a policy that was already being adopted in radical Birmingham. To them the abolition of the connection between the state and religious provision was a natural consequence of Gladstone's pledge to implement this in Ireland in 1868. It was also an example of the new politics that they thought 1867 would usher in, in which all examples of state bias in favour of the propertied and Anglican classes would be abandoned. However the proposals to disestablish the Church in England and remove compulsory rate-supported bible teaching from board schools antagonised many moralistic Anglican Liberals – such as Thomas Hughes the Christian Socialist novelist and MP – and swung them towards the Church defence camp. While the Liberal Party split over the future of religious policy, the Conservative opposition received a great boon: the electoral reaction in favour of the Conservative Party that resulted in the shock 1874 election victory was driven very largely by a propertied voter panic that radicals would use their increased power in the new political order to abolish all institutional safeguards for religion and morality.

Division over the role of the state in shaping popular morals was also evident on the issue of drink. The 1871 Licensing Bill proposed a special police inspectorate for public houses, to be appointed by the Home Office. This touched a radical nerve, and led the old Chartist J. R. Stephens to discern a French-style government

spy system designed to restrict the liberties of Englishmen. Even the milder version of the bill which became law in 1872, and which put the police inspectorate under local rather than central control, still restricted opening hours, and inspired protests including the singing of 'Rule Britannia', asserting that Britons never would be slaves to tyranny. Temperance was a particularly impossible issue for the party because some Dissenting moralists took the side of intervention and indeed started to urge a more thoroughgoing assault on the scourge of drunkenness. Just as Education Minister William Forster's Liberal career was ruined by the Education Act, his friend Henry Bruce's was destroyed by being home secretary responsible for these Licensing Bills. The split between statist moralists and libertarians was also apparent in other areas, particularly the growing agitation (not successful until the 1880s) against the Contagious Diseases acts of 1864 and 1866 which attempted to check prostitution by allowing the incarceration of prostitutes suspected of infection in special hospitals. In 1871 and 1872 there were also two successful protests by backbench Liberal MPs against government attempts to sell off crown land in Epping Forest and to restrict public access to the royal parks in London, both of which they portrayed as ministerial attempts to limit the people's recreational freedom.

In fact the Nonconformist revolt on education and disestablishment was so intense mainly because Dissenters felt the need to strike a pre-emptive blow against what they saw as the growing threat of ultramontane Catholicism in Ireland and the threat of a pro-clerical policy on both sides of the Irish Sea. Gladstone's Irish Church and Land reforms had been designed to prevent the threat of destabilising 'foreign' interventions in Irish politics – either from 'American' Fenian-style agitation or Popish priestly organisation. Unfortunately many were convinced that neither threat had disappeared. Disorder continued, a home rule movement began to emerge, and at the Vatican Council in 1870 the Pope asserted his 'infallibility' in determining what doctrine should be accepted by Catholics everywhere. Though in fact secular nationalist politics was to be the greater risk to the Union in the future, most British Liberals now prioritised resistance to the Irish Roman Catholic bishops' demands, which increasingly focused on the need for a state-supported Catholic university. This meant that there was a marked lack of support for the third prong of Gladstone's Irish reform agenda, the restructuring of Irish universities in line with his hopes of 1868. Gladstone believed that voluntary Catholic denominational colleges must have the right to affiliate with other colleges under a proposed university board, with the result that the university syllabus must reflect Catholic sensitivities on theological matters. The measure thus alienated both Irish Catholic MPs, who

Division over the role of the state in shaping popular morals was also evident on the issue of drink.

All politics is about balancing differences and reconciling potential clashes, and between 1868 and 1874 this was done to a remarkable, unprecedented degree. Gladstone's first government is a topic of such continuing fascination to the political historian because it was not dominated by a simple story or individual, but because of the rich interplay of all sorts of impulses, themes and personalities.

demanded their own university, and enough British Liberals to defeat the bill, forcing the government to resign in March 1873, though it had to return, much weakened. This conflict revealed a complete breakdown of sympathy between British Liberals and Irish Catholics, and the death of all the liberal aspirations of 1868 for Ireland. At the 1874 election Irish Liberalism was more or less annihilated in favour of a new home rule movement. And across Britain and Ireland as a whole, the educational disputes of 1870–3 produced a three-way falling out between Dissenters, Irish Catholics and increasingly conservative-minded British Anglicans, destroying Liberal electoral hopes in Ireland and Britain at the same time.

Ultimately this three-way split was caused by the fact that the global climate of the 1870s was much gloomier and less instinctively liberal than that of the 1860s. In the early 1860s, under the influence of the unification of Italy and the free trade treaties of that decade, it was possible for British Liberals to believe that the world was moving in their direction, away from tariff barriers and towards the peaceful acceptance of constitutional government across the continent. It was in this light that 'justice to Ireland' on a pluralist liberal basis seemed both possible and adequate to reconcile the Irish to the Union, and also in this light that, in benign economic conditions at home, it seemed possible to cut taxes and defence spending and yet to maintain Britain's position as the most influential and respected nation in the world. In 1870–1, the Franco-Prussian war, German unification, and Russia's reclamation of naval rights in the Black Sea, on top of the Vatican Council, demonstrated the emptiness of this optimism, especially since at the same time Britain was embroiled in a prolonged dispute with the United States over the Alabama affair. Britain was now isolated internationally, facing a continent dominated by conservative and clerical empires.

Therefore this changed foreign climate also undermined the basis of Gladstone's economic promises at the 1868 election, and completely destroyed the Radicals' hopes of a new, lean Cobdenite state based on low spending, peace and the abolition of the expensive diplomatic structure. In 1870 the government had to respond to the Franco-Prussian war by asking parliament to fund an extra 20,000 troops. After the Prussian triumph, in 1871 Britain's new-found vulnerability to invasion was highlighted by a severe panic, fuelled particularly by right-wing newspapers and commentators keen to criticise the drift of defence policy towards *bien pensant* Cobdenism. This was one reason why government decided in 1871 on an expensive overhaul of the process of buying army commissions, in the name of efficiency. From now on the media pressure was all for a stronger foreign policy rather than for further reductions. Gladstone's earlier cuts in spending on the army and navy were reversed, while overall government spending rose from £67.1m

to £74.6m between 1870/1 and 1873/4. In 1871 Hugh Childers was replaced by George Goschen at the Admiralty and from this point Gladstone found both service departments increasingly opposed to economy and Treasury control. So was the Colonial Office. Gladstone complained that he could not check the determination of the War and Colonial Offices to send a military expedition to the Gold Coast against the Ashanti in 1873 because the War Office would not let him know the facts. His anger at the influence of these vested interests, these 'knots and groups', was palpable, and in the autumn of 1873 he decided on a dramatic outflanking gesture, proposing the abolition of the income tax that his mentor Peel had introduced as a 'temporary' measure in 1842. This for Gladstone was the ultimate step in demonstrating the economical disinterestedness of the state. However he failed to get the defence departments to give him the £1 million extra in cuts that he needed in order to fund this, and instead decided to dissolve parliament in January 1874 and to appeal to the electorate over the heads of military chiefs, holding out the carrot of income tax abolition if he was returned. The result was a decisive Conservative election victory, a telling example of the limits to the appeal of economy in the new political climate.

The Conservative victory of 1874 was based on a massive political reaction, like that of 1841. To some extent this was an inevitable expression of the fears unleashed among the propertied classes by the far-reaching Reform Act of 1867, as had previously been the case with 1832. More specifically it was driven by a defence of Church interests against perceived Nonconformist and Irish threats, just as in 1835–41, and by a more general defence of institutions against the prospect of radical mobilisation. Radicals seemed to be keen to undermine Britain's foreign policy, army and indeed – in the case of Charles Dilke's controversial venture into republicanism in late 1871 – the monarchy itself. In a world of German and Russian threats, without much hope of support from the enfeebled French, and with the beginning of a scramble for influence outside Europe, to most men of property a strong defence policy seemed essential. Moreover the 1867 Reform Act had done its job so well that it was much less plausible than before to argue that state institutions still needed to be radicalised and made subject to popular control. Of course there were still many who continued to be suspicious of state power, as the 'Nonconformist revolt' showed, but in fact the main driver of that revolt was their fear of a clerical policy in Ireland. The threat of Section 25 was defeated at local level, through Liberal popular control of the school boards, with the result that the 'revolt' did much less damage to the Liberal Party at the 1874 election than was done by the drift of alarmed Anglicans to the Conservative Party. For most voters, the army, the monarchy, and even the Church were institutions to be

valued and upheld as symbols of stability, patriotism and morality. Radical assaults on them seemed misjudged and possibly sinister.

In order to understand the eventful politics of the Gladstone government of 1868–74 – its many legislative achievements and yet its dramatic descent into division and defeat – it needs to be contextualised in two ways: in relation to previous Liberal Party history and to contemporary developments on the continent. The party that Gladstone inherited from Palmerston was large and used to governing, but mostly because its Conservative opponents were always too weak to do so effectively, and not because of any policy-based unity. In 1867–8, good fortune provided Gladstone with a minority Conservative government which decided it had to pursue a contentious Irish policy and an expensive military expedition to Abyssinia and thus gave him the chance of uniting the Liberals behind more attractive approaches both to Ireland and to government spending. These new policies, together with the legitimacy conferred by a large majority from an expanded electorate, gave his government a great deal of momentum, which he used to produce an impressive roster of legislative activity between 1869 and 1871. But from 1871 the tensions within his vast coalition started to come to the fore, most visibly between a moralist interventionism and a radical anti-establishment philosophy, both of which stirred up ill-feeling from a variety of sources. Vestigial radical suspicions of ‘Old Corruption’ in the political establishment came from a dying political tradition, and were no longer capable of generating a unifying campaign – if they had ever been. By the 1870s the more significant political tendency was alarm on the part of the propertied classes at any and every expression of Radical criticism. It is significant that the government’s only significant legislative success after 1871 was the passage of the secret ballot in 1872, which had originally been a Radical demand but was now attractive to conservative-minded MPs anxious about the potential of organised Radical forces such as trade unions to use open voting to threaten electors into pursuing class objectives. However the Russellite moralist tradition was equally too divisive in its social effects to be able to supply any great unity; it would be a long time before Liberalism would be at ease with a policy of constructive social reform.

Meanwhile the policies on which Gladstone had campaigned in 1868 both fell foul of the international tensions that arose in 1870 and that defeated the liberal optimism of the Palmerstonian era. By 1873–4 the happy vision of 1868, of a pluralist common ground between British Liberals and Irish Catholics, had been destroyed. Nor did the state of Europe make it remotely possible to unite the party and win an election on the zealous pursuit of tax and defence cuts.

For all these internal Liberal divisions and tensions, however, it is important to point out that they were a necessary evil in Victorian politics, if indeed they were an evil at all. A party held together by tight agreement on strategy would have been unattractive to most Victorian MPs, and would not have lasted for long. The dirigiste programmatic approach suggested by Joseph Chamberlain in 1885 would have been even less successful, and it was as well for Chamberlain’s reputation that he left the party before he had the chance to try it. The Liberal Party was the dominant party of Victorian Britain because it was a loose coalition of different traditions and interests. Leading it without difficulty and occasional embarrassment was an impossibility. All politics is about balancing differences and reconciling potential clashes, and between 1868 and 1874 this was done to a remarkable, unprecedented degree. Gladstone’s first government is a topic of such continuing fascination to the political historian because it was not dominated by a simple story or individual, but because of the rich interplay of all sorts of impulses, themes and personalities.

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Bibliographical note

I am grateful to John Powell for suggesting that I write on this theme. I have not tackled it in quite this way before, but I have often addressed aspects of it, going back to the Ph.D. thesis which I wrote on the religious and Irish policy of this government and which became a book as *Democracy and Religion: Gladstone and the Liberal Party 1867–1875* (Cambridge, 1986). Therefore this essay draws on more specific pieces that I have published previously. I have not provided footnotes to these publications, just to direct quotations by politicians. Anyone wanting a deeper development of my arguments

might consult, in particular: *The Politics of Patriotism: English liberalism, national identity and Europe 1830–1886* (Cambridge, 2006) [particularly on the interplay of foreign and Irish policy after 1870]; ‘Gladstone, Liberalism and the government of 1868–74’, in David Bebbington and Roger Swift (eds.), *Gladstone Centenary Essays* (Liverpool, 2000), pp. 94–112 [particularly on domestic and defence policy], and ‘The decline of institutional reform in nineteenth-century Britain’, in David Feldman and Jon Lawrence (eds.), *Structures and Transformations in Modern British History* (Cambridge, 2011), pp. 164–86 [on this government’s role in undermining the traditional radical campaign against institutional ‘Old Corruption’]. I have also written on Liberalism before 1867, in *Politics of Patriotism* and in *The Rise and Fall of Liberal Government in Victorian Britain* (New Haven, 1993).

- 1 See, typically for its time, R. C. K. Ensor, *England 1870–1914* (Oxford, 1936), p. 2. On the 1860s, the classic work remains J. R. Vincent, *The Formation of the British Liberal Party, 1857–1868* (2nd edn, Hassocks, 1976).
- 2 See Angus Hawkins, *Victorian Political Culture: ‘Habits of Heart & Mind’* (Oxford, 2015), chs. 7 and 8.
- 3 As shown particularly by Joseph Coohill, *Ideas of the Liberal Party: Perceptions, Agendas and Liberal Politics in the House of Commons, 1832–52* (Parliamentary History Book Series, Chichester & Malden, MA, 2011).
- 4 There is a good summary of this literature in Ian Packer, ‘Whigs and Liberals’, in David Brown, Robert Crowcroft and Gordon Pentland (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Modern British Political History 1800–2000* (Oxford, 2018), pp. 288–94.
- 5 At Warrington, 12 Oct. 1868: *Speeches of W. E. Gladstone, MP, delivered at Warrington, Ormskirk, Liverpool, Southport, Newton, Leigh, and Wigan, in October 1868* (London, 1868), p. 15.
- 6 At Warrington, 12 Oct. 1868 and Leigh, 20 Oct. 1868: *ibid.*, pp. 6, 57.
- 7 At Edinburgh, *The Times*, 6 Nov. 1868, p. 5.
- 8 28 Oct. 1871: A. T. Bassett (ed.), *Gladstone’s Speeches* (London, 1916), p. 408.
- 9 To Granville, 19 May 1877: Agatha Ramm (ed.), *The Political Correspondence of Mr Gladstone and Lord Granville, 1876–1886*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1962), vol. i, p. 40.
- 10 At Windsor, *The Times*, 5 Nov. 1868, p. 3.
- 11 A. P. Martin, *Life and Letters of Robert Lowe Viscount Sherbrooke*, 2 vols. (London, 1893), vol. ii, p. 330.

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)
Cartoon from [www.
CartoonStock.com](http://www.CartoonStock.com)

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

On the same day that Glyn penned his gloomy prognostication, Gladstone began to write his *Chapter of Autobiography*. It was infused with moral and personal explanations rooted in his

On the same day that Glyn penned his gloomy prognostication, Gladstone began to write his *Chapter of Autobiography*. It was infused with moral and personal explanations rooted in his 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.

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.

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

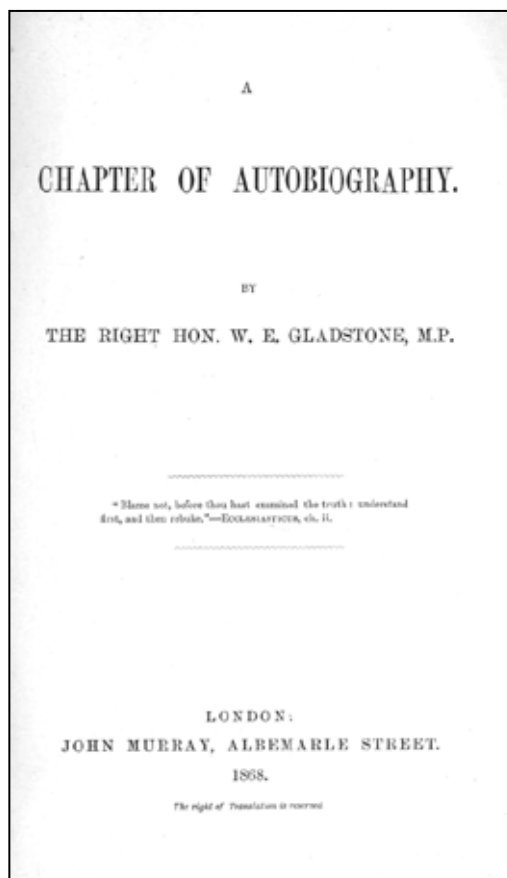
the earlier 'covenanted obligation' – effectively destroyed 'the main principle on which the Established Church was founded.'²³ Gladstone made clear to his readers that by 1844, he intended to support Peel's increased grant to Maynooth, in effect acknowledging that the conditions for supporting the Irish 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.

A Chapter of Autobiography as campaign document

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

A Chapter of Autobiography as campaign document

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

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 'election-eering taunts' in printed form, open as they were to the 'misconstruction of opponents'.

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'.

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- 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.

Ireland

Douglas Kanter examines the central role Irish policy played in Gladstone's first government.

Gladstone's First M



'Visit of the tithe proctor in Ireland', illustration from John Clark Ridpath, *Life and Times of William E. Gladstone* (1898)

IRISH AFFAIRS LAY at the heart of Gladstone's first ministry. He rose to the premiership in December 1868 on a promise to redress Irish grievances; and his failure to do so was, at least in part, responsible for his fall in February 1874. The ends of Gladstone's Irish policy were clear from the outset of his administration, because he had outlined them in speeches, addresses, and private utterances over the course of the previous year. He aimed to promote 'civil justice and equal rights' in Ireland, in order to 'pacify' a country that had been agitated by Fenianism for much of the decade.¹ Underlying these

objectives was a belief that the Union was experiencing a crisis of legitimacy across the Irish Sea. 'The great evil' afflicting Ireland, Gladstone claimed, speaking to an English audience, was 'the estrangement of the minds of the people from the law, from public authority, from this country'.² A policy founded on civil justice, he maintained, would align Irish opinion with the law, 'making it loved', and would 'make these kingdoms united, not merely by the paper bonds of law, but by the blessed law of concord and harmony, which is written on the heart of man'.³ These idealistic appeals to justice and

inistry and Ireland

fraternity, in turn, were informed by a shrewd appreciation of the disruptive capacity of Irish nationalism, and by a corresponding anxiety for 'the unity and integrity of the empire'.⁴ Liberal reforms, if promptly applied, would 'bring Ireland into the condition of being a great part of the strength and a great part of the glory of this Empire, instead of being, as hitherto ... our danger and our reproach'.⁵ Gladstone's approach to Ireland was thus predicated on the conviction that social justice would encourage social order, and enhance imperial security, by legitimising the state.

Though Gladstone lucidly articulated the ends of Liberal governance in Ireland prior to his appointment as prime minister, he was less explicit with respect to the means. His most famous formulation, offered at Southport in December 1867, was guarded and ambiguous. Irish policy, he suggested on that occasion, 'should be dictated, as a general rule, by that which may appear to be the mature, well-considered, and general sense of the Irish people'.⁶ This construction had the merit of gesturing toward Ireland's historical and cultural distinctiveness, but it was deliberately short on details. Gladstone unveiled the centrepiece of his programme in March 1868, when – still in opposition – he introduced parliamentary resolutions in favour of the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland.⁷ Yet, as he noted in October, the status of the church, while 'indeed a great question, is but one of a group of questions. There is the Church of Ireland; there is the land of Ireland; there is the education of Ireland'.⁸ An emphasis on these subjects aligned Gladstone with the popular Irish platform, but every administration since Lord Palmerston's death in 1865 had recognised the need to address Irish concerns in these areas. And, adopting a longer perspective, the attempt to cultivate a moderate, non-sectarian Irish unionism through reform – though it represented a dramatic break with Palmerstonian liberalism – dated back to the 1830s, with even the rhetoric of 'justice to Ireland' owing a debt to the Liberal politicians of that decade.⁹

The distinctive character of Gladstone's engagement with Ireland thus derived less from the broad contours of his policy agenda than from the idiosyncratic political outlook that set the parameters for his understanding of Anglo-Irish relations. He blended a Burkean commitment to prudential reform, grounded in a belief 'that early and provident fear' was 'the mother of security', with a conviction that it was possible to reconcile colonial populations to metropolitan rule by winning 'hearts and minds' through a reliance on the loyalty of 'the whole community' rather than a 'little knot or clique' within it.¹⁰ Most importantly, he was animated by a providential view of politics, which linked the rise of Fenianism to the sins of British misgovernment and emphasised a need for atonement through reform. The 'painful and horrible manifestations' of Fenianism, he suggested at Southport, 'may, perhaps, in the merciful designs of Providence ... have been intended to incite this nation to a greater search of its own heart and spirit and conscience with reference to the condition of Ireland and the legislation affecting that country'.¹¹ On this analysis, it became possible for Gladstone to imagine himself as a high priest of politics, offering 'before the Eternal Throne ... the arduous public work' of Irish reform.¹² He was, after all, 'confident that in serving the right we are serving the God of right and justice'.¹³ These considerations gave to his campaign the urgency, earnestness, and moral force that were its hallmarks.

