

Sources of Liberal history

Alexandra Foulds and Isobel Goodman describe 'Gladstone's Writing', the Gladstone Library's first large-scale digitisation project.

Searching for Gladstone: Bringing nineteenth-century liberal history into the digital age

IN SEPTEMBER 2023, Gladstone's Library in Hawarden, North Wales, completed its first large-scale digitisation project. Entitled 'Gladstone's Writing' and funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the project sought to scrutinise William Ewart Gladstone's life as a reader and a writer by creating a new, open-source digital catalogue of Gladstone's most annotated books and the papers created

by him held at the library that he had founded. In order to do so, just under 200 books featuring Gladstone's annotations and just under 9,000 letters and drafts of papers, articles, and books written by Gladstone were digitised. In addition, volunteers started to create a new,

Gladstone's Library (photo: Geoffrey Scotland Photography)



Searching for Gladstone

enriched catalogue for the archival items to enable them to be individually searchable in new ways. In doing so, the project revealed details – about Gladstone as politician and liberal thinker and the inextricability of Gladstone’s political life, as member of parliament, chancellor of the exchequer, and eventual four-time prime minister of the United Kingdom, from his personal life as son, sibling, husband, father, and friend – that the team at the library are beginning to explore.

In October 1895, William Gladstone outlined the vision and the reason behind his creation of a residential library in his preliminary paper entitled ‘St Deiniol’s Trust and its Purposes’. He writes:

Convinced that the future of the human race depends, in the main, upon the great question of belief, and that the most special and urgent of present needs is the need of sufficient means for the effective promotion of Divine learning, I am engaged in the foundation of a Library, which I trust may serve as the nucleus of an Institution, under the name of St Deiniol’s, Hawarden, adapted to that end.¹

To accomplish this end, he had a corrugated iron structure built in Hawarden, the village that had been his home since the 1840s, into which he transferred a selection of books from his personal collection. The library, now known as Gladstone’s Library, today holds historic and contemporary printed collections and archives focused on areas of Gladstonian interest, particularly history, literature, theology, and politics. It continues to be one of the few residential libraries in the world, and to be a place for research, discussion, reflection, and learning, with a programme of events, courses, and literary festivals. It is also the only prime ministerial library in the United Kingdom. Its current neo-Gothic building was constructed as the memorial to Gladstone after his death; as such the library is also a

trusted source of information about the four-time prime minister, and a site that strives to provide a balanced viewpoint of his life, career, and the times in which he lived, as well as a space to explore his legacy and relevance today.

Gladstone’s books now make up the library’s Foundation Collection. This collection of 20,000 books is arranged into Gladstone’s own classification scheme and bears the marks of his use. Around 6,000 of the books have his marginalia, including indexes created by him. In other cases, books feature an inscription from the author or publisher who sent the volume to Gladstone, as attested to by letters in the library’s Glynne-Gladstone Archive. This archive contains the personal, family, business, and estate correspondence and papers of the Glynne and Gladstone families, including part of the records of William Gladstone. After Gladstone’s death, his correspondence and papers held in the Octagon at Hawarden Castle were moved to a purposely built Muniments Room at Gladstone’s Library, where they were arranged and classified by Arthur Tilney Bassett. In the 1930s, they were then transferred to the British Museum, who had expressed an interest in 1887, according to Bassett, to obtain ‘Mr Gladstone’s papers “on any terms and conditions he might impose”’.² At the British Museum, Bassett re-sorted the letters, and anything that was not to be kept by the British Museum was sent back to Hawarden.³

The ‘Gladstone Papers’ at the British Museum, now the British Library, in the years since have often been described as his ‘public and political papers’, whereas the around 50,000 papers of William Gladstone’s at Gladstone’s Library have been said to be ‘[l]etters from members of Gladstone’s family’ and letters of a ‘private nature’.⁴ Records of Gladstone’s life as politician and statesman were said to be held at the British Library, whereas his records as a family man and a scholar

were said to be at his library. This belief about the division of Gladstone's collections was reflected in documentation related to the collections created by both institutions. The page of the British Library's website related to the Gladstone Papers described them as his 'Official papers'⁵ and situated them within their collection of the papers of later prime ministers whose papers were required to be preserved for the nation by law. The handlist created in 1990 for the Glynne-Gladstone Archive, on the other hand, referred to its contents as his 'family correspondence'.⁶ Delving into Gladstone's collections at his library as part of the 'Gladstone's Writing' project, however, and looking at his letters alongside his books, as well as edited copies of his diaries, has revealed that to describe the relationship between the two collections in this way would be an oversimplification not only of their contents, but of Gladstone's own engagement with and use of them. There was far less of a separation between the public and private spheres of Gladstone's life than this arrangement would suggest.