After Gladstone took office on 3 December 1868, however, emollient rhetoric and an insistence that God was on the prime minister's side were bound to be less significant than the prosaic details of Liberal legislation and the quotidian activities of the Irish executive. In political terms, Gladstone's achievement in 1868 had been to ally Irish liberals, moderate nationalists, and Catholic churchmen to a reinvigorated British Liberal Party. This coalition helped the party secure 66 of Ireland's 105 parliamentary seats at the general election that year, its best showing since the Great Famine.¹⁴ The challenge for the administration was to respond to the grievances of these diverse

He aimed to promote 'civil justice and equal rights' in Ireland, in order to 'pacify' a country that had been agitated by Fenianism for much of the decade.

Gladstone's first ministry and Ireland

Irish constituencies through a programme that satisfied their sectional interests. But Irish reform also had to be acceptable to Liberal opinion in Britain, given the need to govern through the instrument of the cabinet and to legislate through the medium of parliament. The prime minister and his colleagues, consequently, were obliged to operate in two distinct political contexts simultaneously, and to balance the demands of Irish pressure groups against the preoccupations of the British elite.

There were signs from the outset of Gladstone's first ministry that the premier would find it difficult to bridge the divide between Irish and British opinion. Indeed, he seems not to have fully appreciated the extent to which he had raised expectations by his ostensible pledge to govern in accordance with Irish ideas, which (like other Gladstonian obiter dicta) seemed radical only when its qualifications were ignored. In staffing his administration Gladstone demonstrated little awareness of Irish popular opinion. His senior Irish appointments were sufficiently well received – the lord lieutenantancy went to Earl Spencer, the (Anglican) nephew of a celebrated Catholic priest; the chief secretaryship was pressed on Chichester Fortescue, a progressive Irish Protestant whose brother was a resident landlord in County Louth; and the Irish lord chancellorship was bestowed on Thomas O'Hagan, the first Catholic to hold the position since the revolution of 1688.¹⁵ But the prime minister kept William Monsell, the most prominent Irish Catholic Liberal with pretensions to high office, out of the cabinet, and he failed to make good use of O'Hagan's political services.¹⁶ The composition of the government ensured that Gladstone's advisers on Irish matters tended to be Liberal Irish Protestants from a landed background, when they were not simply his British cabinet colleagues. Though the premier himself was to be the primary interpreter and expositor of the *vox populi Hibernica*, he was remarkably insulated from the leaders of Irish opinion.

The administration's early successes temporarily masked these deficiencies. Its first significant actions signalled Gladstone's desire to govern Ireland through popular consent rather than executive fiat. At the opening of parliament in February 1869, ministers announced that they would permit the restoration of habeas corpus in Ireland, which had been suspended for nearly three years in response to Fenian activity.¹⁷ Less than a week later, Fortescue revealed that the government intended to release forty-nine of the eighty-one civilians who remained imprisoned for Fenianism.¹⁸ The prime minister saw such concessions to public opinion as a means 'to draw a line between the Fenians & the people of Ireland, & to make the people of Ireland indisposed to cross it'.¹⁹ Initial reports from across the Irish Sea appeared to vindicate his approach.²⁰

Gladstone followed these conciliatory gestures with the introduction of the government's

signature Irish legislation – a bill for the disestablishment and partial disendowment of the Church of Ireland. On this measure, uniquely, he prepared the ground carefully in both Ireland and Britain, ascertaining the wishes of the Irish Catholic hierarchy in 1867, and rallying the Liberal Party around disestablishment the following year.²¹ With a united party, galvanised by the recent general election, disestablishment was a foregone conclusion. As Gladstone explained when he brought in the Irish Church Bill in March 1869, from the first day of 1871 church law would no longer be enforceable in Ireland, Irish bishops would cease to sit in the House of Lords, and the 'ecclesiastical corporations' associated with the Church of Ireland 'would be dissolved'.²²

Disendowment, however, was a more contentious affair. In framing the legislation, Gladstone treated the Church of Ireland's 'temporalities' (property and possessions) as a capital sum, which he valued at about £16 million.²³ Using the secularisation of the Canadian clergy reserves in 1854 as a precedent, he proposed to apply some £7 million to the satisfaction of vested interests in the church, and to the provision of 'glebes' (land and houses) for the clergy on easy terms. Most of the remaining capital was to be diverted to secular Irish purposes.²⁴ Critics of the scheme preferred a more generous financial settlement for the church, as well as the concurrent endowment of the various denominations in Ireland from the balance of the funds. In the Lords, dissident Whigs joined with the Tories to force amendments to the bill along these lines. Gladstone and his colleagues refused to concede on concurrent endowment, but the cabinet – overruling the prime minister's objections – sweetened the financial deal for the church, and the bill passed in July.²⁵ Disestablishment was also accompanied by the elimination of grants to the Catholic seminary at Maynooth and the Presbyterian community.²⁶ These provisions, broadly popular among the Nonconformist constituency that comprised much of the Liberal Party's base in Britain, were rendered acceptable in Ireland by the generous one-time capital advances offered as compensation.²⁷

The Irish Church Act proved to be the ministry's signal Irish achievement. Catholics welcomed the measure.²⁸ Though Protestants were, unsurprisingly, less effusive, and some disaffected Irish conservatives responded to the prospect of disestablishment by endorsing the restoration of the Irish parliament, most Anglicans grudgingly accepted the settlement.²⁹ Indeed, clerical opponents of the measure were prepared, with the benefit of hindsight, to concede that it ultimately conduced to the 'spiritual advantage' of the church by calling forth 'the energy' of its members – much as Gladstone had predicted in the course of debate.³⁰ The favourable terms on which the church was disendowed, moreover, left it in a financially sound position.³¹ The act also had beneficent social consequences, as church

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'Master Willy Gladstone, under the tuition of Fenianism, is brought to learn that "the Est-ab-lish-ed Church in Ire-land is a great in-just-ice". Ben Disraeli, who breaks down in his lesson, is flogged and sent back to his seat. The Head Master (Professor Stephens) declares Willy a most docile and promising pupil.' (*Weekly News* (Dublin), 2 May 1868)



lands were sold off to thousands of tenant farmers over the next decade in order to realise the capital sum necessary to implement the legislation's dis-endowment provisions.³²

As the Irish Church Bill made its way through parliament, however, problems related to the maintenance of law and order resurfaced. In May, Spencer was obliged to proclaim Londonderry City, giving authorities exceptional powers under the Peace Preservation Act, after rioting broke out during a visit by Prince Arthur.³³ Several days later, ministers were saved from an embarrassing controversy when the mayor of Cork, who had made public comments apparently condoning the recent Fenian-inspired attempt on Prince Alfred's life in Australia, resigned from office ahead of a government effort to remove him.³⁴ More worryingly, a campaign for the amnesty of the remaining Fenian prisoners roared to life over the summer, and agrarian crime began to increase over portions of southern Ireland in anticipation of the administration's Land Bill.³⁵ As popular pressure mounted, Gladstone, Spencer, and Fortescue found themselves at cross purposes, with the prime minister supporting a further release of Fenians and the Irish executive lobbying for the passage of coercive legislation.³⁶

While the deadlock continued, ministers began to consider the outlines of an Irish Land Bill, which was to be the focal point of the 1870 parliamentary session. Gladstone recognised the

importance of devising a satisfactory measure – 'it is a question of the security of the Empire, & of the happiness of millions of God's creatures' – but he professed uncertainty about the nature of the Irish demand.³⁷ On the one hand, an Irish Tenant League advocated a bill granting farmers fixity of tenure at rents set by judicial valuation.³⁸ On the other, more moderate proponents of land reform pressed for the legalisation and extension throughout Ireland of the Ulster tenant right, by which outgoing tenants received 'goodwill' payments from either the landlord or the incoming farmer.³⁹ The prime minister's failure to give a strong lead provided space for alternative proposals to emerge from within the cabinet. John Bright, long associated with the radical demand for free trade in land, sought legislation for the establishment of a peasant proprietorship.⁴⁰ Fortescue, in contrast, suggested that the government introduce a measure recognising tenant right where it existed, but elsewhere providing Irish tenants with compensation for improvements made to their holdings, as well as payments for 'disturbance' (eviction).⁴¹ The prime minister was unenthusiastic about these suggestions, and in the course of the autumn he developed a proposal for the recognition and extension of the Ulster tenant right. Though his plan was in line with historicist and relativist developments in British thought, and had the additional advantage of inoculating British landlords against demands for

If the passage of the Land Act alienated nationalists, the administration's simultaneous resort to coercion placed new strains on its relationship with Irish liberals.

analogous legislation, it failed to convince a sceptical cabinet, and was set aside in December.⁴²

When Gladstone introduced the Land Bill to parliament in February 1870, consequently, he presented a compromise measure, which owed its greatest debt to Fortescue's proposals but incorporated a limited scheme of land purchase along the lines recommended by Bright.⁴³ The prime minister hoped that the legislation would end 'wanton eviction' and constrain 'unjust augmentations of rent'.⁴⁴ If the measure operated as intended, he maintained on its second reading in March, it would provide Irish farmers with 'stability of tenure', rather than the fixity of tenure demanded by more radically inclined Irish politicians.⁴⁵ Making a virtue of necessity, on the bill's third reading in May Gladstone emphasised that the cabinet had 'deliberately and advisedly declined to meet the popular demands in Ireland' while framing its provisions.⁴⁶ As the measure made its way to the statute book, however, he privately expressed 'intense ... anxiety' about 'the difficulty of bringing British ideas into harmony with Irish wants'.⁴⁷

The prime minister's misgivings proved to be well founded. In parliament, the bill was sufficiently moderate to ensure that the prolonged debates which accompanied its passage were something of a 'sham fight', and the Land Act received the royal assent in August 1870 with few substantive alterations.⁴⁸ In Ireland, however, the measure was received with disappointment. Tenant right activists, predictably, complained that it 'caused universal dissatisfaction', but more moderate voices also conveyed their displeasure.⁴⁹ The Land Act failed as a political settlement, with nationalists – concluding that they had nothing to expect from continued alliance with the Liberal Party – joining disaffected Irish conservatives to launch the home rule movement in May.⁵⁰ It was scarcely more successful as a social and economic intervention. The measure served as a modest deterrent to rent increases and evictions, but many outgoing tenants were unable to make use of the compensation provisions. Few farmers sought to purchase their holdings under the so-called Bright clauses, deeming the terms of sale to be insufficiently generous. Only in Ulster, where the legal recognition of the tenant right tacitly granted security of tenure at moderate rents, did the act prove truly effective.⁵¹

If the passage of the Land Act alienated nationalists, the administration's simultaneous resort to coercion placed new strains on its relationship with Irish liberals. Spencer and Fortescue finally overcame Gladstone's opposition to extraordinary legislation in March 1870, when the cabinet approved an alteration of the Peace Preservation Act.⁵² The amended measure, enacted in April, strengthened the power of the authorities to regulate and search for arms, detain suspects, impose curfews, and move or forego trial by jury in disturbed districts. Most controversially, it authorised the Irish executive to suppress nationalist

publications deemed to be 'treasonable or seditious'.⁵³ Not only did the legislation call into question the anodyne properties of the government's Irish policy, but it also weakened the case for the discharge of the remaining Fenian prisoners, whom the prime minister remained anxious to liberate. Only in November, as the amnesty agitation began to revive, did Gladstone convince the cabinet to approve a further partial release of convicts, on condition of their banishment from the country.⁵⁴ This stipulation, which removed some of the most committed Fenians from the reach of the authorities, was scarcely calculated to enhance imperial security.⁵⁵ The gesture, moreover, failed to placate the advocates of amnesty, because a handful of civilians, along with sixteen soldiers, remained imprisoned for Fenianism.⁵⁶ Gladstone was unable to secure their freedom, and the grievance survived his ministry.

The government's hard line did little to damage it in the eyes of the Catholic Church.⁵⁷ But the continued support of the Irish Catholic hierarchy was contingent upon the ministry's willingness to deliver a satisfactory measure of university reform. For the bishops, this meant state recognition of, and support for, the struggling Catholic University, which they had established in Dublin some two decades earlier. Gladstone's hostility to ultramontanist left him unsympathetic to this particular Irish idea – 'it seems to me that in the main we *know* what we ought to give them whether they will take it or not' – and anxious to defer the introduction of a measure that might offend clerical sensibilities.⁵⁸ The proceedings of the Vatican Council, which defined papal infallibility in July 1870 and provoked an anti-Catholic reaction in Britain, furnished the prime minister with a pretext for delay.⁵⁹

The decision to procrastinate on university reform, however, was accompanied by a loss of direction and initiative in Irish affairs, which the administration never recovered. In 1871, the government secured the repeal of the Ecclesiastical Titles Act of 1850, which had prohibited the assumption of territorial titles by members of the Catholic hierarchy throughout the United Kingdom. But the measure, though odious, had never been enforced, so its abolition redressed a symbolic injustice rather than a practical cause of complaint.⁶⁰ Its repeal, in any case, was overshadowed by a renewed recourse to coercion, as the Irish executive determined that the Peace Preservation Act had failed to suppress agrarian crime in County Westmeath and adjacent districts.⁶¹ Once more, Gladstone fought a rearguard action against repression, but in February he succumbed to cabinet pressure. Anxious to distance the government from coercion, he insisted that the state of Westmeath be referred to a parliamentary committee of inquiry before legislating – a decision that looked perilously like an abnegation of ministerial responsibility, though it failed to insulate the administration from Irish Liberal criticism.⁶²

After the Westmeath committee reported in March, Fortescue's replacement as chief secretary, the Marquess of Hartington, introduced a bill for the local suspension of habeas corpus. Following the passage of the so-called Westmeath Act in June, Spencer proclaimed Westmeath and portions of King's County under its provisions.⁶³

Westmeath was soon quiet, but problems of Irish law and order continued to bedevil the government. In August, Gladstone found himself obliged to defend the Dublin Metropolitan Police against accusations that constables had employed excessive force in breaking up an amnesty meeting in the Phoenix Park. Nationalist attempts to link the suspension of habeas corpus in Westmeath with police brutality in Dublin may not have been entirely fair, but they underscored how frail the legitimacy of the state remained in Ireland.⁶⁴ The following year, ministers consented to the repeal of the Party Processions Act of 1850, designed to restrain Orange demonstrations in Ulster, though they had long been aware that such a decision would alienate northern Catholics.⁶⁵ Predictably, the annulment of the measure was followed by ferocious sectarian rioting in Belfast during the summer marching season.⁶⁶ Though the rest of the country was largely 'free from serious crime' by this time, the cabinet refused to reconsider the Peace Preservation Act or the Westmeath Act.⁶⁷ Instead, ministers approved the renewal of both measures in 1873, Gladstone signalling his consent 'with a groan'.⁶⁸

The government's difficulties with coercion were compounded by a revival of religious controversy, which placed new pressure on the alliance between the Liberal Party in Britain and the Catholic Church in Ireland. In May 1872 Judge William Keogh, a notorious figure in nationalist circles, voided the return of a home ruler at a County Galway by-election on grounds of undue clerical interference in the contest, delivering a fiercely polemical decision.⁶⁹ Though Spencer anticipated that the judgment would 'lead to a horrible mess', ministers announced proceedings against twenty-two Catholic priests, including Bishop Duggan of Clonfert, in July.⁷⁰ Their declaration 'excited the R.C. party against the Government', and jurors in western Ireland refused to convict when the first three cases went to trial in February 1873, leading the Irish law officers to abandon the remaining prosecutions.⁷¹ By this time, a second and more protracted source of sectarian tension had emerged. In November 1871 Cardinal Cullen suspended Robert O'Keeffe, the parish priest of Callan, County Kilkenny, after O'Keeffe became embroiled in a series of disputes in the diocese of Ossory. O'Keeffe had been serving as a manager of the local national schools and a poor law chaplain, but following Cullen's action he was removed from both offices. A number of high profile lawsuits ensued, and O'Keeffe's case came to the notice of the Commons in August 1872, with anxious backbench liberals joining

hostile conservatives to condemn what they regarded as inappropriate clerical influence in public appointments.⁷² Though the government judiciously refused to commit itself while legal action was ongoing, the issue provoked 'the No-Popery passions' of the house.⁷³ The controversy, moreover, was slow to resolve, and continued to inflame anti-Catholic sentiment in Britain through 1873.⁷⁴

As the government's reform programme stalled, and its relationship with Irish liberals and churchmen began to sour, the campaign for home rule gathered momentum. Home rulers won eight of the thirteen Irish by-elections held in 1871–72, with the movement's leading advocate, Isaac Butt, among the victorious candidates. A handful of Irish Liberal MPs, sensitive to the shift in the political wind, also announced their support for home rule.⁷⁵ Gladstone was obliged to decline invitations to visit Ireland in both years, because Spencer and Hartington feared that nationalist demonstrations might embarrass the administration if he came.⁷⁶ Though the prime minister privately expressed a remarkable degree of sympathy for a federal reform of the Anglo-Irish relationship, his public comments on home rule ranged from apparently hostile to merely noncommittal.⁷⁷

Had Gladstone produced a satisfactory Irish University Bill, perhaps he could have salvaged the government's position. But in framing the legislation he disregarded the wishes of the Catholic hierarchy, insisting that 'no direct endowment cd. be made to a R.C. University or College'.⁷⁸ Instead, the prime minister redefined the Catholic 'grievance', which he 'held to consist in this, that an R.C. educated in a college or place where his religion is taught cannot by virtue of that education obtain a degree in Ireland'.⁷⁹ Even if Gladstone had been more sympathetic to the demands of the Irish Catholic Church, the staunch opposition of English Nonconformists, encouraged by Henry Fawcett's annual parliamentary motion for an unsectarian reform of the University of Dublin, made a settlement along lines desired by the bishops impossible.⁸⁰ The prime minister's response to these competing pressures was to keep his own counsel during the measure's long gestation. When Archbishop Manning, the Irish hierarchy's conduit to Downing Street, sounded Gladstone on the bill in 1870, he was rebuffed.⁸¹ The two leading Catholic officeholders in the government, O'Hagan and Monsell, were also shut out of deliberations.⁸² Prominent figures at the University of Dublin were similarly neglected.⁸³ Indeed, Gladstone did not personally consult a representative of the university until the regius professor of Greek, John Kells Ingram, helped him to settle some of the measure's outstanding details on the eve of its introduction.⁸⁴

When the prime minister presented his plan for Irish university reform to the Commons in February 1873, consequently, he unveiled legislation

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that had been formulated with little input from the most interested parties. Gladstone's measure sought to affiliate various institutions of higher learning in Ireland, including the Catholic University, to the University of Dublin. A reformed governing body, intended to be broadly representative of Ireland's denominational demography and funded primarily out of Trinity College Dublin's endowments, would be empowered to examine students, award prizes, and confer degrees, but would not interfere with the internal affairs of the constituent colleges.⁸⁵ The prime minister's scheme attempted to square the sectarian circle, allowing the state to recognise the Catholic University without offending Protestant sensibilities. But its initially favourable reception in the Commons was not shared by Cullen, who complained 'that the Bill was in opposition to what the R Catholics had been working for in Ireland for years ... that it perpetuated the mixed system of education to which he had always been opposed, that no endowment or assistance was given to the Catholic University'.⁸⁶ At the end of February, the legislation was 'condemned by the united Bishops'.⁸⁷ Their censure proved to be fatal to the measure, which was defeated on its second reading in March, with thirty-seven Irish liberals delivering the opposition a narrow majority.⁸⁸

Despite an abortive resignation attempt in the aftermath of the division, the government survived for another eleven months. But, as Gladstone later reflected, the ministry 'never recovered from the blow ... on the Irish Education Bill'.⁸⁹ The rejection of the measure has been convincingly portrayed as ending the alliance between Irish Catholics and British liberals.⁹⁰ The prime minister, who lost his equilibrium in the aftermath of the vote, did what he could to widen the breach. In public, he was brusquely dismissive of the notion that Ireland ought to be governed by Irish ideas.⁹¹ In private, he contended that the administration was absolved from its Irish commitments.⁹² Much of Gladstone's ire was directed at the Catholic bishops, to whose opposition he attributed the loss of the University Bill. Accordingly, an autumn ministerial reshuffle resulted in 'the introduction ... of three eminent "No Popery" members' to junior office, and the first draft of Gladstone's election address, read to the cabinet in January 1874, 'spoke of resisting "Ultramontane" aggressions'.⁹³ Though the objections

of his colleagues led to the excision of the offending passage – and the address did include a Delphic reference to local self-government that could be interpreted as a sympathetic allusion to home rule – it was evident to Hartington that the prime minister was 'not looking for support from Ireland'.⁹⁴ It came as no surprise, therefore, that when the poll was called in February Irish constituencies returned home rulers for sixty seats, against only ten for liberals.⁹⁵

Gladstone resigned from office on 17 February 1874, bringing his first ministry to a close. Though the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland had been a monumental achievement, and was to prove an enduring one, on balance the government's Irish mission ended in failure. Much of the responsibility lay with Gladstone himself, for the resonant rhetoric that helped carry him to the premiership in 1868 was not matched by a corresponding ability to redress the sectional grievances of those Irish interest groups that had rallied behind the Liberal Party at the election. Perhaps Gladstone was bound to disappoint them, because what he took to be 'mature' and 'well-considered' Irish ideas – essentially, the views of cisalpine Catholics and Liberal Protestants – were in tension with the 'general sense of the Irish people'.⁹⁶ In any case, the high moral purpose evinced by the prime minister on Irish matters at the outset of the administration was not maintained to its end.

But Gladstone's incapacity to satisfy popular demands also reflected the deeper structural problem of aligning British and Irish opinion, given the different political cultures, underpinned by the disparate social and economic conditions, prevailing on the two islands. Despite an opportune consensus on disestablishment, the reforms desired by popular politicians in Ireland were either too radical (in the case of land) or too clerical (in the case of higher education) for the Liberal government to concede. As this became evident to Irish observers, the frail legitimacy of the Union, which Gladstone hoped to buttress through conciliatory legislation, was further undermined. Over the course of his administration, consequently, the coalition of liberals, moderate nationalists, and Catholic churchmen that sustained the Liberal Party in Ireland dissolved, only to be gradually reconstituted by Isaac Butt under the umbrella of home rule. Ironically, a Liberal

government that entered office on a promise to secure the empire by doing justice to Ireland presided over the most formidable nationalist mobilisation in a generation, as well as the precipitous and permanent decline of the Irish Liberal Party. It would be almost a decade before Gladstone, in very different circumstances, sought to reengage with Irish popular politics.

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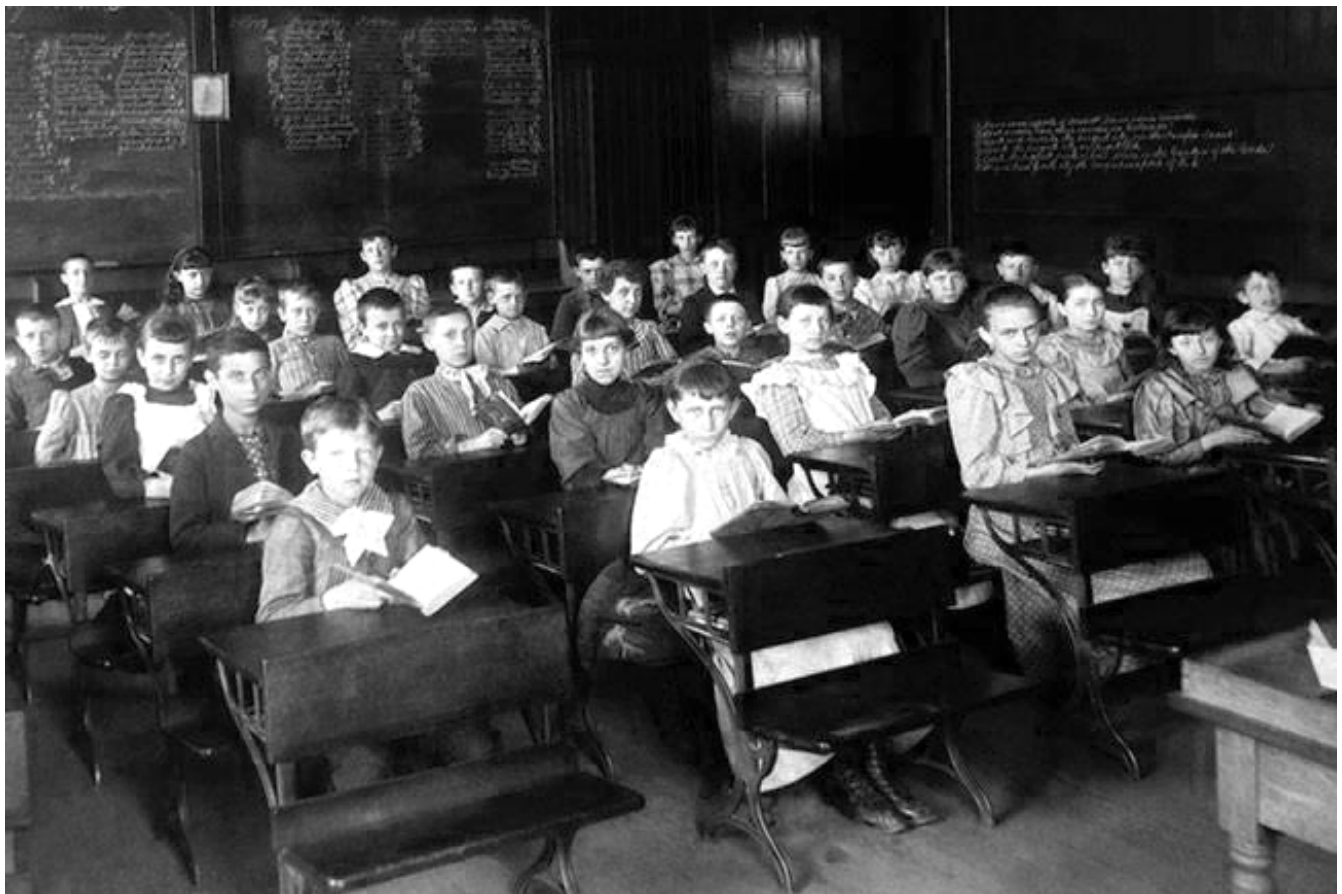
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Education

Geoffrey Chorley discusses the Elementary Education Act of 1870, the first piece of legislation to deal specifically with the provision of education in Britain

Gladstone and the 1870 E



One of the new board schools established under the 1870 Education Act

THIS ARTICLE WILL examine the background to the passing of the Elementary¹ Education Act of 1870 in Gladstone's first ministry, paying particular attention to the religious difficulty within English education and to the compromise of the Cowper-Temple clause in that act, which provided a partial solution to this problem. The subsequent recriminations about clause 25 of the act will also be briefly discussed. The article will show how, despite the demands of the Irish Land Bill, Gladstone intervened in the Education Bill at crucial moments, both in Commons speeches and in private communications.

These interventions demonstrated his keen understanding of the subtleties of the religious difficulty and his own preferred solution.²

The beginning of Gladstone's first ministry

Following the Liberal victory in the general election of November–December 1868 Gladstone succeeded Disraeli as prime minister. Sixty-nine Nonconformist MPs sat in the 1868–74 parliament,³ and the Liberal success had raised the hopes of the Nonconformists for further religious equality with the Church of England.⁴

Elementary Education Act

Compulsory church rates had been abolished a few months before the election by a Conservative government and the Nonconformists hoped there would be significant educational reforms. In his youth Gladstone had been influenced by evangelical Christianity. But with the rise of the Tractarians or Oxford Movement, a group of some High Church Anglicans beginning in 1833, who sought to recall the Church of England to certain older beliefs and practices and emphasised sacraments and ritual, Gladstone had moved to a more High Church theological position, although he could not be considered a Puseyite or ritualist. This did not, however, prevent a growing Nonconformist personal respect for Gladstone.⁵

The general election of 1868 had been fought on the question of Ireland⁶ and, on learning that he would be invited by the Queen to form a government, Gladstone is reported to have commented, 'My mission is to pacify Ireland.'⁷ Thus, within two months of taking office, the Irish Church Disestablishment Bill of 1869 was brought in; the Irish Land Bill was introduced in 1870. Reform of the War Office was also required. But already in 1867, before becoming prime minister, Gladstone had also identified education as a priority.⁸

The problem of elementary education in the nineteenth century

The struggle to extend elementary education for working-class children was one of the great social issues of the nineteenth century and at its core was the question of funding. From 1833, government grants to schools began to be channelled through two voluntary societies. The larger of these two bodies was the National Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Established Church, that is the Church of England, (hereafter the National Society) founded in 1811. The smaller organisation was the British and Foreign School Society (hereafter BFSS), whose

origins go back to 1808. The BFSS was committed to religious teaching without any distinctive denominational creeds, a policy known as unsectarianism or undenominationalism. However, in practice it increasingly drew its support from the Dissenting churches. From 1839 schools receiving grants through the two voluntary societies were inspected by Her Majesty's Inspectorate. Other schools operated without government funding or inspection, either because they did not meet the criteria for a grant, or because they rejected government aid on principle. Sponsors of the latter type were known as *voluntaryists* and typically came from Dissenting churches.⁹

In the second half of the nineteenth century, concern about economic competition from other increasingly powerful industrialised nations such as the United States and Prussia led to pressure to expand education. Additionally, children without school places roaming the streets, particularly in urban areas, were seen as being in moral danger; education, it was argued, was cheaper than prison.

Both governments and individual MPs unsuccessfully attempted to pass legislation to set up more schools, either for a limited local area such as cities or boroughs, or on a national basis. This failure was partly due to the so-called religious difficulty in English education. It was agreed by most politicians and clergy at the time that education must be founded on Christianity, but they could not agree whether the religious instruction in new schools could include the denominational teaching of the Church of England such as its catechism, or must be restricted to some presumed common core of Christian doctrine, although it was often asserted that these denominational differences did not matter to ordinary people. While, in theory, such distinctive teaching could also have been that of Dissenting denominations, in practice the dilemma was focused on the Church of England. The financing and control of new schools was a related problem. To supplement school fees, proposed schemes typically planned

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Gladstone and the 1870 Elementary Education Act

to levy a rate as a form of local taxation, which was liable to be unpopular. This was particularly sensitive before and after the abolition of compulsory church (that is, Church of England) rates in 1868, which had been a long-standing grievance of the Dissenters, or the Nonconformists as they were increasingly called in the later nineteenth century. Other issues with rating included the variation between areas in what could be raised from a rate, and objections to ratepayers being forced to pay for schools that taught religious doctrines to which they had conscientious objections.

The Newcastle Commission 1858–61 and after

Following the failure of a number of education bills in the 1850s, Sir John Pakington, Conservative MP for Droitwich, on 11 February 1858 secured the establishment of an Education Commission, chaired by the Duke of Newcastle. This Newcastle Commission, which reported in 1861, recommended the establishment of county and borough education boards, which would be empowered to levy a rate to complement central government education grants from the Committee of the Privy Council.¹⁰ This prefigured a central feature of the future 1870 Elementary Education Act. But Palmerston's last government, which was in office when the report was issued, was unwilling to face the challenges of the sectarian anguish on local rates. The report argued that parents were not especially concerned with the religious difficulty: for them, it was much more important that a school was efficient in providing secular knowledge as opposed to religious teaching.¹¹ Moreover, most parents were unlikely to be clear about distinctive denominational differences. But the report wisely noted that, even if it were agreed that the religious difficulty was not of any great moment amongst the parents, it was amongst the sponsors of schools that a real difficulty existed.¹²

1867 was a crucial year in the struggle to advance education. In this year the Second Reform Act expanded the franchise to include urban male householders and became associated with the (inaccurately cited) slogan 'We must educate our masters'. Edward Baines, one of the leaders of the voluntarist movement, conceded in a speech to the Congregational Union in Manchester on 11 October 1867 that their twenty-year policy of refusing government aid for their schools had failed and that the financial support of the state was necessary to expand education.

Gladstone's alleged lack of interest in education

To some writers it has seemed surprising that Gladstone should be remembered for successfully overseeing an elementary education bill. Roy Jenkins's biography made the sweeping statement

that Gladstone was uninterested in education.¹³ Colin Matthew argued in a more nuanced form that: 'Gladstone had shown little interest in education in the 1850s and 1860s, save for reform of the universities and public schools.'¹⁴ Gladstone had been a loyal and assiduous participant in parliamentary select committees on education in the 1830s and early 1850s. He was closely involved with the National Society in the late 1830s. The draft proposals in a document entitled *Proposals for improving and extending National Education through the agency of the "National Society, for promoting the Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Established Church"*,¹⁵ probably to be dated May 1838, appear to be very much an initiative not only of Gladstone himself but also of members of his family. In the mid-1840s Gladstone's practical commitment to elementary education, as opposed to committee work, was shown by his teaching in a ragged school near Covent Garden.¹⁶ On 11 February 1852 Gladstone gave by far the longest of the ten speeches at the second reading of the Manchester and Salford Education Bill and later that year he served on the select committee on the bill, attending eleven out of fifteen meetings. On 11 April 1856 he made a substantial speech in a debate on education resolutions introduced by Lord John Russell. In the 1860s, Gladstone exchanged perceptive comments in correspondence with the outspoken Archdeacon Denison¹⁷ and with Lord Granville, Lord President of the Council, about the Privy Council requirement to include in school trust deeds a conscience clause exempting children of Dissenters from the teaching of the Church of England catechism.¹⁸ It is certainly true that Gladstone's intensive preoccupation with elementary education in the late 1830s was not matched in the later decades. But, with the possible exception of 1858, Gladstone's diaries record that he attended meetings, corresponded and read publications on education each year from 1850 until December 1868.¹⁹ So by the time Gladstone became prime minister, he was well informed about the education question.

The genesis of the Elementary Education Bill

In October 1869, despite being closely involved with the Irish Church and Land bills, Gladstone took the initiative on elementary education by inviting Earl de Grey, Lord President of the Council and in the cabinet, and W. E. Forster, responsible in the Commons as Vice-President of the Council, to frame an education bill. Forster, however, did not serve in the cabinet until July 1870 when the most difficult period of the bill's progress through the Commons was already past.

Forster first drew up a memorandum to prepare for a bill. Rather than continue control of schools from central government through the existing Committee of the Privy Council on Education Forster opted for localism. But instead

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While the detail of managing the bill was left clearly in the hands of de Grey in the Lords and Forster in the Commons (and, of those two, primarily Forster), Gladstone had a regular and decisive impact on the bill's development.

of multi-purpose local authorities, ad hoc local school boards, which would not be universal, would be set up to create new schools where needed. Forster's preferred option for religious teaching in new schools set up by school boards was undenominationalism.

It has been wrongly argued that Gladstone had little significant involvement in the debates leading to the successful passage of the 1870 Education Bill. Morley's biography, for example, downplayed Gladstone's involvement with the bill and his disagreements with colleagues.²⁰ But, while the detail of managing the bill was left clearly in the hands of de Grey in the Lords and Forster in the Commons (and, of those two, primarily Forster), Gladstone had a regular and decisive impact on the bill's development. Indeed his first significant intervention was to block Forster's preferred option for undenominational religious teaching as a solution to the religious difficulty in the initial version of the memorandum of autumn 1869. He wrote to de Grey:

The proposal to found the State schools on the system of the British and Foreign Society would I think hardly do. Why not adopt frankly the principle that the State or the local community should provide the secular teaching, & either leave the option to the Ratepayer to go beyond this sine qua non, if they think fit, within the limits of the conscience clause, or else simply leave the parties themselves to find Bible & other religious education from voluntary sources?²¹

By 1870 a conscience clause was increasingly used in Anglican schools to allow children of Non-conformist parents to be withdrawn during periods of distinctive Anglican church teaching or worship. Gladstone later denied that there had been differences of opinion between himself and Ripon (de Grey became known as Marquess of Ripon in 1871) and Forster about the bill, but the archival evidence shows that this is not correct.²² Consequently, Forster soon revamped his memorandum to satisfy Gladstone and brought in his Education Bill on 17 February 1870. The aim of the bill was to identify areas where there was a shortfall of school places and, if the voluntary sector was unable to fill those gaps, to set up new schools. Funding would come from school fees, the parliamentary grant, and rates. Boards could choose to make school attendance compulsory and could also decide whether religious instruction could be taught in their new schools. But the bill made no reference to the character of any religious instruction in these new schools, relying mainly on a conscience clause to address the religious difficulty, backed up by prohibiting schools from insisting that children either attended, or desisted from attending, any particular place of worship on Sundays.²³ However, the Nonconformists regarded this conscience clause as inadequate since it would have left them in an inferior

position and, in agricultural districts, it was feared that parents would be unwilling to risk the opprobrium of their employers by withdrawing their children from Anglican teaching and worship.

Gladstone and the influence of W. F. Hook

Colin Matthew has argued²⁴ that Gladstone's reaction to the first version of Forster's memorandum in autumn 1869 and his preferred solution to the religious difficulty in education were rooted in a public letter, published in 1846 by his friend Walter Hook, who was then vicar of the sprawling industrial parish of Leeds and later dean of Chichester.²⁵ Gladstone began to read Hook's pamphlet on 9 July 1846 and finished it on 12 July. The diary also records that he wrote to Hook on 12 July.²⁶ In preparation for the debates on the Elementary Education Bill he later reread the pamphlet on 14 April 1870.²⁷ Hook was writing in the aftermath of two failed attempts by governments of opposing political complexions to increase the role of the state in providing education for working-class children. In 1839 Melbourne's Whig government had tried to establish a government normal school (an institution for the training of teachers) providing undenominational religious education. This had been thwarted by the Church of England. Then in 1843 Sir James Graham, the Conservative home secretary, unsuccessfully attempted to pass a Factory Education Bill, but met overwhelming opposition in the country from the Dissenters.

Hook therefore sought to extend education, but, to avoid the religious difficulty, he proposed another way for children to benefit from a truly religious education. As a counterpoint to voluntarism, he envisaged the state providing only literary and scientific education;²⁸ it would therefore not be responsible for directly providing any religious teaching, ensuring only that all children received religious instruction. Hook would require children to attend a place of worship on Sundays according to parental choice and then to produce a certificate of this Sunday attendance to the weekday school. This, in fact, echoed the BFSS. But, secondly, Hook went beyond – and indeed against – the BFSS system in proposing to use the weekday school on Wednesday and Friday afternoons for denominationally distinctive religious teaching. As far as demands on the clergy were concerned, Hook argued that the state funding of schools under his scheme would relieve clergy of the need to raise funds to set up or maintain schools and thus free them to work more intensively in the weekday schools. Hook denied that he was a reductionist who was trying to cut out the influence of religion in education; he wrote, he said, as a High Churchman and one of his concerns was to improve the quality of the specifically Anglican teaching in schools supported by the National Society.

When we compare Hook's proposals with Gladstone's comments about Forster's

Gladstone and the 1870 Elementary Education Act



Key figures in the Education Act debates:

W. E. Forster (1818–86), Vice-President of the Council

George Frederick Samuel Robinson, 3rd Earl de Grey, later 1st Marquess of Ripon (1827–1909), Lord President of the Council

Walter Farquhar Hook (1798–1875), Vicar of Leeds, Dean of Chichester



memorandum in autumn 1869, there was an important difference between them: Gladstone did not support the compulsory connection between school and church in Hook's scheme. Diverging from Forster, Gladstone did support Hook's view that the teacher of secular instruction could at other times give distinctive denominational teaching and, in Gladstone's view, a community might wish to use school premises for this purpose, but this was by no means a requirement as in Hook's scheme.²⁹ Thus, although they both shared the idea of a state which provided only secular education, Gladstone's unwillingness to enforce additional religious teaching made his version of this plan significantly different from Hook's.

The second reading of the bill

On 9 March 1870, shortly before the second reading of the bill, Gladstone received a delegation of over 400 members of the National Education League, a Radical pressure group seeking universal, free, compulsory and unsectarian education. They expressed particular concern about the freedom for school boards to determine the character of religious instruction in their areas. Thus the second reading debate, which began on 14 March, was dominated by an amendment from the Birmingham MP, George Dixon, who, notably, was an Anglican:³⁰

This House is of opinion that no measure for the elementary education of the people will afford a satisfactory or permanent settlement which leaves the question of religious instruction in schools supported by public funds and rates to be determined by local authorities.³¹

It was unusual for an amendment to be tabled at the second reading since this procedure was often designed to reject a bill at an early stage. Forster appealed for support for the bill by portraying it as reflecting the Radical programme of trusting municipal government to be guided by the ratepayers.³² Gladstone also played a decisive role at this stage by personally imploring Dixon to withdraw his amendment, but, knowing that the bill was supported by the Conservatives, he gave no hostages to fortune about changes to the bill:

We do not anticipate any serious attempt to transform the Bill. If such efforts were made, we would not be parties to it. But we freely admit that some alterations may be made ...³³

After Dixon withdrew his amendment, there was then a long delay before the committee stage of the bill in June. This may have been due to the challenges posed by the Irish Land Bill and Gladstone's desire to try and hold the support of Non-conformist MPs.³⁴

Discussions behind the scenes

In the immediate aftermath of the second reading Gladstone showed little awareness of the potential difficulties for the bill. On 24 March he wrote to Lord John Russell in optimistic vein;³⁵ by late March, in a letter to Cardinal Manning in Rome, he identified the greatest danger for the bill as coming from the secularists or, as he termed them, the unsectarians.³⁶ Gladstone's imprecision here is surprising; Dixon had earlier distinguished the two terms in his opening speech at the second reading, although the distinction he made might not have been universally agreed:

The difference between an unsectarian and a secular system appeared to be this – that in both you would exclude all Christian dogmas, but in an unsectarian system you would not have to exclude Christian precepts.³⁷

But Gladstone's earlier optimism had finally evaporated when he wrote again to Russell on 12 April: 'We have great difficulties.'³⁸ Yet, despite this acknowledgement, even in mid-May Gladstone continued to resist the pressure for changes to the bill from de Grey and Forster, since on Saturday 21 May the cabinet agreed only to amendments on the conscience clause (see below) and on the election of school boards. The original plan outlined by Forster in February was for the electoral body for the boards to be either the town councils, or the vestries, a unit of local government that originally combined secular and ecclesiastical responsibilities. The vestries declined in the nineteenth century with the rise of local boards with rating powers, for example for health. It was this model of a board that was now chosen for the new schools envisaged under the Education Bill. It was proposed that the boards would be directly elected: in the towns by the burgesses (those entitled to vote in municipal elections including those not entitled to a parliamentary vote and many women) and in parishes by the ratepayers.