Many of the figures in Gladstone's private life were also involved in politics in a variety of ways, and Gladstone's family was a political family. His father (Sir John Gladstone), two of his brothers (Sir Thomas Gladstone and John Neilson Gladstone), and two of his sons (William Glynne Charles Gladstone and Herbert John Gladstone) were all members of parliament. His other brother, Robertson Gladstone, was mayor of Liverpool, and one of his other sons, Henry Neville Gladstone, was an alderman on Flint County Council. His nephew, George William Spencer Lyttelton, and his son Herbert both served as his private secretaries, and, unusually for the time period, his daughter Mary also served as an unofficial private secretary.⁷ The family that Gladstone married into was equally political. The Glynnes were related to four previous prime ministers,⁸ and both of Gladstone's brothers-in-law through

his marriage (Sir Stephen Glynne and Lord George Lyttelton) were members of parliament. As a result, Gladstone's correspondence to all of these people is filled with discussions of political affairs. These are particularly detailed in the letters to his father and his wife, Catherine.

Gladstone wrote to his father almost every day, and his letters are filled with news from parliament. While some of this is a son updating his father on his career and activities – letting his father know, for example, of his new appointments – he also seems to feel the need to provide his father with updates on political matters, including information about bills being debated and passed, committees being formed, and resignations and appointments. Gladstone frequently comments on the amount of news he has to give his father, such as in a letter dated the 30 April 1833 when he writes 'There is little to [sic] news to communicate today, except that [John] Hobhouse, the Secretary for Ireland, has been forced to resign his seat in Parliament, as he could not remain a member of the Government and vote for the repeal of the House and Window Taxes, nor remain member for Westminster and vote against it'.⁹ Some of his letters to his father are written from the House of Commons suggesting an urgency felt in relating the latest news, and on some occasions a new update merits a second letter on the same day. This, for example, is the case on the 7 August 1833 at 6.30pm when, after months of giving his father updates about the Slavery Abolition Bill, he writes 'I have written to you already this day but I add this line to say that the Slavery Abolition Bill is just passed. God prosper it'.¹⁰

Gladstone would also write to his father to discuss qualms he had about his positions on votes going through parliament. One of particular interest, dated 11 March 1835, discusses Gladstone's concerns about a vote on West Indian Education in which he worries that 'Lord Aberdeen may probably or at least

Searching for Gladstone

possibly adopt a scheme, which I could not in any conscience approve, and which therefore if ultimately adhered to might render it necessary for me to choose between the forfeiture of my principles and the resignation of office'.¹¹ He states that he is apprehensive that Lord Aberdeen will apply for national funds for the education to be provided 'in that sect to which they belong, whether churchmen, dissenters, or Roman Catholics', and Gladstone is anxious that this will mean the Protestant state giving money to the Roman Catholic Church. These anxieties show early indications of Gladstone's feelings as expressed in his 1838 publication *The State in its Relation with the Church*, and which would lead to his resignation over the Maynooth Grant in 1845. He asks his father to 'repose confidence in [him] to act for the best if necessity should arise', hinting at the influence he allowed his father to hold over his political stances, at least early in his political career.¹²

After his marriage letters contain more personal details, discussing Catherine and the couple setting up their home, their children, and the Hawarden estate. Gladstone does, however, continue to give his father updates on debates and bills going through parliament, as well as sending him copies of reports.