De Grey and Forster had prepared two draft amendments on the content of religious instruction and presented them to the cabinet on 13 May 1870:³⁹

The Bible alone shall be used as the text for the instruction in religious subjects given in the school, [unless the Education Department, upon the request of the school board, permit the use of any religious catechism or formulary.

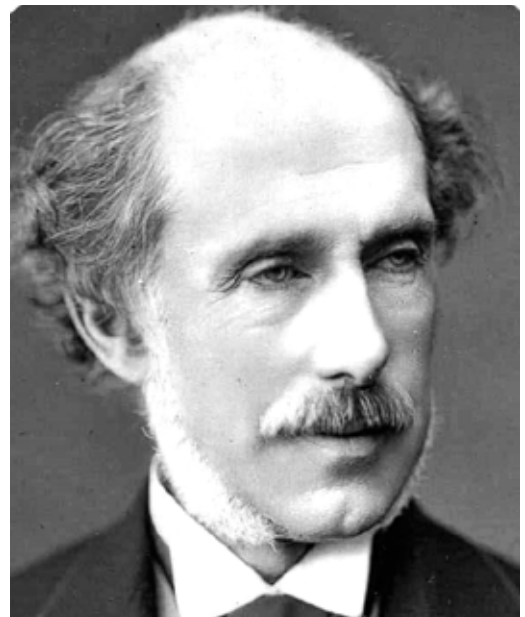
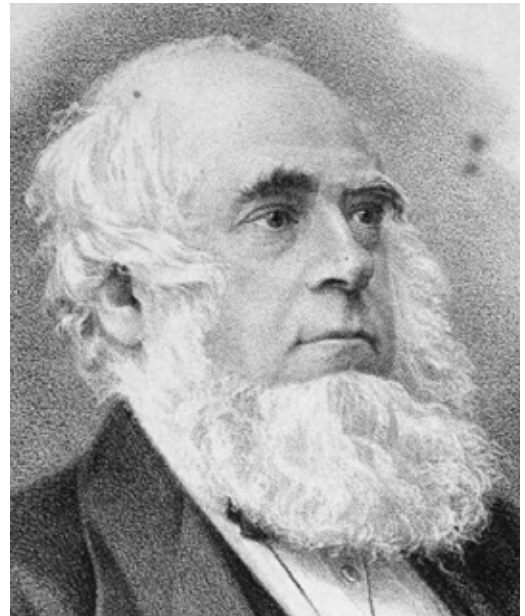
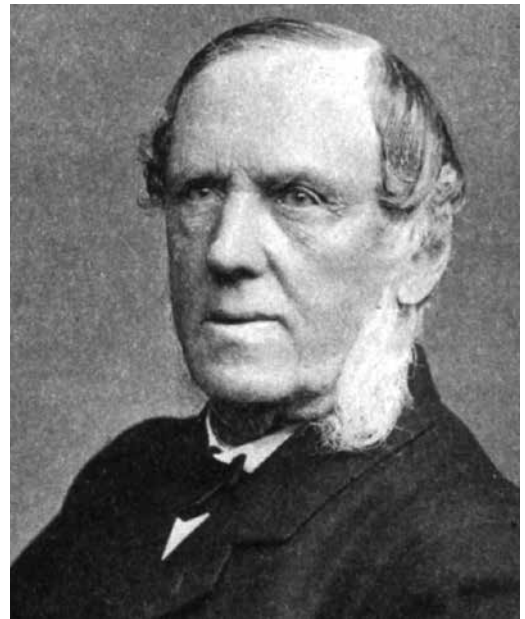
The Education Department shall cause to be laid before both Houses of Parliament in every year a report stating the cases in which they have been requested by any school board to permit the use of any religious catechism or formulary, and their reasons for giving or refusing such permission.]

Key figures in the Education Act debates:

George Dixon (1820–98), MP for Birmingham

Rev. Henry Richard (1812–88), MP for Merthyr Boroughs

William Cowper-Temple (1811–88), MP for Hampshire South



Gladstone and the 1870 Elementary Education Act

In effect, Forster was here returning to the spirit of the first version of his October 1869 memorandum, which Gladstone would not at that time support. An alternative proposal was also included:

No religious catechism or formulary shall be used as the text for the instruction in religious subjects given in the school, [except with the consent of the Education Department, upon the request of the school board.]⁴⁰

Gladstone was reluctant to see the government put in an amendment at that stage, and in response drew up his own memorandum of 28–9 May 1870 on the religious difficulty, which he sent to Granville, his close ally, colonial secretary and leader of the House of Lords, on 30 May. Despite the proposals of de Grey and Forster, Gladstone continued to argue against the state's taking any responsibility for the teaching of religion and incorporating undenominationalism because of the difficulty of defining it adequately in law.

Ironically, Gladstone must have sympathised with the Welsh Nonconformist MP Henry Richard, who led sixty-two MPs to vote to allow the various denominations access to schools to teach their own beliefs. Gladstone himself preferred this solution rather than the Cowper-Temple compromise, but their motivations were diametrically different: Richard was opposed to denominational schools, whereas Gladstone wished to protect the integrity of distinctive Anglican doctrinal teaching.⁴¹

However, the Liberal Party was now at odds with the Liberal government.⁴² Although Gladstone in private continued to urge the secular solution for the new board schools,⁴³ the need to save the bill forced him to bow to a majority at the cabinet meeting on 14 June and accept an amendment tabled by the Liberal MP for South Hampshire, William Cowper-Temple:

no religious catechism or religious formulary which is distinctive of any particular denomination shall be taught in the school.⁴⁴

This may initially appear to be very similar to the formulation in a draft bill of the National Education League, which laid down that no creed, catechism or tenet distinctive of any denomination should be taught in board schools. Cowper-Temple's formulation did not include reference to tenets, but mentioned only catechisms and formularies, of which the outstanding example for the Church of England would be the Thirty-Nine Articles. Both catechisms and formularies were written documents; tenets, by contrast, would be considered as oral. The Cowper-Temple amendment was thus designed to avoid only certain written material in teaching children.

The bill in committee

In his Commons speech on 16 June Gladstone announced several measures to mitigate the objections to the bill. The conscience clause would be strengthened by limiting religious instruction to fixed hours; rates would be applied only to secular instruction; the religious difficulty would be addressed through Cowper-Temple's proposed amendment for schools funded by rates and controlled by school boards.⁴⁵ This restricted, but did not eliminate, the discretion of the school boards on religious instruction, upon which the government had been so keen. But the logic of Cowper-Temple's amendment meant that school boards would be prevented from using rates to aid voluntary schools with distinctive denominational teaching. Government grants would therefore be increased to one half of their total annual costs.

The Cowper-Temple clause was negative undenominationalism, that is, it did not prescribe what, if any, religious instruction should be taught in the new board schools (for example, the Bible or generally agreed Christian doctrines), but only that it should not include formularies or catechisms which were distinctive of any particular denomination. The clause has been variously interpreted, but Roy Jenkins's prize-winning biography of Gladstone is completely misleading in suggesting that the clause provided a 'basic or Nonconformist religion, that is the Bible and a few hymns, on the rates.'⁴⁶ Matthew is also similarly misleading in describing this compromise as a surrender to latitudinarianism and Nonconformity.⁴⁷ But logically, this clause did not provide for any positive content for religious teaching; it was precisely the difficulty of defining any kind of positive undenominationalism which drew the government away from that solution. So even the subsequent policy of most school boards to provide Bible-based teaching does not match Matthew's judgement, since latitudinarianism is a doctrinal term which would not apply to simple Bible teaching.

Three significant amendments were discussed at the conclusion of the committee stage on 30 June. Sir John Pakington, a leading proponent of national education for more than a decade, called for compulsory daily Bible reading in the new board schools.⁴⁸ Ironically, Cowper-Temple had supported compulsory religious instruction and Bible reading with explanation when he spoke at the second reading on 18 March.⁴⁹ Gladstone made little comment on Pakington's motion, but, somewhat incongruously, alluded approvingly to a speech (presumably that of 23 June) by Edward Baines, Liberal MP for Leeds, as undermining Pakington's case. But the views of Baines and Gladstone in fact diverged in important respects. Baines's support for the state remaining neutral about religious teaching would be congenial to Gladstone. But Baines did not so much argue a case against Pakington as present hopes and assertions. He relied on the wisdom of the local boards

Gladstone continued to argue against the state's taking any responsibility for the teaching of religion and incorporating undenominationalism because of the difficulty of defining it adequately in law.

to decide to provide religious teaching. However, unlike Gladstone, he both praised the BFSS model of religious teaching and argued that undenominational religious education was feasible, a view anathema to Gladstone. He was also scornful of the practicality of clergy visiting schools to provide religious teaching, as mooted by Gladstone. Put to the vote, Pakington's amendment was lost by 81 to 250, a majority of 169.⁵⁰

Gladstone spoke in more detail on the motion of Sir Stafford Northcote, Conservative MP for North Devonshire, his former private secretary. Northcote tried to remove the Cowper-Temple clause and so, in this aspect, revert to the bill as first introduced by Forster on 17 February 1870.⁵¹ Gladstone accepted the theoretical force of Northcote's argument, but stated that the government was not now prepared to alter its stance. With various amendments still pending and significant time having already been devoted in committee to the bill, Gladstone, betraying a hint of impatience, wished it to be accepted as a practical way forward. He sympathised with Northcote's argument, especially the 'larger liberty' it would give to the teaching of religion. However, the government had been influenced by the feeling in the country as much as by the logical arguments of MPs. There could be no going back. Northcote was defeated in the vote, with 252 against and 95 in favour: a majority of 157.

An amendment from Jacob Bright, Liberal MP for Manchester, was also debated. There was widespread agreement that the interpolation of the Cowper-Temple clause into the bill forbade the use as a schoolbook of any written catechism or formulary which was distinctive of any particular denomination. So, for example, the Anglican Book of Common Prayer and its catechism were precluded. However, not everyone was content that the clause could be interpreted as allowing oral comments by the teacher which might explain a Bible passage in a denominationally distinctive way. Hence, to forestall this use of the Cowper-Temple clause, Bright proposed that:

In any such school in which the Holy Scriptures shall be read and taught the teaching shall not be used or directed in favour of or against the distinctive tenets of any religious denomination.⁵²

Gladstone's response to Bright was split between two speeches he made on this day. He put forward a mollifying argument: he had no problem with Bright's intention, but 'the effect of his amendment would be to introduce a new kind of State religion', for which he refused to take responsibility.⁵³ Gladstone also advanced a political argument: the Conservative opposition had accepted that the government concessions had been suitable. Here the government stood, he said, even though not all Liberals were supportive of the government position. Gladstone's legal argument

was that judges would not support Bright's amendment and would say that, if parliament made unintelligible laws, it must be expected that they would be disobeyed.

Before this stage of the bill Gladstone had been consistently critical of the BFSS's undenominational plan. Now came something of a volte-face, for he expounded the BFSS policy on religious teaching in such a way as to undermine Bright's argument. Gladstone rightly said that the BFSS had two cardinal principles: that the Bible should be read daily and that 'no catechism, or other formulary peculiar to any religious denomination, shall be introduced or taught during the usual hours of school instruction'.⁵⁴ Thus, Gladstone argued, the BFSS did not lay down any rules about restricting teachers from using their teaching in support of, or against, any particular denomination. This was fair comment on Gladstone's part since the BFSS required their day-school teaching to be supplemented by compulsory attendance at a church of the parents' choosing on Sundays. But Gladstone argued that if the BFSS did not restrict the teacher in this way, then the bill should not so do either. When Bright's amendment was put to the vote, it was defeated, 130 voting in favour and 251 against.⁵⁵ Thus, with the defeat of amendments from Northcote, Pakington and Bright, the Cowper-Temple clause was secure in the Commons.

Gladstone's later reflections on the bill contrasted with his achievements

In the years to come Gladstone consistently resented the inclusion of the Cowper-Temple clause. Those who argue that Gladstone was outplayed in the negotiations on the 1870 bill may point to his later vitriolic reflection that the Cowper-Temple clause was a 'moral monster'.⁵⁶ Soon after the 1870 debates Gladstone, writing to Lord Lyttelton, his brother-in-law, derided the Cowper-Temple clause.⁵⁷ He also wrote to Granville on 14 June 1874:

I have never made greater personal concessions of opinion than I did on the Education Bill to the united representations of Ripon and Forster.⁵⁸

However, Gladstone can be credited with achievements. The principle emphasised in the second reading of the bill in March 1870 of some local discretion about religious instruction had been secured. He had not wanted the BFSS system of compulsory undenominational Bible teaching in the new board schools, and this he achieved. He and his government colleagues fought off amendments from Sir John Pakington and Jacob Bright seeking to expand and qualify the Cowper-Temple compromise. He had succeeded in transcending, to a degree, party differences to convince Anglicans to accept a conscience clause for all schools and sufficient Nonconformists to accept

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While the passing of the Irish bills was an achievement of his first ministry, the Elementary Education Act of 1870 better stood the test of time. It has been described as the most outstanding achievement of that ministry and was arguably one of the great pieces of nineteenth-century social legislation.

the Cowper-Temple principle, even if they were not all reconciled.

The aftermath of the passing of the bill

The bill received the royal assent in August 1870. Gladstone's government had secured a national education bill, which had eluded previous administrations for almost sixty-five years. It had evolved from a denominationally biased bill to one which, through the acceptance of Cowper-Temple's amendment, permitted, but did not require, the new school boards to adopt a negative form of undenominational religious education as a partial solution to the religious difficulty in English education. But not everyone accepted the potential interpolation of oral denominational teaching under the Cowper-Temple clause; hence many school boards introduced the precise wording of Jacob Bright's amendment into their by-laws. Here we must distinguish the original interpretation of the Cowper-Temple clause itself from Cowper-Temple, the clause in the Act enhanced with Jacob Bright's unsuccessful amendment in parliament. On 8 March 1871 the London School Board qualified the Cowper-Temple clause by adopting a by-law prohibiting any attempt either to attach children to, or detach them from, any particular denomination:

That in such instruction the provisions of the Act in Section VII. and in Section XIV. ("No religious catechism or religious formulary which is distinctive of any particular denomination shall be taught in the school") be strictly observed, both in letter and spirit, and that no attempt be made in any such schools to attach children to any particular denomination.

London's decision proved to be influential and many other boards followed this policy. Ironically, this meant that the local determination required by the 1870 Act in fact often followed a pattern explicitly rejected by parliament. This, therefore, was what the Cowper-Temple clause came to mean for many of the immediate post-1870 generation. However, the government, echoing the principle laid down at the second reading in March, had been determined to leave some small measure of local discretion to the school boards to decide whether to have religious instruction or not. Hence what Gladstone vehemently condemned as a 'moral monster' should be perhaps not quite the original act itself, but rather the way in which it was interpreted in local areas. In a further irony, school board syllabuses for religious instruction tended to follow the spirit of Pakington's unsuccessful amendment by prescribing Bible reading. After the bill had become law, clause 25, hitherto unremarked, which empowered school boards to pay the fees of poor children in denominational schools, became a focus of protest by the Nonconformists, who saw it as a breach

of the Cowper-Temple principle. However, many Nonconformists retained their loyalty to Gladstone.⁵⁹ Moreover, in practice this was a minor issue since few school boards exercised this right. However, the Nonconformist anger over clause 25 may have contributed to the Liberal defeat at the general election in 1874, although other factors should not be ignored. Difficulties over the Ballot Bill, university tests and licensing laws also played a part.⁶⁰ Parry has also drawn attention to the geographical division of the country whereby, in county and southern borough constituencies, voters were anxious about the threats to the established church and to religious education.⁶¹

Conclusion

Gladstone's major faults during the progress of the 1870 bill were that he was slow in two respects. He misjudged the mood of dissatisfaction with the bill at the second reading in March 1870 and in May he was reluctant to accept his colleagues' proposals for amending the bill, but was then pressured by members of his cabinet into a compromise to save it. It was politically damaging that the bill was passed only with Conservative support. Yet Gladstone was superb in his grasp of the issues arising from the religious difficulty in education. While the passing of the Irish bills was an achievement of his first ministry, the Elementary Education Act of 1870 better stood the test of time. It has been described as the most outstanding achievement of that ministry⁶² and was arguably one of the great pieces of nineteenth-century social legislation. It provided at least a partial solution to the religious difficulty in English education. It was the start of what is sometimes loosely called 'state education' in England and the dual system of state, or more strictly local authority, schools alongside a voluntary sector. Thus it paved the way for extending basic education to all children, especially from the poorest strata of society, and for schooling to become compulsory by 1880 and eventually free by 1891.

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- 1 In nineteenth-century literature, the alternative terms 'national education', 'popular education' and 'working-class education' were also frequently used to express the idea of elementary education.
- 2 An excellent succinct account of the progress of the Elementary Education Bill can be found in chapter 7 of D. W. Bebbington, *The Nonconformist Conscience: Chapel and Politics 1870–1914* (George, Allen and Unwin, 1982), p. 10. See also Geoffrey F. A. Best, 'The religious difficulties of national education, 1800–70', *Cambridge Historical Journal*, 12/2 (1956), pp. 155–73 for a reliable perspective view of the background. Patrick Jackson, *Education Act Forster* (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press and Associated University Presses, 1997) has much valuable material,

- but errs by describing the British and Foreign School Society as a Dissenting or Nonconformist organisation. See p. 136.
- 3 Jonathan Parry, *The Rise and Fall of Liberal Government in Victorian Britain* (Yale University Press, 1993), p. 262.
 - 4 H. C. G. Matthew (ed.), *The Gladstone Diaries, With Cabinet Minutes and Prime-Ministerial Correspondence: Volume 7 January 1869 – June 1871* (Clarendon Press, 1982), p. xxix.
 - 5 Bebbington, *Nonconformist Conscience*, p. 10.
 - 6 E. J. Feuchtwanger, *Gladstone* (Allen Lane, Penguin Books, 1975), p. 151.
 - 7 Richard Shannon, *Gladstone: Heroic Minister 1865–1898* (Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1999), p. 57.
 - 8 *Ibid.*, p. 62.
 - 9 This term should not be confused with the fact that before 1870 all schools, even those which received government funding, could be described as voluntary.
 - 10 Report of the Commissioners appointed to inquire into the state of popular education in England (HMSO, 1861) vol. i, p. 545.
 - 11 Newcastle Commission Report, vol. i, p. 34.
 - 12 Newcastle Commission Report, vol. i, p. 304.
 - 13 Roy Jenkins, *Gladstone* (Pan Macmillan, 2002), p. 322.
 - 14 H. C. G. Matthew (ed.), *The Gladstone Diaries, With Cabinet Minutes and Prime-Ministerial Correspondence: Volume 7 January 1869 – June 1871* (Clarendon Press, 1982), p. lxiv.
 - 15 The document was marked 'for private perusal and circulation only'. British Library, Add MSS 44,728, fos. 70–1.
 - 16 H. C. G. Matthew, *Gladstone, 1809–1874* (Clarendon Press, 1986), p. 97.
 - 17 Gladstone Papers, British Library, Add MSS 44,140.
 - 18 Gladstone Papers, British Library, Add MSS 44,165.
 - 19 Gladstone's reading on education included works by Sir John Pakington, the acknowledged leader of the movement for national education from 1857, the report of the Newcastle Commission, and, in the 1860s, items on the conscience clause problem in elementary education, usually read soon after they were published.
 - 20 John Morley, *The Life of William Ewart Gladstone* (3 vols, Macmillan, 1903), vol. ii, p. 298.
 - 21 Gladstone to Earl de Grey, 4 Nov. 1869. This originally archival detail probably appeared first in Wemyss Reid's 1888 biography of Forster.
 - 22 W. E. Gladstone, 'Mr. Forster and Ireland', *The Nineteenth Century: a monthly review*, 24 (September 1888), p. 453 (in a review of Wemyss Reid's newly published biography of W. E. Forster). See further below.
 - 23 Hansard, Parl. Debs. (series 3) vol. 199, col. 1947 (14 Mar. 1870).
 - 24 Matthew, *Gladstone Diaries, Vol. 7*, p. lxxv.
 - 25 W. F. Hook, *On the Means of Rendering more Efficient the Education of the People: a Letter to the Lord Bishop of St. David's* (1846). The bishop in question was Connop Thirlwall.
 - 26 M. R. D. Foot and H. C. G. Matthew (eds.), *The Gladstone Diaries, Volume 3: 1840–1847* (Clarendon Press, 1974), pp. 551 and 558 respectively.
 - 27 Matthew, *Gladstone Diaries, Vol. 7*, p. 275.
 - 28 Hook, *Means of Rendering*, p. 36.
 - 29 W. E. Gladstone, 'Mr. Forster and Ireland', *The Nineteenth Century: a monthly review*, 24 (September 1888), pp. 451–64 (a review of Wemyss Reid's newly published biography of W. E. Forster).
 - 30 On Dixon, see passim James Dixon, *Out of Birmingham: George Dixon (1820–98), 'father of free education'* (Brewin Books, 2013).
 - 31 Hansard, Parl. Debs. (series 3) vol. 199, cols. 1930–1 (14 Mar. 1870).
 - 32 *Ibid.*, col. 1945 (14 Mar. 1870).
 - 33 *Ibid.*, col. 302 (18 Mar. 1870).
 - 34 Norman Morris, *The Politics of English Elementary School Finance 1833–1870*, Studies in British History, 72 (The Edwin Mellen Press, 2003), p. 275.
 - 35 Gladstone to Lord John Russell, 24 Mar. 1870, Russell Papers, National Archives, PRO 30/22 16F, fos. 152–5.
 - 36 Gladstone to Cardinal Manning, 26 Mar. 1870, Gladstone Papers, British Library, Add MSS 44249, fo. 148.
 - 37 Hansard, Parl. Deb (series 3) vol. 199, col. 1923 (14 Mar. 1870).
 - 38 Gladstone to Lord John Russell, 12 Apr. 1870, National Archives. PRO 30/22/16F, fo. 165.
 - 39 Dixon, *Out of Birmingham*, p. 127.
 - 40 The document with the two amendments is entitled 'Elementary Education Bill. Draft Amendments.', British Library, Add MSS 44086, fos. 146–7. The relevant clause in the bill was 14(2).
 - 41 Shannon, *Gladstone*, p. 81, nn. 92 and 93.
 - 42 *Ibid.*, p. 82.
 - 43 John T. Smith, *Methodism and Education 1849–1902: J. H. Rigg, Romanism, and Wesleyan Schools* (Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 62, citing letters to Forster, 8 Jun. 1870 and to Sir George Grey, 10 Jun. 1870, as in H. C. G. Matthew, *Gladstone 1809–1874* (Clarendon Press, 1991), pp. 304 and 305 respectively.
 - 44 Matthew, *Gladstone Diaries, Vol. 7*, 14 Jun. 1870, p. 307.
 - 45 Hansard, Parl. Debs. (series 3) vol. 202, cols. 266–85, especially 272 (16 Jun. 1870).
 - 46 Jenkins, *Gladstone*, p. 323.
 - 47 Matthew, *Gladstone Diaries, Vol. 7*, p. lxxvi.
 - 48 Hansard, Parl. Debs. (series 3) vol. 202, col. 1265 (30 Jun. 1870).
 - 49 Hansard, Parl. Debs. (series 3) vol. 200, col. 289 (18 Mar. 1870).
 - 50 Hansard, Parl. Debs. (series 3) vol. 202, col. 1269 (30 Jun. 1870).
 - 51 Hansard, Parl. Debs. (series 3) vol. 199, cols. 1236–44 (17 Feb. 1870).
 - 52 Hansard, Parl. Debs. (series 3) vol. 202, col. 1270 (30 Jun. 1870).
 - 53 *Ibid.*, col. 1281 (30 Jun. 1870).
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 - 56 Gladstone to Rev. Septimus Buss, 13 September 1894, cited in D. C. Lathbury (ed.) *Correspondence on Church and Religion of William Ewart Gladstone*, 2 vols. (J. Murray, 1910), vol. ii, p. 148.
 - 57 Gladstone to Lord Lyttelton, 25 Oct. 1870, quoted in Morley, *Gladstone*, vol. ii, p. 306.
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 - 60 Feuchtwanger, *Gladstone*, p. 166.
 - 61 Parry, *Democracy and Religion*, p. 403.
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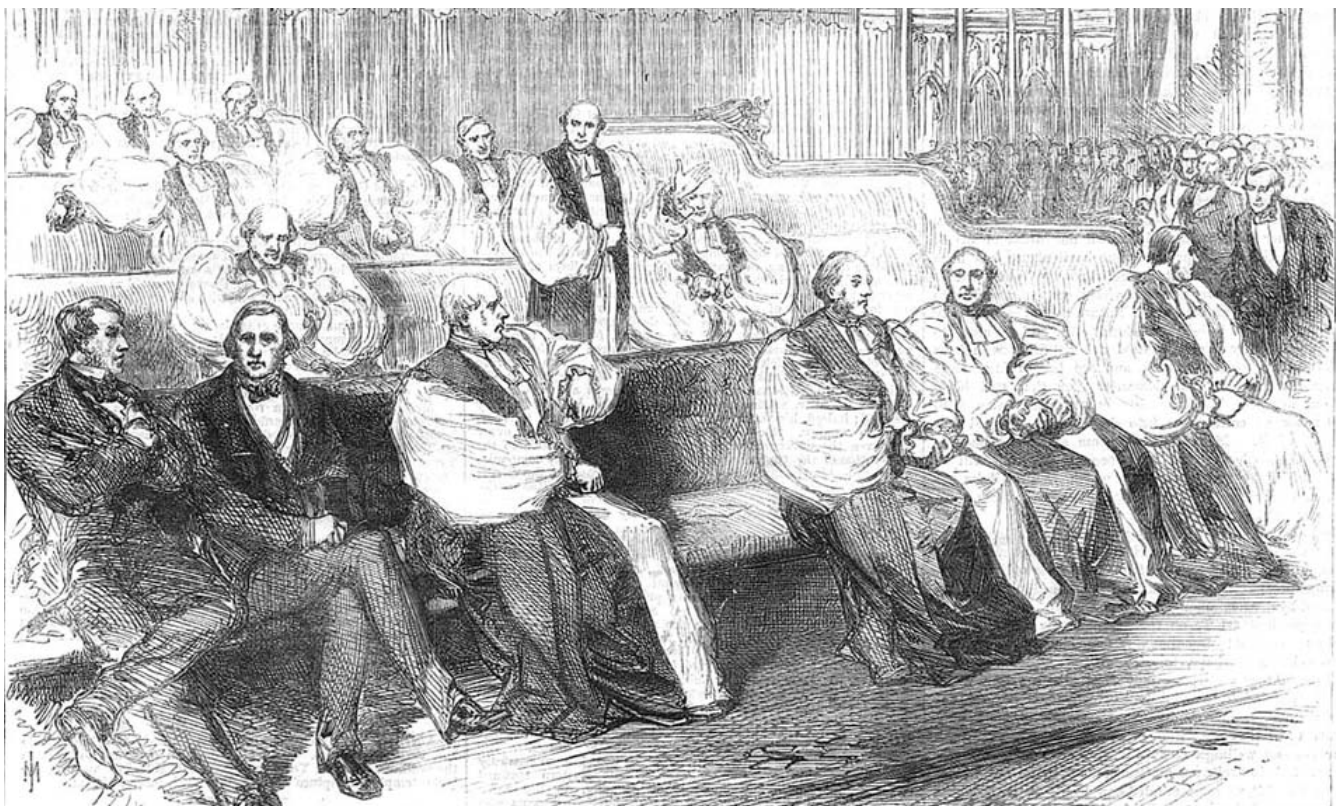
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Liberals and the Lords

Tony Little examines Gladstone's struggles to have legislation passed by the House of Lords

Jogging Along by the Gladstone's First Government



The Bishops' bench in the House of Lords during the debate on the Irish Church Bill, 1869

AT THE 1868 general election, Liberals won a majority in excess of 100 seats. But in the Lords, Conservatives predominated. According to a paper that Gladstone sent the queen in 1869, there were 433 'voting members' of the upper chamber and 'the balance of opinion in the House of Lords tends to become increasingly adverse to the Liberal Party'. This point was reinforced by Lord Granville a few days later: 'Lord Bessborough has lost from his list of 1850, of those he used to summon, 45 Peers whose Peerages have become extinct, who are incapacitated, or who in their own persons or in that of their sons have become Conservatives.' Granville estimated the Conservative majority at 'between 60 and 70 without counting Bishops or Liberals who vote oftener for the Opposition than for the

Government.' Ominously he added that 'many' Liberal peers 'are not friends of Mr. Gladstone and prefer the failure to the success of his colleagues.'¹

How could the new Liberal government overcome the potential veto of a chamber inherently hostile to its reforming zeal? This article examines four of the most controversial bills to assess how Gladstone's first government managed its legislation in the Lords.

The tone was set even before the election. After its Second Reform Act debacle, Gladstone reunited the Liberal Party, in spring 1868, by proposing resolutions to disestablish the Church of Ireland. He followed through with a bill suspending new Church appointments. When this bill reached the Lords, Lord Clarendon, soon to be Gladstone's foreign secretary, declared that,

Parliamentary Train? Government and the House of Lords

after electoral reform, anyone supposing things would ‘go on in their old train’ would be ‘greatly mistaken’:

In the new House of Commons we must expect to find many new men with many new ideas, which will possibly be persisted in all the more strongly because they are new and because they will jar with routine opinions and prejudices. It behoves us, therefore, to look well at our position – because it will never do for the House of Lords to jog along by the Parliamentary Train while the House of Commons travels by the express.²

Responding to Clarendon, the disaffected new Tory peer, Lord Salisbury, formulated the convention that still governs the Lords. While rejecting the ‘humiliation of being a mere echo and supple tool of the other House’, he counselled his colleagues that ‘when the opinion of your countrymen has declared itself, and you see that their convictions – their firm, deliberate, sustained convictions – are in favour of any course, I do not for a moment deny that it is your duty to yield’.³ Salisbury was reinforced by Lord Cairns, then Disraeli’s lord chancellor, who concluded a lengthy onslaught on the bill:

These are the issues involved in your Lordships’ decision now, and they are the issues yet to be presented to the country in the great appeal to its enlarged constituencies ... in that great appeal the Government will stand as the defenders of all that this Bill and the policy of its promoters would seek to overthrow. By the result of that appeal we are prepared to abide; and, my Lords, be that result what it may.⁴

Salisbury had been more circumspect, arguing that ‘the difficulty of ascertaining the opinion of the country may be great’ and that sometimes the Lords knew ‘the opinion of the nation better than the House of Commons’.⁵ ‘Since 1945, the

Salisbury doctrine has been taken to apply to Bills passed by the Commons which the party forming the Government has foreshadowed in its General Election manifesto,⁶ but in 1868, Salisbury clearly envisaged the Lords reaching their own judgement. In the event, their Lordships declined to board either of Clarendon’s trains, rejecting the Suspension Bill by a majority of ninety-five, which set the stage for Gladstone’s 1868 election victory.

Although their customs differed, the legislative procedures of the two Houses were analogous. After a second reading debate, which could dispute its principles, a bill went through committee and report stages, which considered amendments, concluding with a third reading debate. For bills initiated by the Commons, any Lords amendments needed the further agreement of the lower House. Theoretically, amendments could be battled between the two chambers indefinitely but, in practice, the parliamentary timetable necessitated compromise or the abandonment of the legislation. The outcome of disputes between the Houses was not predetermined but depended on the character and determination of the party leaderships. Yet the relationship between the chambers in this period has been explored largely for the development of the referential, or Salisbury, convention rather than this intrinsic party conflict.⁷ How far would opposition to the new government be carried?

When Gladstone took office, the Conservative peers were led by Lord Cairns, an austere Ulster Protestant lawyer, though a better counsellor than leader. Cairns had recently succeeded Lord Derby⁸ who had preferred to exploit Liberal differences rather than unite his opponents through confrontation and had drawn satisfaction from Palmerston’s legislative inactivity. When Cairns resigned in February 1870, the recently elevated Lords Derby⁹ and Salisbury both declined the post; Derby citing lack of experience and Salisbury want of confidence in Disraeli, from whose government he had resigned over electoral reform. Consequently, the Tories were led by the

‘It behoves us, therefore, to look well at our position – because it will never do for the House of Lords to jog along by the Parliamentary Train while the House of Commons travels by the express.’

Jogging along by the parliamentary train? Gladstone's first government and the House of Lords

Duke of Richmond, a more representative, substantial landowner but dismissed by Disraeli's biographer, Lord Blake, as 'an amiable but ineffective nonentity'. Richmond, however, quickly persuaded Salisbury to join his front bench and retained Cairns as an adviser.¹⁰

Liberal leadership in the Lords was provided throughout by Granville with Lord Bessborough as the chief whip. The March 1869 *Vanity Fair* cartoon of Granville is captioned 'The ablest professor in the Cabinet of the tact by which power is kept: it is his mission to counteract the talk by which it is won and lost.' Its text contrasts his strengths with Gladstone's:

There are those who can speak for three hours twenty minutes on the Irish Church and would fail ignominiously in the task of satisfying with a word a cold and unenthusiastic assembly of Peers who want to go home and dress for dinner. There are those who fill newspapers and those who fill lobbies, and of the two, the former sort can infinitely better be spared from a Cabinet, than the latter, for reports pass and votes remain.¹¹

'Woful huckstering'

When Gladstone proclaimed that his mission was to pacify Ireland, that enterprise had three components: the Church, the land and education. Since defending Church and landed interests were the essence of Tory beliefs, these reforms provided a central test of the Lords' resolve.

Gladstone's 1868 election address was elusive, as was his style, but on disestablishment he was adamant: 'One policy has advocates who do not shrink from its avowal. It is the policy to bring absolutely to an end the civil establishment of the Church of Ireland.'¹² Disraeli forcefully condemned the 'dissolution of the union between Church and State', offering 'to this policy uncompromising resistance. The connexion of religion with the exercise of political authority is one of the main safeguards of the civilisation of man.'¹³

From the beginning, Gladstone anticipated difficulties. In January 1869, he urged the Irish attorney general to establish 'a party of concession' among English and Irish clergy:

I assure you I think it is impossible to overrate the value of such a diversion with reference to that wh. is the most formidable stumbling block in our way, viz. the possibility that the H of Lords might be tempted, partly by the English County elections, partly by a possible development of *minor* schism in the Liberal body, when we come to adjunct details esp. with ref. to R.C.s – to use its majority by rejecting the Bill.¹⁴

The Times reported a hostile meeting, on 5 June, between the bishops and the Conservative peers who anticipated rejecting the Disestablishment Bill by a majority of eighty.¹⁵ A few days later,

after conversations with the Archbishop of Canterbury and Lord Carnarvon, Granville advised Gladstone that Carnarvon 'has still some hopes of getting Salisbury to vote, and of persuading other peers', though he complained 'it was a mistake' for 'Argyll to take this week as a good opportunity' to throw contempt on Ld Russell's (Life Peerages) bill, and 'attack Salisbury and Carnarvon.'¹⁶ Tensions rose further when a second minister, John Bright, told his constituents that the Lords were 'not very wise' in threatening to delay the bill and concluded, 'In harmony with the nation, they may go on for a long time; but, throwing themselves athwart its course, they may meet with accidents not pleasant for them to think of.'¹⁷

John Morley described the four-day Lords' second reading as 'a fine debate' in 'the fullest House assembled in living memory'.¹⁸ After outlining the details of disestablishment, Granville stated bluntly, 'My Lords, you have power – great power – immense power – for good; but there is one power you have not ... you have not the power of thwarting the national will when properly and constitutionally expressed' and reminded opposition leaders of their previous declarations. While Cairns recognised that the 'House of Lords must faithfully interpret the wishes of the nation' he still opposed the bill 'because I believe that the more the country sees and knows of this measure the less it likes and approves it'. By conceding that the Lords should 'fairly accept the conclusion at which the nation has arrived', Salisbury acknowledged the implications of his earlier statements but, when it came to amendments, he did not believe 'any Minister, however great his talents, however brilliant his success, is powerful enough even to threaten an independent branch of the Legislature, if in details of this kind its opinions do not chance to coincide with his own.' In the early morning of 19 June the second reading was carried by 179 to 146 – a majority of 33.¹⁹ Only one bishop supported the government, eleven opposed.²⁰ The next day, Lord Kimberley recorded in his diary that 'immediately after the division Ld. Salisbury said to de Grey and me, "we have given you more than we intended". The fact is they meant us to win by 7 or 8 but with so many peers uncertain, they dare not withdraw their men.'²¹

If that completed one act of the drama, a climax had not yet been reached. The Conservatives pursued two strategies in committee: to increase the property and financial resources retained by the Church and to divide the Liberals by proposing concurrent endowment.²² Gladstone concluded 'the amendments seem to mean war to the knife.'²³ Kimberley noted 'Granville's perseverance thro' all those nights in spite of a fit of gout was most heroic. The debates were very exciting. The opposition being all powerful have knocked the bill to pieces.'²⁴ The Lords gave their amended bill a third reading on 12 July with Gladstone warning the queen that 'the only result of persistence in such a course can be to establish a

John Morley described the four-day Lords' second reading as 'a fine debate' in 'the fullest House assembled in living memory'.

permanent discord between the House of Lords and the country, and probably as the first effect to produce a movement against the Episcopal seats in the House of Lords such as has never yet been seen.²⁵

On 15 July, the Commons rejected the Lords amendments, though with some financial concessions. At this point, conventionally, the Lords should have capitulated but when it became clear that they would persist, Gladstone 'determined to throw up the bill', being 'unwilling to carry this Bill against our friends by the votes of our opponents'.²⁶ Prompted by Granville, a posse of ministers met behind the Speaker's Chair to dissuade Gladstone from immediate action and to adjourn the Lords.²⁷ Following a 'flying cabinet'²⁸ the next morning, Gladstone outlined the government's options for the queen: abandon responsibility for the bill immediately, debate the amendments in whole or part and if carried then leave the majority to arrange the consequences, or return the bill to the Commons and again urge MPs to reject them. 'Under a strong desire to exhibit patience' the cabinet agreed to continue because 'Lord Granville deemed it just possible that the peers might be prepared to give way.'²⁹

Since the bill had left the Commons, the government had received several approaches from the clergy and opposition and, while refusing continued endowment, had hinted where concessions could be made – 'this woful [sic] huckstering affair' as Gladstone described it.³⁰ On the day of the resumed Lords' debate, with Gladstone ill in bed, Granville and Cairns conducted last minute negotiations – Granville shuttling between the Colonial Office, Cairns' room and Gladstone's home, and Cairns liaising with Salisbury and the Archbishop of Canterbury. Sometime after 4.30 pm, having secured an assurance from Cairns that 'he, the Archbishop and I could carry anything we agreed upon', Granville and Cairns compromised on yet more generous funding for both the Church and its clergy. Finally, Granville reported 'I shook his hand, which was trembling with nervousness' and agreed that Cairns 'should be the person to announce the details'.³¹ After Cairns' statement to the Lords, around 7.00 pm, a revised bill quickly passed its remaining stages in both Houses. Cairns had exceeded his brief and Kimberly believed that 'the Tories never forgave him for his moderation'.³² More ponderously Morley concluded, 'Never was our political system more severely tested' and 'The Lords fought hard, but yielded before the strain reached a point of danger.'³³

Almost intolerable

If the government had been forewarned on the Irish Church Bill, it had not been forearmed, reacting to opposition approaches, improvising a solution to the impasse and anxious to avoid a reform agitation. The only practical Lords' reform considered during the ministry was

Liberal leaders in the Lords:

Granville Leveson-Gower, 2nd Earl Granville (1815–91): Secretary of State for the Colonies 1868–70, Foreign Secretary 1870–74

George Villiers, 4th Earl of Clarendon (1800–70): Foreign Secretary 1868–70



Russell's unsuccessful private member's bill to create a small group of specialist life peers.

However, over the summer after the disestablishment crisis, Gladstone and Granville made a coordinated effort to persuade the queen to create more Liberal peers. Informally submitting a list of candidates for prior approval, Gladstone outlined the decline in peerage numbers over the previous thirty years and the need 'to maintain and strengthen the order' before delicately suggesting 'some regard is also to be had to the preservation of harmony between the new Houses'. He compared the modest number of Palmerston's nominations to the greater numbers elevated under Derby's shorter premiership. In response to royal resistance, Granville was plainer: 'The position of Your Majesty's Government in the Lords is almost intolerable. ... No one would pretend that a dozen Peers could swamp such a majority; but Her Majesty's Government requires moral support in the House.' Knowing the queen's reliance

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on her late husband, Granville added, diplomatically, 'The Prince was averse to numerous creations, but it was at a time when there was no such hurtful anomaly as a majority of 100 in the Commons, and an immense majority on the opposite side in the Lords. But even then His Royal Highness constantly told Lord Granville that the House was wanting in Peers representing different classes and different types of ideas.' He concluded, 'It is disadvantageous to the Lords that it should be difficult to initiate measures in it. It is not good for the Crown that its servants should be helpless in either branch of the Legislature'.³⁴ With no crisis to force her hand, Victoria grudgingly allowed only '7 or 8 now and 2 or 3 added later'.³⁵ Although Gladstone did not immediately admit defeat, only modest numbers of further peerages were created.

They would have acted more wisely

The Irish land reforms³⁶ were formulated against a background of agrarian unrest and the 1867 Fenian uprising. Around three-quarters of Irish land was held at will,³⁷ with tenants professing a customary entitlement to their farms and owners often fearing to enforce the law. Regularising and ameliorating the position of Irish tenants without destroying the rights of landlords or sparking an equivalent English agrarian agitation was, as Gladstone lamented to Granville, 'a question arduous & critical within as without the Cabinet'.³⁸ Despite initiating debate between colleagues in May 1869, it was not until February 1870 that Gladstone introduced his bill. The delay proved beneficial to the passage of the legislation, if not to the success of the policy. Firstly the public debate it stimulated was exploited by Irish agitators which, paradoxically, made landowners more amenable to a settlement. Secondly, the cabinet discussions modified Gladstone's more radical proposals, again enhancing their acceptability.

After the initial Commons debates on the 16 February, Derby noted that 'the land bill is everywhere talked about. ... The landlords appear on the whole inclined to think that matters might have been worse: and everybody agreed that there would be danger in putting off legislation to another year.' A later meeting with Cairns, Hardy and Disraeli reached the same conclusion, but, by March, the Conservatives were looking to modify the proposals.³⁹ The Lords gave the bill a second reading without a division but it took three days of opposition damning with faint praise to which most cabinet peers felt obliged to respond. One junior minister, Lord Dufferin, conceded so many opposing arguments that he felt obliged to offer his resignation, though it was refused⁴⁰.

The Lords' committee stage was where the parties clashed. Following publication of proposed amendments towards the end of June, the government prepared by means of two cabinets and a meeting between the principal ministers

and nine Liberal peers, though Gladstone was glad to delegate final arrangements to Granville.⁴¹ Although willing to accept government funded land purchase, the regularisation of Ulster Custom tenancies and compulsory compensation for tenant improvements, Conservatives balked at compensation for 'disturbance'. They sought to limit the amounts payable and the circumstances justifying compensation for eviction. This battle was directed by the leaderships on both sides with divisions attracting around half of the total peerage. The Conservatives were not wholly united and Salisbury carried an amendment restricting compensation in which Richmond voted with the government.

Granville and Fortescue (chief secretary for Ireland) conferred again ahead of the Lords' report stage, where the real bargaining began. Cairns and Richmond met Granville on 2 July at his Mayfair home for two hours with the Irish attorney general available 'in a back room'. The committee stage alterations were divided into those to be accepted by the government, either immediately or in the Commons, those to be negated in the Commons and Salisbury's amendment. Cairns and Richmond obviously expressed themselves forcibly about Salisbury as Granville was 'bound to not tell what they said on the subject'. Granville agreed that Bessborough, as an Irish landlord, would introduce a new clause that 'cancelled' Salisbury's restrictions, a clause approved with the votes of Cairns and Richmond against rebellious Tory peers. Richmond assured Granville that he had the Conservative peers 'in hand' but admitted that even former Conservative ministers had not been informed of their concessions.⁴² After this 'anxious interview' Gladstone wrote to Granville: 'I think every difficulty is solved in your *projet de loi* and we have only to desire that the evil angels may not fly athwart the light, and the execution may correspond with the design.'⁴³

Execution in the Lords proceeded smoothly and the Liberal backbencher Sir John Trelawny detected signs of the deal, when the bill returned to the Commons, noting 'Govt seemed to exercise their power moderately, only insisting upon disagreement with the Lords in cases in which agreement would most likely peril the Bill. Disraeli seemed to be equally discreet. The Bill will pass.'⁴⁴ However, 'evil angels' had intervened, as the Commons tampered with a negotiated amendment. As Granville complained 'the improvement ... is unlucky as it was part of the positive agreement between Richmond & me, and was wished by him to reassert his position with his party.' Granville was obliged to 'offer to decline agreeing your amendment to our amendment.' He added that if other alterations were made it would 'upset me as to the conduct of any bill in the Lords.'⁴⁵

On 27 June 1870, part way through the committee stage Clarendon had died suddenly, promoting Granville to foreign secretary, while remaining leader of the Lords. Consequently, the

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Franco-Prussian crisis, which surprised the Foreign Office, distracted Liberal leaders during the final stages of land reform. That and the abstruse nature of the remaining differences, may account for the tetchy tone of the letter Gladstone wrote to Granville on 22 July:

We had to cram dishes of the Lords amendments down the throats of our men today ... We have strained ourselves as well as our friends a good deal for the sake of peace: I hope the Lords will not tempt us any further.

I am unable to join in the compliments paid to their moderation, but I have kept silence thus far. They would have acted more wisely for the order as well as for the country, had they acted more liberally.

I hope the Bill will not come back: if it does our debates will I fear be of a different colour.

Both Disraeli and Ball spoke with prudence; indeed I am fully persuaded that they have by no means concurred in all the steps taken by your Opposition.⁴⁶

Two days later, Granville and Gladstone swapped apologetic notes about a heated exchange in cabinet, Gladstone feeling 'mortified' and Granville with a 'bad taste in my mouth' after Gladstone's misinterpretation of the 'treaty' left Richmond feeling double-crossed and no longer willing to find a 'mezzo termine'.⁴⁷ The cabinet agreed 'to accept the Lords amendments rather than lose the bill'. Gamely, Granville reopened negotiations but, as he finally reported, 'I tried my best in public and private to get Richmond and Cairns to get something out of the fire, but notwithstanding Halifax's assistance they stuck to their pound of flesh'.⁴⁸ Supplemented by the Lords' final amendments the bill completed its parliamentary journey before the end of the month.

The feelings of an old guardsman

The Irish reforms fulfilled Liberal campaign pledges, but the remaining examples, from the 1871 legislative programme, encountered greater difficulties and would not have been protected under the Salisbury convention.

The Prussian army's swift victories against the French in 1870 provided renewed impetus for reform of the British army. Cardwell was charged with reorganising the War Office, restructuring the regiments to improve mobilisation and still cutting expenditure. The purchase of commissions, whereby individuals bought into a regiment and paid for promotion, restricted recruitment, frustrated ambition, hindered efficiency and prevented flexibility. But significantly, on retiring, commissions could be sold to provide a pension. Theoretically, prices were regulated under the 1809 Brokerage Act but most transactions occurred at 'over-regulation' prices and were technically illegal though tolerated. The 1871

Army Bill sought to abolish purchase and compensate those affected.

Introduced to the Commons in February, the bill ran into difficulties from the outset. As Anthony Bruce concluded, 'It is the first example of systematic obstruction in the Commons, a technique used later by Irish nationalists to much greater effect'.⁴⁹ After five days of second reading debate, a group of Conservative backbenchers nicknamed 'the Colonels' prolonged the committee stage from the beginning of May till the middle of June, despite the government pruning the bill. On 3 July as it received its Commons third reading, Cairns discussed the Army Bill with Derby. They agreed as to 'the impolicy of opposing it: Carnarvon takes the same view: but Richmond has the feelings of an old guardsman on the question of purchase: and Salisbury is always for fighting'.⁵⁰ A wider group of peers met inconclusively the next day with Derby, Cairns and Carnarvon 'pointing out the danger and inexpediency of trying to throw out the bill: seeing that purchase cannot be permanently maintained, and that the officers are never likely to get equally good terms again. Salisbury and Redesdale were strongest on the opposite side dwelling chiefly on the political aspect of the question, the risk of breaking up the party by declining to give expression to their views ...'.⁵¹ This disunity may explain Richmond's tactic of refusing a second reading until a royal commission or similar body produced a 'complete and comprehensive scheme for the first appointment, promotion, and retirement of officers; for the amalgamation of the Regular and Auxiliary Land Forces; and for securing the other changes necessary to place the military system of the country on a sound and efficient basis'.⁵²

The weekend before the Lords' debate, Gladstone visited Lord Salisbury, noting 'We were most kindly received and very happy at Hatfield, army bill notwithstanding'.⁵³ Salisbury had saved his venom for the House, damning the bill as 'hasty and imperfect legislation' from which 'everything was cut away that might impede its progress. Nothing was kept except what would catch the democratic breeze'.⁵⁴ Facing defeat, Granville responded in kind claiming that they had heard 'how far one of the ablest men in this House can go in sarcasm and invective – particularly when, I think, he feels himself a little weak in argument'.⁵⁵ In the early morning of 17 July peers divided against the bill by 155 to 130.

If in previous disputes, the government had improvised concessions, this time they had prepared and were steadfast. The cabinet had met on 12 July and concluded it was 'impossible consistent with duty to allow the illegality of over-regulation prices, now made officially known, to continue'.⁵⁶ On 18 July, the cabinet advised the queen, through a formal minute, to issue a royal warrant withdrawing the regulations permitting the sale of commissions;⁵⁷ a decision conveyed

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to parliament on 20 July. This placed the 'crest-fallen'⁵⁸ Conservatives in an awkward position – purchase had been abolished but without the bill no compensation was available. They covered their retreat by a censure motion, with Salisbury accusing Granville of believing that 'the whole duty of the House of Lords is to obey the House of Commons',⁵⁹ before agreeing to the remaining stages of the bill. Kimberley described the censure as a 'foolish move. Such a vote utterly disregarded by the govt, serves no purpose but to proclaim to the world the impotence of the House', a conclusion echoed by the Conservative Lord Exeter writing to Richmond that in using 'the Royal Prerogative to abolish Purchase' Gladstone had 'plainly told the Country that he can do without the House of Lords.'⁶⁰

Presented with an authoritative knock

Among measures delayed by the Army Bill, was a bill for secret ballots in parliamentary elections, nominated by Gladstone as one of four key measures for the 1871 Queen's Speech.⁶¹ The bill did not secure its Commons' third reading until 8 August. Acknowledging its difficulties, the cabinet considered its options on 24 July and, after consulting the chief whip, favoured continuing into an autumn session rather than shortening the bill or delaying to a new parliamentary year. A decision characterised by Trelawny as 'a grim jest. Not a soul believes this possible' though necessary to retain the support of Radicals.⁶² Granville was instructed to consult the 'Duke of Richmond & learn whether his friends had a preference'.⁶³ They had. On 10 August, the Lords killed the bill by deferring consideration for six months, which Kimberley thought 'excessively foolish', even though 'the lateness of the Session is a decent excuse'. Gladstone, he described as 'violent against the H. of Lords.'⁶⁴

The problems with the Army and Ballot bills resulted in a degree of dissatisfaction with the government. Trelawny grumbled, 'A quarrel has been established with the House of Lords – a quarrel which might have been avoided. If Gladstone do[es] not exhibit more care, his Ministry will soon totter to its fall.'⁶⁵ On the other side, Derby noted 'the newspapers are full of comments on the session. It has undoubtedly left Gladstone and his colleagues in a weaker position than they were at its commencement'.⁶⁶ In response, Gladstone turned to the platform. In September, on a holiday jaunt to his son's Whitby constituency, he replied to an address from the local Working Men's Liberal Association. Using deliberately provocative terms, he questioned whether 'the will of majorities was to prevail or the will of minorities' and whether the rules of the Lords were to 'bar the way to the passing of useful measures'. Time spent on the Ballot Bill in the Commons had not been lost, he declared, 'The people's House had passed the people's Bill,

and that Bill, when presented again at the door of the House of Lords, as he trusted it would be very early next session, would be presented with an authoritative knock which it would not otherwise have possessed.'⁶⁷ In October, he spoke in his own, Greenwich, constituency: denouncing the Lords' rejection of the Ballot Bill as 'a great and serious error', he raised the spectre of reform – 'that we should eject and expel from the House of Lords what is termed the hereditary principle' – before dispelling it by a digression on how 'the Englishman is very apt indeed to prefer' a lord to a commoner.⁶⁸

The 1872 Ballot Bill reached the Lords in June and received a second reading by eighty-six votes to fifty-six. Unfortunately in Committee, the Lords passed an amendment making the secret vote optional. Unsurprisingly, this was reversed by the Commons, setting up another clash between the Houses.

On 3 July Gladstone wrote to his chief whip: 'Since you were here, I have seen a very alarming indication for Monday next in the Lords; not an ordinary note from the (Tory) Whip but a lithographed letter from the Leader, couched in strong terms.' He requested that Glyn 'let the trumpet blow that the Lords may know before the time comes what the country thinks.'⁶⁹ On previous occasions, the whips organised backbench cheering for Gladstone to warn off the Lords.⁷⁰ Gladstone also suggested a press campaign 'pointing to the extreme gravity of the consequences.'⁷¹

The cabinet met, on a Saturday, to consider 'six alternatives' if the Lords stuck to optional secrecy. They rejected the creation of peers, resignation, accepting the amendment, or trying again the following year.⁷² As Kimberley recorded, they decided to dissolve either immediately or early the next year if an autumn session again rejected the bill, despite expecting to lose between twenty-five and thirty seats⁷³. The preparations were unnecessary for, as Derby noted, 'the amendments were lost by 19: 157 to 138. The result was doubtful to the last: many peers remaining, as I believe, undecided even when they came into the House.'⁷⁴ A few days later, Gladstone reported to Granville from the Commons: 'We are engaged in proposing and giving effect to the scheme for dealing with the Lords Amendments which we understood to have been agreed upon by you & the Duke of Richmond', though he was confused by continued Conservative opposition, concluding 'I suppose the explanation is that Hardy & Co had not been apprised of the state of the case, through some default on the part of the leaders.'⁷⁵

A 'debateable and debated question'

In his 1867 essays, *The English Constitution*, Walter Bagehot argued that after the 1832 Reform Act, the House of Lords was 'a chamber with (in most cases) a veto of delay with (in most cases) a power of revision, but with no other rights or powers.'⁷⁶

Trelawny grumbled, 'A quarrel has been established with the House of Lords – a quarrel which might have been avoided. If Gladstone do[es] not exhibit more care, his Ministry will soon totter to its fall.'

Bagehot was premature. Salisbury and his colleagues were unwilling to concede what Bagehot had called the 'evil of two co-equal Houses'. The four cases presented, chosen to avoid the internal Liberal divisions that complicated the education debates, illustrate the mix of negotiation and confrontation used by Gladstone's administration to circumvent this aristocratic opposition. They also demonstrate the boundaries that the government imposed on itself.

While hoping to persuade Queen Victoria to create more peers, Gladstone wrote that the Lords' 'constitution after the reform Act of 1867, might readily be brought into controversy. But without doubt it is a cardinal object of good sense and good policy, to keep this, if possible out of the category of debateable and debated questions.'⁷⁷ Gladstone deviated from this discipline in response to the Lords' obstruction to the Ballot Bill, as his Greenwich and Whitby speeches show. By 1872, ministers contemplated an election in which expelling 'the hereditary principle' from the Lords would inevitably become the main issue. Only Conservative timidity prevented their resolution being tested and Kimberley suspected that Disraeli had 'not wished any serious attack to be made on the Govt.'⁷⁸ But even then, against the greatest delay imposed by the Conservatives, the government did not contemplate the mass creation of new peers, the elimination of bishops or limiting the powers of the upper chamber.

Gladstone's first government was his most successful in managing the Lords. This reflected the strength of conviction embodied in its majority but also the relative competence of the Liberal and Conservative leaderships. The skills of Gladstone and Granville were complementary. Gladstone's virtues in conceiving and presenting complex legislation are well known, but he was also viewed as 'wanting of late in temper, discretion & straightforwardness'⁷⁹ Granville no doubt mastered detail less well but, as Steele suggests, 'He had the art of listening sympathetically to the disgruntled and the anxious, and giving without offence advice other than they had hoped to hear,'⁸⁰ skills very adaptable to the 'woful huckstering' of negotiation.

By comparison, in 1870, Derby wrote of Disraeli, 'from want of health he has virtually abdicated during the present session',⁸¹ and in the following year, 'Disraeli is disliked by many, and not much trusted even by those who like him best.'⁸² During the 1871 Ballot Bill dispute, Derby unfavourably assessed his fellow peers:

Richmond though sensible by nature, has never studied political matters, and his want of knowledge is painfully apparent in debate: Salisbury destroys by violence the effect of his undoubted ability: and Cairns, whose character and capacity make him the proper Conservative leader, if he would accept the post, is rather too much disposed to dwell at length on details – the usual

lawyer's fault – and so to weaken his admirably skilful arguments. But besides all this, there is no concert or communication, and each of the three takes a line of his own.⁸³

During the obstruction of the Army Bill, Derby wrote of Salisbury that if he was not 'gratifying an unhappy temper', his 'object must be to provoke a collision between the two Houses – but for what purpose I cannot see.'⁸⁴ Opposition is necessarily reactive but the Conservatives, except Salisbury, lacked a strategy and, tactically, lacked the cohesion required to judge the battles to fight or to win those chosen. The modest concessions won in the church and land contests were not commensurate with the effort employed. Salisbury had a clear determination that the Lords would not be subservient and during Gladstone's later governments, as Conservative leader he turned the Lords into an effective opposition.

The government appear to have kept well informed about their adversaries, despite which they underestimated the opposition they faced over disestablishment. From the beginning the queen encouraged compromise but, with the bishops and the Conservatives only intermittently coordinated, it required Gladstone's attention to detail and Granville's diplomatic skills to focus and limit the compromise to the financial complexities of the legislation. That the Liberals were perceived to be the victors is confirmed by Cairns' surrender of his leadership. Faced with the weaker leadership of Richmond, Granville ensured that he was kept in place by the token victories offered on the Land Bill.

The Conservatives fought the fundamentals not the details of the Army and Ballot Bills. In both cases the government had prepared in advance. The manoeuvre which abolished the purchase of commissions was sufficiently devious for Morley to quote the historian, E. A. Freeman, in his hero's defence: 'I believe that this is one of those cases in which a strictly conscientious man like Mr. Gladstone does things from which a less conscientious man would shrink.'⁸⁵ Ballot Bill frustrations emboldened Gladstone to threaten the radical option of making the Lords a 'debateable and debated question'. However, Conservative backbenchers deserted their leaders sensing that the optional secret ballot was too flimsy a weapon for such a confrontation.

To push Lord Clarendon's metaphor to its limits, the opposition in the House of Lords were very reluctant passengers on the parliamentary train, crowding into the guard's van, unsuccessfully fighting Granville over control of the brakes. If the train eventually derailed in 1873, the fault lay more with the over-ambitious driver than the passengers and guard.

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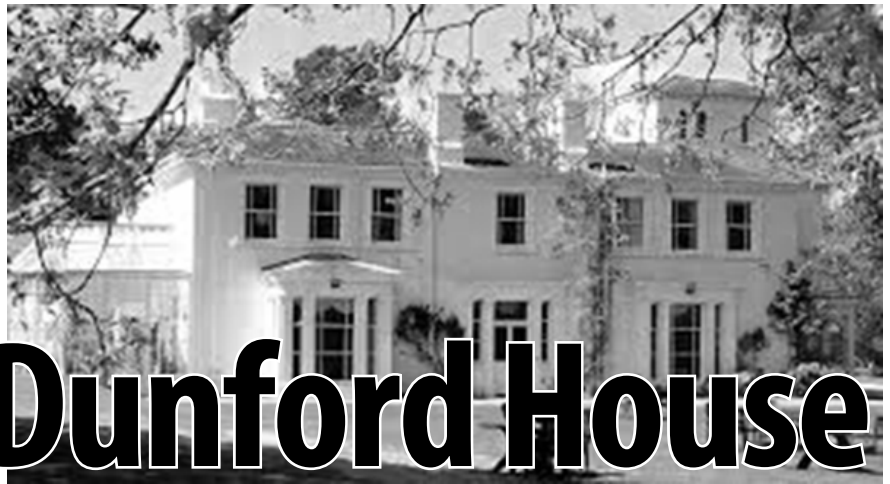
Jogging along by the parliamentary train? Gladstone's first government and the House of Lords

chapter cover *Gladstone's first ministry to the Group's Peace, Reform and Liberation* (2011). *Tony chairs the Liberal Democrat History Group*.

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- 4 Hansard, Parl. Debs. (series 3) vol. 193, col. 288 (29 June 1868).
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Anthony Howe

on the threat to Richard Cobden's
Sussex home



Saving Dunford House

SINCE THE EARLY 1950S Dunford House, the home of the great Victorian Liberal Richard Cobden, has been in the possession of the YMCA, operating for many years as a conference centre, hosting, inter alia, the Richard Cobden Bicentenary Conference in 2004. The YMCA is currently intending to dispose of Dunford House, and a family-led 'Cobden Foundation' is in the process of formation, with a view to re-acquiring it in order to retain it as an educational centre and as a deeply important historic home.

Dunford's significance in the history of liberalism is threefold.

First, Dunford is a unique example of the home of a leading middle-class politician of Victorian Britain. Most preserved Victorian houses tend either to be those of the aristocracy or of wealthy capitalists imitating their lifestyle. Dunford, however was rebuilt, c. 1848–53, as a family home for Britain's leading Liberal – but by no means wealthy – politician. It has therefore ever since been associated with the values of free trade, peace, and international good will which Cobden's career exemplified. From Cobden's letters we can gain a good sense of the rebuilding process, with its characteristic Victorian features such as the Paxtonesque glasshouse and the delightful and pleasing library in which some of Cobden's own books are still displayed (although regrettably others, including his copy of the Great Exhibition catalogue, have recently been disposed of). Dunford, as much as Parliament, was the base of Cobden's later political career from which he wrote thousands of letters designed to influence his contemporaries and political life. He also received many

political friends and foreign visitors, some of whom recorded the impact of 'fireside chats' at Dunford on their future careers. Dunford is therefore unique for its insights into the domestic basis of Victorian middle-class Liberal political culture, and this is reflected in its surviving artefacts, including family portraits.

Second, Dunford was an important cradle of feminism, exemplified by Cobden's daughters. After their father's death, the Cobden sisters who had been brought up at Dunford and lived there for some time afterwards were to play an unusual part in later Victorian life. Annie (1853–1926) who married the Arts & Crafts publisher Thomas Cobden-Sanderson, became a leading suffragette, while Jane (1851–1947), who married the Progressive publisher Thomas Fisher Unwin and who retained a strong local presence into the 1940s, was a leading suffragist and one of the first women members of the London County Council; she also supported many other radical causes. A third sister, Ellen, later a novelist (Dunford appears thinly disguised as Dunton in one of her novels), married the leading artist Walter Sickert. Family portraits and related artefacts are preserved at Dunford, while the library contains volumes bearing the nameplate 'The Daughters of Richard Cobden'. Dunford therefore played a highly significant part in the genesis and development of later Victorian and Edwardian feminism.

Third, Dunford in the twentieth century became a centre for global society and the international community, so that Cobden's career as the 'International Man' has been fully reflected in its later history. Although this has not been

extensively documented, in the Edwardian period the house acted as a port of call for many foreign visitors attracted by its associations with free trade and peace, such as the French Society of Economists. After a brief spell as a weekend retreat for students and staff of the London School of Economics (1920–24), in the later 1920s it became a real microcosm of aspirations towards a global society, hosting a series of conferences (including the first in Britain devoted to a 'United States of Europe') while the Dunford House (Cobden Memorial) Association organised a series of lectures by distinguished internationalists such as Nicholas Murray and Moritz Bonn. Artefacts relating to this period (for example, a visitors' book) are preserved at Dunford, as well as many archives in the WSRO. Nevertheless, the 1930s proved less conducive to the values of Cobden's internationalism and the property of the Dunford House Trust was offered to the National Trust in 1935–36. But into the 1940s it remained under the aegis of Francis Hirst, a leading Liberal publicist and former editor of *The Economist*, who had married a great-niece of Cobden's in 1903.

The campaign to save Dunford is spearheaded by Cobden family members led by Nick Cobden-Wright, but also has much local community and wider national support, including that of the Reform Club. It is now seeking further support from those willing to contribute financially as patrons or as members of the 'Cobden League of Friends'. If you are willing to help this appeal in any way, or for further information, please contact: Nick Cobden-Wright, nickcobdenwright@icloud.com

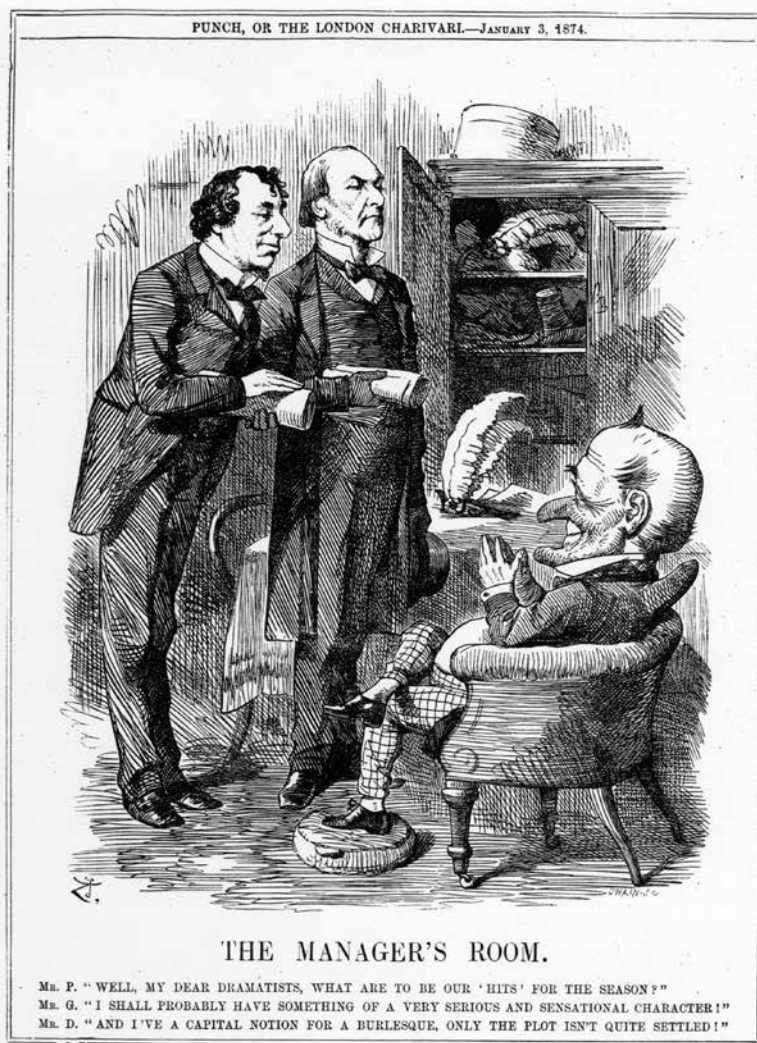
Election analysis

David Brooks discusses the 1874 election and its outcome, which brought to an end Gladstone's first government

The General El

ON 23 JANUARY 1874, Gladstone stunned the political world, and the country in general, by announcing the sudden dissolution of parliament, thereby precipitating a brief but highly charged contest at the polls. It would prove to be one of the more significant general elections of the nineteenth century, dramatically reversing the Liberal triumph of just over five years previously. More than most such contests, that of 1874 assumed a highly personalised character. Gladstone and Disraeli had long sparred across the floor of the House of Commons. Now their inveterate rivalry would be transferred to the hustings, with each declaiming against the other in speeches in their respective constituencies. In the opinion of the *Saturday Review*, 'if there is any one political question ... it is that suggested by the comparison between Mr. Disraeli and Mr. Gladstone, which Mr. Gladstone has done his utmost to put in the strongest light possible.'¹ The platform oratory of the two party leaders effectively defined the 1874 general election; and, in rhetorical terms, it has to be said that Disraeli had rather the better of the encounter.

But of course much more was at work than great personal antagonism. The electoral contest amounted to a referendum on the record of Gladstone's tumultuous first administration, with its list of major and controversial reforms, involving religion, the rights of property, education, the system of voting, and national defence. Rarely, indeed, had the British establishment seemed under such sustained attack. In these circumstances the electoral verdict can with some justification be interpreted as a conservative reaction to Gladstone's radical reforms, but beyond this it was arguably also a reaction to almost half a century of sweeping legislation and organic change. To this extent it can be seen as marking the end of an era, signalling the close of a long period of Liberal hegemony, in both Britain and Ireland, and pointing, in Britain at least, to increasing Conservative strength and dominance. One political commentator put it rather well. 'The great lesson of the election of 1874', he declared, 'is that the middle classes have gone over to the enemy bag and baggage.'²



Opening exchanges

Gladstone began proceedings with a manifesto, couched in the form of an inordinately long letter to his Greenwich constituents. Disraeli would describe it with some justice as a 'prolix narrative', in which the prime minister laboured somewhat unconvincingly to blame the Conservatives for the sudden dissolution of parliament, on the grounds that they had failed to take office ten months previously after defeating the government in the House of Commons on the Irish Universities Bill. This failure, claimed Gladstone, had

The approach to the election – Disraeli and Gladstone in front of Mr Punch (*Punch*, 3 January 1874)

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undermined the constitution, and placed both crown and country at a disadvantage. It had certainly left him in charge of what would today be described as a lame-duck administration, without sufficient authority to impose its will on either of the house of parliament.

In contrast to 1868, Gladstone now gave little indication of what he would do if he were returned to office; though he made it clear that his emphasis would be on England rather than on Ireland and the Celtic fringe. He talked in very general terms about reforming 'the institutions of this great metropolis', and, more widely, of amending the system of local government finance, with possible relief for ratepayers; and in addition he referred vaguely to the extension of household suffrage to the counties, or, as he somewhat drolly put it, 'to the populations of a number of rural districts with a central village, which may perhaps be called peasant-boroughs'. Like much else in his election programme, this raised as many questions as it answered. Thus *The Economist* considered his tentative proposal to reform London's system of government 'a subject involving the delicate adjustment of an infinity of details', adding that 'it must disturb and alarm a vast multitude of vested interests.' Furthermore Gladstone took credit for his government's record in reducing public expenditure and thereby accumulating a likely surplus of £5.5 million by the time of the next budget; and this, he claimed, would enable him to offer his one substantial, not to say startling, election promise, in the form of the abolition of income tax.³ Surely, one would have thought, this would prove a clear winner with the electorate.

Disraeli's own manifesto, following a day later in the form of a letter to his Buckinghamshire constituents, was of course a very different document. Incisive and epigrammatic, in contrast to Gladstone's, it fastened effectively on a number of key themes. To begin with, it took issue with what it chose to regard as Gladstone's constitutional impropriety in dissolving parliament just a few days before it was due to come back into session. The snap dissolution, declared Disraeli, was 'essentially un-English', indeed a virtual 'coup d'état', almost worthy of Napoleon III, whether

undertaken 'as a means of avoiding the confession by the Prime Minister that he has, in a fresh violation of constitutional law, persisted in retaining for several months a seat to which he was no longer entitled, or resorted to by his government in order to postpone or evade the day of reckoning for a war carried on without communication with Parliament and the expenditure for which Parliament has not sanctioned'.⁴ Clearly Disraeli relished taking the constitutional high ground at his old opponent's expense; and indeed Gladstone's failure to seek re-election for Greenwich in August 1873, after assuming the additional office of chancellor of the exchequer, had caused him to be served a writ of pains and penalties in the Court of Queen's Bench, significantly just three days before he had taken the decision to dissolve.⁵

The war against the Ashanti in West Africa, alluded to here, had been opposed by Disraeli when it broke out in 1873; and during the general election campaign he would repeatedly insist that it endangered British interests in Asia, a part of the world which of course always appealed much more than Africa to his imperial imagination. Disraeli's contention was that, in order to obtain the cession of Dutch forts along the Gold Coast in West Africa, Gladstone's government had surrendered to the Dutch control of Sumatra and the vital waterway of the Malacca Straits between that island and the Malay Peninsula. This was of course part of the central message which Disraeli promulgated at the 1874 general election, that what was needed was 'a little more energy in our foreign policy and a little less in our domestic legislation'. In his manifesto Disraeli warned, in the light of the record of the previous five years, of the fresh domestic upheavals that might be in prospect should Gladstone and the Liberals be returned to power. The Church of England, the Irish Union, the House of Lords, indeed the Crown itself: all might be in danger. In particular Disraeli very effectively exploited Gladstone's toying in his own manifesto with the possibility of further parliamentary reform.⁶ This was of course a subject at which Disraeli had excelled at his rival's expense in 1866 and 1867; and he now took occasion to warn of all the complications

involved. Quite apart from the fact that the recent major changes of 1867 and 1872 still had properly to be assimilated, the extension of household suffrage to the counties, which any further instalment of parliamentary reform would involve, would necessitate the wholesale redrawing of constituency boundaries, and hence the disappearance of many of the smaller parliamentary boroughs. As the outcome of the general election would largely be decided in the many small towns of England, all loath to lose their prized parliamentary status, this was to prove a particularly shrewd thrust on Disraeli's part.

Gladstone responded with a lengthy address to his Greenwich constituents, delivered from a covered wagon in Blackheath. He mocked Disraeli for finding it necessary, in his manifesto, to travel to the remote Malacca Straits, 'as far off as the Kingdom of Brobdingnag' as it were; and he suggested that his rival, with his idea of an armed neutrality, might have involved Britain in the Franco-Prussian war in 1870. But on a key theme of his campaign, the abolition of income tax, Gladstone's speech raised as many questions as it answered. Indeed, by founding his calculations on what would perforce remain a hypothetical surplus until the end of the financial year in April, he seemed at risk of squandering the great reputation which he had acquired over many years for prudent and skilful management of the Exchequer. Laborious and uninspired, his speech left his audience unclear as to whether there would in fact be enough spare capacity to fund the abolition of income tax, and indeed whether such a measure would actually benefit the bulk of the community, most of whom did not pay income tax anyway.⁷ *The Economist* considered Gladstone's financial scheme as even more extraordinary than his precipitate dissolution of parliament. 'Many things', it declared, 'were prophesied of the new voters, but no one ever suggested that the most agreeable thing to them would be the removal of a tax which the rich pay and they do not.'⁸ With this in mind, Joseph Chamberlain would later describe Gladstone's manifesto as 'the meanest document that has ever in like circumstances proceeded from a statesman of the first rank.'⁹ 'Remember', *The Times* now recalled, 'with what charms Mr. Gladstone could once adorn his financial schemes.'¹⁰ Clearly the flawed project of 1874 could not stand comparison with his great budgets of former years.

Disraeli, it must be said, had waited a long time to have his revenge for the defeat of his own budgetary proposals at Gladstone's hands in 1852. Now he had his chance, taking his great rival severely to task on points of principle as well as detail. Gladstone, he declared in a speech at Aylesbury, was attempting to bribe the electorate, or at least a section of it, just like a Roman emperor of old. He was presenting 'to the people of this country the most extraordinary inducements to support a minister that ever were unblushingly offered.' The whole scheme was 'inconsistent, illogical and

unjust'. In the past, and not least in 1852, Gladstone had stressed the need to maintain 'the due proportion that should subsist in our permanent financial system between direct and indirect taxation'. Now he was proposing to do exactly the opposite, with his scheme to relieve taxation on the better off without apparently doing anything for the great bulk of the community. In any case, Disraeli claimed, Gladstone had got his sums wrong. The abolition of income tax would leave a hole in the nation's finances which even Gladstone's vaunted economising would hardly fill. He would perforce have to look for new sources of revenue elsewhere. Indeed he might find himself obliged to resort to taxing articles of consumption, perhaps even – horror of horrors – returning to the very tariffs which income tax had originally been introduced to replace in 1842. At the very least he would surely have to fall back on increasing other forms of direct taxation, such as the house tax and the succession duty. Relieved of income tax, the middle classes would necessarily find themselves fleeced in other ways.¹¹

In his campaign speeches Disraeli contrived to link the financial question with that of foreign policy, a subject by which he set especial store. Easy to expand at short notice, the income tax was a vital weapon in an emergency, an essential war levy, the continuance of which would demonstrate Britain's determination to fulfil her obligations as a great power. The lack of such determination, Disraeli asserted, had led Britain to disaster in the past, at a time indeed when Gladstone had first been chancellor of the exchequer. 'In the course of my public life', he declared in a speech at Aylesbury, 'I know no event that I more deplore, or look back on with less satisfaction, than the Crimean War ... a war that was perfectly unnecessary; it was the conduct of the cabinet of England, vacillating and ambiguous, that encouraged the Emperor of Russia to that war'. Gladstone, a key member of that cabinet, was in Disraeli's unforgiving view, 'the minister who occasioned the Crimean War'; and the conduct of his government since 1868 arguably provided further glaring examples of appeasement and neglect. Particular cases in point had been allowing Russia in 1870 to remilitarise the Black Sea (in contravention of the peace treaty of 1856), and conceding American claims for compensation concerning the Civil War, and the depredations of Confederate warships built in Britain, most prominently the *Alabama*.¹²

The verdict of the boroughs

Polling in the general election began on 31 January 1874, just a few days after the dissolution had first been announced; and, in common with all such contests before 1918, it stretched over a fortnight and more. The initial results indicated a clear trend, even though they were not all in the same direction. On the first day, indeed, the

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Liberals gained one seat – Barnstaple – but they lost five others – Andover, Chatham, Guildford, Kidderminster, and North Lincolnshire. On the second day the Liberals gained another seat at Westbury; but they lost three more at Wakefield, Warrington and in Mid-Lincolnshire. Even at this early stage, one can detect a tide running in the Conservatives' favour in various parts of England. On the third day this became still more apparent, with the Liberals gaining eight seats, but losing eighteen. At this point in time a particular interest attached to Gladstone's own result in the two-member constituency of Greenwich. He was duly re-elected; but disappointingly he came second in the poll to a Conservative, and with several hundred votes fewer than in 1868, in part due to the intervention of a home rule candidate. As he put it, 'my own election for Greenwich after Boord the distiller is more like a defeat than a victory'.¹³ In the circumstances, it was not surprising that he would seek a new constituency before the next general election, which of course would turn out to be Midlothian.

Two other individual contests attracted national attention at this moment, as they seemed to provide test cases of the popularity of the 1870 Education Act, one of the most controversial measures of Gladstone's first government. At Bradford, in what *The Times* described as 'the most satisfactory result up to the present time', W. E. Forster, the act's chief architect, saw off a challenge from the candidate of the 'extreme Nonconformists' by a margin of 11,945 to 8,398. *The Times* was also pleased by a similar result at Sheffield, where Chamberlain, the candidate of the 'Birmingham dissenters', was convincingly defeated by J. A. Roebuck, a supporter of the 1870 act and a representative of old-style Radicalism.¹⁴ On the same day, the Liberals reversed a recent by-election loss at Stroud, and they defeated a Conservative heavyweight, Sir John Pakington, at Droitwich.

But any thoughts of a rally in Liberal fortunes were soon dispelled. On 5 February the balance of seats gained stood in the Conservatives' favour at forty-three to nineteen. On the following day it stood at sixty-one to twenty-four; and notable Liberal losses at this stage included the two-member seat of Brighton, 'long regarded as a stronghold of advanced Liberalism'. (Here one of the defeated Liberals was Henry Fawcett, seen as second only to John Bright as a Radical tribune in the House of Commons). It was at this point that Gladstone privately acknowledged overall defeat in a letter to his brother, Robertson.¹⁵ For the majority of sixty-six, which his government had retained at the time of the dissolution, had now evaporated. In the words of *The Times*, it was clear that the Liberals had lost 'in every part of England, in great constituencies as in small, in commercial and manufacturing cities as well as agricultural market towns'.¹⁶ As the *Saturday Review* trenchantly observed, 'the boroughs have shown that they wish for religious education in



'Joy, joy for ever! My task is done – the gates are passed, and heaven is won!' Disraeli rejoices at his electoral success in 'Paradise and the Peri' (from *Lalla Bakh* by Thomas Moore; the peri, a creature from Persian mythology, has been expelled from Paradise and strives to regain entrance) (*Punch*, 28 February 1874)

some mild and unaggressive form, no county franchise at present, and no restrictions on the trade in beer except for police purposes.'¹⁷

Metropolitan and county constituencies

Results published a day later, on 7 February 1874, showed that the Conservatives had extended their range of successes still further, notably in the nation's capital, which had once been a Liberal preserve. Thus they gained three of the four City of London seats, perhaps in reaction to Gladstone's tentative plans for reforming city government; and, strikingly, they also gained the metropolitan boroughs of Chelsea, Marylebone, Tower Hamlets and Westminster. In addition the Conservatives gained three adjoining county seats – Middlesex, East Surrey and South Essex – where the extension of suburbia, or what was called 'villadom', was thought to be a factor. During the last week of polling, the Conservative tide even reached into the Celtic fringe, with nine gains in Scotland and three in Wales, most of them in county constituencies; while in the counties of England the Conservatives added further to their already strong position, with nineteen gains and only two losses. *The Spectator* indeed noted 'the extraordinary completeness of Liberal defeat in the English counties'.¹⁸ Only mining seats in Cornwall and Durham, or those under the territorial influence of a Liberal magnate such as the Duke of Devonshire, seemed

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able to resist the tide. The one other exception to the Liberals' tale of woe was in Ulster, where there was talk of the rout of 'Orange Toryism' by a 'Presbyterian democracy'.¹⁹ Aided perhaps by the tenant-right legislation of 1870, the Liberals here gained a number of seats: Down, Londonderry, Cavan, Dungannon and Coleraine. In the final tally, in mid-February, across the whole of the United Kingdom, the balance of gains in the Conservatives' favour stood at ninety-eight to thirty-eight, leaving them with an overall majority of fifty-four.²⁰

Almost the last result to be announced had been in Disraeli's own three-member seat of Buckinghamshire, where he had headed the poll with 3,004 votes, as against his main Liberal challenger with 1,720. This was in many ways a fitting conclusion to the national campaign. Disraeli had cultivated a close relationship with his constituency for over a quarter of a century; indeed rather more securely than Gladstone had been able to do during his own long, electoral association with the University of Oxford. Disraeli liked to flatter his constituents as belonging to 'that sacred land', that historic county in which, so he claimed, the parliamentary constitution of England had been established by half a dozen families. Not least, with matters of taxation in mind, he purported to be the heir of John Hampden, who had famously opposed the arbitrary levy of ship money by the government of Charles I before the Civil War; and he berated Gladstone for toying with ideas about income tax when he should really be addressing the much more pressing problem of agricultural rates.²¹ Buckinghamshire indeed provided in 1874 a more suitable platform for Disraeli than did Greenwich for Gladstone. The prime minister had only represented the seat since 1868, and seemed ill at ease in a metropolitan constituency. And certainly his campaign in 1874 did little to avert a notable decline in Liberal strength in London and its adjacent counties.

A swing of the pendulum

Disraeli's indictment of Gladstone in 1874 bore distinct similarities to his assault on Peel in 1846. *The Times* indeed considered that his Aylesbury speech, accusing Gladstone of behaving like a corrupt Roman emperor of old, recalled 'the worst passages in Mr. Disraeli's career', adding that 'what could be pardoned in a rising politician is not to be excused in a veteran statesman'.²² But Disraeli, it must be admitted, did succeed in making a key issue in the general election one of confidence in the prime minister. In his view, Gladstone could be as high-handed as Peel had once been. Indeed the *Saturday Review* would detect in the country generally 'a personal reaction against the Prime Minister and against the impulsiveness and disregard of constitutional usage which had prompted him to dissolve parliament "on a sudden", just as he had abolished purchase by royal prerogative'.²³ Now, instead of

Where, it was asked, would Gladstone's restless and innovating spirit take the country next? In the pithy view of *The Spectator*, the prime minister had 'come to seem more dangerous in charge of a majority government than Disraeli in charge of a minority one'.

Disraeli, it was Gladstone who could plausibly be likened to Napoleon III, with his constitutional malpractice, with his calling of what was in effect a plebiscite, and even with his own version of the Mexican expedition in the form of the Ashanti war.²⁴ Where, it was asked, would Gladstone's restless and innovating spirit take the country next? In the pithy view of *The Spectator*, the prime minister had 'come to seem more dangerous in charge of a majority government than Disraeli in charge of a minority one'.²⁵ The *Saturday Review* took a similar line, and pointed to the alienation of swing voters belonging to the middle classes. Among them it identified 'the dwellers in those happy hideous homes which line the great roads out of towns', arguing pointedly that 'they were not harassed; their incomes had not been cut down by a retrenching government; they had not the slightest wish to go to a public-house after eleven at night; but they thought that Mr. Gladstone, having done some very good things, had lost his head and was at the mercy of any clique of violent, foolish men'.²⁶

Generally the country appeared prosperous in early 1874. The onset of what economists have termed the Great Depression of the later nineteenth century, partly a consequence of the German financial crash of 1873, had yet to make its mark. And prosperity, in the view of *The Spectator* served as a 'political opiate', working 'against Gladstone's zeal and over-activity'.²⁷ Other influences could be seen as reinforcing a mood of conservatism, not least what was perceived as turmoil in Europe. As Disraeli put it in a speech at Newport Pagnell, warning against possible designs on Gladstone's part against the House of Lords and perhaps even the monarchy, 'we have national institutions, the value of which was never more apparent than at a moment when you find old and established Europe generally in confusion and peril'.²⁸ Here he was referring in particular to the recent horrors of the Paris Commune, the continuing crisis in Spain, and the real possibility of European war that might result from Bismarck's *Kulturkampf* and consequent conflict with the pope. Halifax, a prominent Whig statesman, broadly echoed this sentiment, and stressed also the swing of the political pendulum:

As far as I can make out people are frightened – the masters were afraid of their workmen, manufacturers afraid of strikes, churchmen afraid of nonconformists, many afraid of what is going on in France and Spain, and in very unreasoning fear have all taken refuge in conservatism. Ballot enabled them to do this without apparently deserting their principles and party. Things in this country as elsewhere are apt to run for a time in opposite directions. The reaction from the quiet of Palmerston's government gave you strength to remove four or five old-standing abuses which nobody had ventured to touch for years. The feelings of those who suffer from the removal of abuses are always stronger than those of the general public

who are benefited. Gratitude for the Reform bill and its sequel of improvements hardly gave a liberal majority in 1835, and gratitude for the removal of the Irish church, purchase, etc., has not given us a majority in 1874.²⁹

Beer and the Bible

Two particularly controversial recent items of legislation must be considered. Gladstone notoriously referred to them in the letter to his brother Robertson, cited earlier. 'We have', he wrote, 'been borne down in a torrent of gin and beer. ... Next to that has been the action of the Education Act of 1870, and the subsequent controversies. Many of the Roman Catholics have voted against us because we are not denominational; and many of the dissenters have at least abstained because we are.'³⁰ As far as the question of drink was concerned, *The Times* was in broad agreement with Gladstone as regards the role of licensed victuallers 'a trade which is not only very rich and powerful, but able from its peculiar relations with its customers to influence great masses of popular opinion.' And, the newspaper added of Gladstone, 'probably all the disquiet occasioned by his organic reforms has not cost him so many seats as the licensing bills of Mr. Bruce.'³¹ Almost certainly the prime minister was also right to see the 1870 Education Act as a significant factor in the Liberal defeat. As *The Economist* pertinently observed, 'the most numerous class of the present constituencies belong to the sub-dissenting population who may be acted on by the Church of England in favour of Conservatism, and at any rate are not acted upon by the dissenters against Conservatism.'³² Here Disraeli could be said to have brought off a similar trick to that which he had worked over parliamentary reform in 1866–7. By endorsing the 1870 act, and with it the broad principle of non-sectarian religious instruction in the newly established board schools, he had contrived to split the Liberals and to throw their Nonconformist supporters into disarray. As he had put it, somewhat tentatively, in his speech at Buckingham, 'the only question before the country is whether national education should be founded on the sacred basis of religion, or whether it should be entirely secular. The twenty-fifth clause is the symbol of the controversy, and you must be for or against it.'³³ This particular clause, it will be recalled, had provided for support out of public funds for pauper children attending voluntary, in practice mainly Anglican, schools. This clause had deeply antagonised the Nonconformists; but their ranks were in any case split over another aspect of the act, the Cowper-Temple clause. This had provided for non-denominational religious instruction in the new local authority or board schools, which in practice meant readings from the Bible. Many Nonconformists could accept this, following the lead of Forster, himself a Quaker and the act's

chief architect; but others, including the rising star, Chamberlain, still saw in it the covert influence of Anglicanism. Roebuck had exploited this division in his epic contest with Chamberlain at Sheffield. Whereas the latter had favoured entirely secular, as opposed to non-sectarian, religious education, Roebuck had successfully wrapped himself in national colours, defending Bible teaching as being as much a part of England's identity as Shakespeare. 'The English language is founded upon the Bible ... our language has gone round the globe.'³⁴ Here was an argument close to Disraeli's heart. By successfully mobilising the religious residuum, as he saw it, against the dissenting denominations, he could be said to have dished the Nonconformists in 1874 much as he had claimed to dish the Whigs in 1867. Disraeli noted the erosion of Nonconformist influence in the numerous minor parliamentary boroughs, 'those small towns where sectional interests and sectarian feelings predominated.' And he celebrated 'the striking demonstration which has been offered to the country of the existence of the Conservative working man'. This could be seen:

... in the large majorities that have asserted themselves in Lancashire and Yorkshire, in the whole of Kent and the whole of Essex and Surrey ... in the City of London, the City of Westminster, the great metropolitan boroughs, in Liverpool, Manchester and Leeds, in Dublin, and, I am glad to say, even in Glasgow.³⁵

The strange death of Liberal Ireland

One other important aspect of the 1874 general election needs emphasising. For it could plausibly be said to have sounded the death knell of Irish Liberalism. In 1868, on the promise of Gladstone's plans to transform the country, the Liberals had won 65 out of 105 seats in Ireland. In 1874, despite their gains in Ulster as noted earlier, they were reduced to a mere twelve, mostly at the expense of the newly founded Home Rule Party, which had capitalised successfully on the disappointed expectations surrounding Gladstone's once ambitious programme of reform. The new party would now return fifty-eight MPs to Westminster, having enjoyed particular success in the province of Munster. Here, for example, its leader, Isaac Butt, retained his seat at Limerick, and a former Conservative MP, Sir Joseph McKenna, won Youghal as a home ruler. In addition two former Liberals, now standing as home rulers, won County Cork, the largest agricultural constituency in Ireland. In the province of Leinster, Chichester Fortescue, who had been Irish chief secretary, lost his seat at Louth. Gladstone considered his defeat 'painful in a public view with regard to the gratitude of Irishmen', adding that 'it would be hard to name the man who has done for Ireland all that you have done.'³⁶ *The Times*, it is true, sounded a note of qualification,

By successfully mobilising the religious as he saw it, against the dissenting denominations, [Disraeli] could be said to have dished the Nonconformists in 1874 much as he had claimed to dish the Whigs in 1867.

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suggesting that the snap dissolution had caught the home rulers at something of a disadvantage. 'Mr. Gladstone's surprise', it declared, had 'so far operated to cripple the tactics of the Separatists that the disaffected masses of the people have been compelled to adopt as their candidates in most instances Irish Roman Catholic Liberals of the type well known for more than forty years at Westminster.'³⁷

But it would soon become clear that what *The Times* referred to as 'these home rulers of the eleventh hour' would not return to the ranks of Liberalism. Indeed, under Parnell's subsequent ascendancy, their places would increasingly be filled by nationalists of a more extreme character. And, after the 1885 general election, the once all-powerful Liberal Party would find itself without a single seat in Ireland.

Change of government

On 17 February 1874, Gladstone formally resigned the seals of office on behalf of himself and his ministers. In 1868 he had criticised Disraeli for doing this without observing the traditional protocol of first meeting parliament; but he now accepted the historic nature of his defeat, and followed his rival's example. As he would later put it, 'the Parliament chosen in 1868 exhibited an unexampled phenomenon ... for the first time the mind of the nation, as tested by the constituencies, had decisively altered during the course of a single Parliament.' By contrast, it had taken 'three Parliaments to overthrow the Liberal majority of Earl Grey, and three more – between 1847 and 1857 – to re-establish it in decisive numbers.'³⁸ So now, at last, Disraeli was able to obtain the overall majority which he had been seeking for so many years; and he was able to form a strong, united Conservative government. Included in its ranks were Northcote and Derby, both regarded as safe pairs of hands at the Treasury and the Foreign Office respectively; but in addition key figures in the party such as Salisbury and Carnarvon, who had resigned in protest against Disraeli's Parliamentary Reform Bill in 1867, were now lured back into office. Another leading Conservative, Gathorne Hardy, took over the War Office, a job which *The Spectator* considered the second most important in the government, given the unsettled state of Europe.³⁹ The 1874 general election would prove decisive in yet another sense. Never again, as Gladstone's biographer, Morley, was to point

out, would a government put before the country a proposal to abolish income tax.⁴⁰ So clearly that impost had come to stay. But, in a rather different way, the precedent of 1874 would be repeated. As was seen as recently as 2017, a prime minister can still be tempted to call a snap general election. Gladstone would try the same again in 1886, with even less success than in 1874. And, ironically, Disraeli's government, formed in the wake of Gladstone's precipitate dissolution in 1874, would itself founder in not dissimilar circumstances in 1880. In that year a government would again call a general election, seemingly with scant justification, and at what was perceived to be an untimely moment, just weeks after the state opening of parliament. Once again indeed there was a suspicion that a government was trying to avoid a subject of embarrassment, and in effect to put one over on the electorate. And once again a government was punished at the polls. As so often, it might be said, 'the whirligig of time brings in his revenges.'

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- 1 'Mr. Gladstone', *Saturday Review*, 7 (7 Feb. 1874), pp. 165–6.
- 2 F. Harrison, 'The Conservative Reaction', *Fortnightly Review*, 15 (Mar. 1874), pp. 297–309. Useful secondary sources in this regard include: H. J. Hanham, *Elections and Party Management: Politics in the time of Disraeli and Gladstone* (1959); J. Parry, *The Rise and Fall of Liberal Government in Victorian Britain* (1993); P. Smith, *Disraelian Conservatism and Social Reform* (1967).
- 3 'The Government of London', *Economist*, 32 (31 Jan. 1874), p. 127; *The Times*, 24 Jan. 1874. *The Economist* here noted the 'separation of the City from the rest of the Metropolis'. Within the City, there was 'the paraphernalia of Lord Mayor, Aldermen and Common Council, and Livery Companies and Wardmotes.' London outside the City was the responsibility of the Metropolitan Board of Works, chosen not by the ratepayers at large, but by the vestries and the districts' boards of works.
- 4 *The Times*, 26 Jan. 1874.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 27 Jan. 1874.

- 6 *Ibid.*, 26 Jan. 1874.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 29 Jan. 1874.
- 8 'Finance and the Dissolution', *The Economist*, 32 (31 Jan. 1874), pp. 125–7.
- 9 J. L. Garvin, *The Life of Joseph Chamberlain* (Macmillan, 1932), vol. i, p. 164.
- 10 *The Times*, 3 Feb. 1874.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 2 Feb. 1874.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 2 Feb. 1874.
- 13 John Morley, *The Life of William Ewart Gladstone* (Macmillan, 1903), vol. ii, p. 490. Cuts in naval and military expenditure probably cost the Liberals votes in Greenwich, and also caused them to lose the dockyard seats of Chatham, Portsmouth, Devonport and Plymouth.
- 14 *The Times*, 5 Feb. 1874.
- 15 Morley, *Gladstone*, p. 496.
- 16 *The Times*, 6 Feb. 1874.
- 17 'The Elections', *Saturday Review*, 37 (7 Feb. 1874), pp. 163–4.
- 18 *The Spectator*, 47 (21 Feb. 1874), p. 226.
- 19 *The Times*, 9 Feb. 1874.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 19 Feb. 1874.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 11 Feb. 1874.
- 22 *Ibid.* 2 February 1874.
- 23 'The Conservative Reaction', *Saturday Review*, 37 (14 Feb. 1874), pp. 195–6. Strictly speaking, the ending of the purchase of army commissions in 1871 had been effected not by royal prerogative but by royal warrant.
- 24 *The Times*, 28 Jan. 1874.
- 25 'The Inference from the Elections', *The Spectator*, 47 (14 Feb. 1874), pp. 196–7.
- 26 'The Elections', *Saturday Review*, 37 (14 Feb. 1874), pp. 193–4. Particular suspicion here attached to John Bright, who had returned to the cabinet in 1873.
- 27 'The Inference from the Elections', *The Spectator*.
- 28 *The Times*, 5 Feb. 1874.
- 29 Morley, *Gladstone*, p. 494.
- 30 *Ibid.*, p. 496.
- 31 *The Times*, 10 Feb. 1874.
- 32 'The New Government', *The Economist*, 32 (21 Feb. 1874), pp. 221–2.
- 33 *The Times*, 11 Feb. 1874.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 30 Jan. 1874.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 11 Feb. 1874.
- 36 Morley, *Gladstone*, pp. 491–2. The former notion that the secret ballot, introduced two years earlier, was crucial to the results in 1874 in Ireland has been challenged in M. Hurst, 'Ireland and the Ballot Act of 1872', *Historical Journal*, 8 (1965), pp. 326–52. From the record of by-elections, he argues that 'Home Rule had beaten the Whigs on its own terms before the Ballot Act'.
- 37 *The Times*, 9 Feb. 1874.
- 38 'Electoral Facts', *Nineteenth Century*, 4 (Nov. 1878).
- 39 'The Tory Cabinet', *The Spectator*, 47 (21 Feb. 1874), p. 228.
- 40 Morley, *Gladstone*, p. 496.

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
(cc-by-sa/2.0 - © John S Turner - geograph.org.uk/p/628022)

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

The historical Gladstone and the contemporary Gladstone

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.

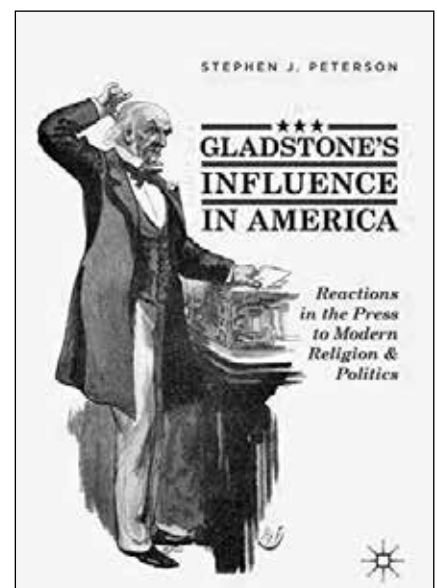
In the first half of his political career Gladstone was not particularly popular in the USA. Indeed his claim in 1862, during the Civil War, that the South was making a nation, won him no friends in the North. Yet only a few years later, his successful campaign to disestablish the Anglican Church in 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



A Liberal Democrat History Group evening meeting

Gladstone's first government 1868–74

One hundred and fifty years ago, in December 1868, William Ewart Gladstone became Prime Minister for the first time. Over the following six years, from 1868 to 1874, his government produced a series of lasting reforms, including nationwide primary school education, the secret ballot, legalisation of some trade union activities and the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland. Join **Professor Jon Parry** and **Dr David Brooks** to discuss the importance and legacy of what might be considered the first Liberal government and the first modern administration. Chair: **Baroness Liz Barker**.

7.00pm, Monday 28 January (following the Liberal Democrat History Group AGM at 6.30pm)
Lady Violet Room, National Liberal Club, 1 Whitehall Place, London SW1A 2HE

A Liberal Democrat History Group fringe meeting

Liberalism in the north

Despite its decline after the First World War, the Liberal Party managed to hang on in Yorkshire and Lancashire, contributing to its eventual revival. Discuss why this was with **William Wallace**, **Tony Greaves** and **Michael Meadowcroft**. Chair: **Baroness Kath Pinnock**.

8.15pm, Friday 15 March

Meeting room 1/2, Novotel Hotel, Fishergate, York YO10 4FD (no conference pass necessary)

Gladstone. Yet in his later years, Gladstone displayed considerable interest in various aspects of American life. That was evident, for example, in his various contributions to the *North American Review*, especially his 1878 article on 'Kin beyond Sea'. Gladstone's prediction that the United States would surpass Great Britain as an economic force in the world was music to American ears, as was his admiration for the American constitution. The article helped to inspire the movement in favour of the unity of the English-speaking peoples, which was popular in America at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In the last chapter of the book Peterson ranges beyond religious themes to

chart the perception of Gladstone as the 'British Lincoln' – a liberal reformer and advocate of international amity and transatlantic unity. When Gladstone died, in 1898, his American admirers bestowed almost semi-divine status on him. He was hailed as a great Christian as well as a great statesman and one Baltimore minister eulogised him as 'the friend of America, the prophet of her greatness and the friend of God'.

Peterson has performed a valuable service in revealing and analysing the full extent of American interest in Gladstone's religious views and actions. Nevertheless the reception in America of Gladstone's views on other issues requires more investigation. It

must also be remembered that American interest in Gladstone reflected a more general phenomenon: the closeness of the ideological and cultural ties between Britain and the USA in the later decades of the nineteenth century.

Roland Quinault is Senior Research Fellow, Institute of Historical Research, University of London. He was previously a scholar and Junior Research Fellow at the University of Oxford and Honorary Secretary of the Royal Historical Society. He is the author of British Prime Ministers and Democracy (2011) and the co-editor of William Gladstone: new studies and perspectives (2012).