With Catherine, parliamentary news also takes up a significant amount of all of his letters, updating her on debates in the House of Commons, committees, reports, bills, and his meetings with Queen Victoria. This was in part because it dictated his travel arrangements and his ability to go between London and Hawarden to see her and their family. Frequently he writes that political matters are keeping him in London for longer than he had hoped. In a letter dated 21 January 1840 and written from the House of Commons, for example, he explains that after already having been delayed in London for several days longer than he had planned he must stay longer. He writes to Catherine:

I fear my poor dear is worrying herself upon this very plaguing subject [of his detention in London]. I assure you new difficulties spring up continually. [Thomas] Fremantle has within the last five minutes summoned me to a meeting at Peel's about Prince Albert's allowance: but I am stuffy and rebellious, and threaten not to go unless I find in the meantime some great necessity. Now I am afraid you will hardly believe me whatever I may say on these matters, so little have I been able to fulfil the expectations under which I left you – but my own own¹³ will see how difficult it is to manage these matters, and will know that the delays are anything but agreeable to me.¹⁴

There is a notable difference in tone between these letters and those to his father. Here Gladstone is more conversational, and his feelings on political issues are more obvious as he expresses his frustrations. In doing so he often confides in her about sensitive matters and several of his letters to her mention the need for secrecy. One, dated 24 December 1852, is marked 'Lock & key' at the top of the first page, and in it he writes that John Russell, the prime minister at the time, 'is weak as water, a puppet pulled by strings from without. He does not know his own mind for 12 hours together: & it is wholly owing to his incessant shifting that we lose day after day & threaten to become ridiculous'.¹⁵

This is not the only time that Catherine became his political confidant. In May 1885, in the midst of a diplomatic crisis with Russia following the Panjdeh Incident, and increasing questions about Irish home rule, Gladstone wrote to Catherine: 'What was a ray of light yesterday, is a flood today, and the great Russian question is, according to all human probability, amicably settled ... this great event ... will not solve the difficulties of the Govt. concerned with Ireland – on the contrary it may even increase them'.¹⁶ The

GLA/GGA/2/2/1/152/74

H. of C. Aug 7.
6 1/2 P.M.

My beloved Father,

I have written to you already this day but I add this line to say that the Slavery Abolition Bill is just passed. God prosper it.

Love you affly
W.G.

10. Woburn Street,
Whitehall.

May 2. 84-

My own C. ✓

(What was a ray of light yesterday, is a flood today, and the great-
Burmian question is, according to all human probability amicably settled; as far as the present stage, and the point of threatening difficulty, are concerned.

letter is full of references to previous conversations between the two on similar subjects and it is clear that they were discussing these pressing political matters as a topic of regular conversation.

We can trace the development of Gladstone's opinion on different political issues through his correspondence, and we can also map this onto his reading practices. His library attests to the importance he placed upon books in shaping his opinions, and his books essentially functioned as a nineteenth-century search engine with Gladstone often reading material reflecting both sides of a debate. By bringing together the printed editions of Gladstone's diaries with the books held at the library, we can glean an insight into his research methods by seeing the books he recorded reading at particular times and the annotations he made in those books as he read.¹⁷ A good example of this is in his reading about Ireland.

At the same time as the above letter to Catherine was written, his diaries show that Gladstone was also reading widely on the topic of Ireland and Irish home rule. This period of 1885 to 1887 was a key time in political discussions of Ireland, with the Hawarden Kite incident where Gladstone's private support for home rule was made public in *The Times* by his son in late 1885, swiftly followed by the defeat of Gladstone's first Home Rule Bill in April 1886. It was clearly a topic he was thinking about extensively at this time, as he prepared bills for parliament, or addresses and speeches to deliver to people across the UK. As well as contemporary publications about the ongoing crisis, Gladstone also records reading several histories of Ireland such as Francis Plowden's *The History of Ireland*, George John Shaw-Lefevre's *Peel and O'Connell*, and Daniel O'Connell's *Memoir on Ireland*.¹⁸ It is clear from the thorough annotations throughout these titles that Gladstone read them all in great

Searching for Gladstone

detail. His marginal marks include his typical notice lines, question marks, tick marks, 'NB' and occasional exclamation marks, but there are also several marginal comments in these volumes too, generally correcting, or adding emphasis or additional details to the printed text. He has also added his characteristic indexes to the back of each volume.

Gladstone's reading shows us that he wanted to get a broad scope of several different views on each subject, so his collection includes books written from very different perspectives. Daniel O'Connell, for example, was the political leader of the Roman Catholic majority in Ireland and campaigned strongly for Catholic emancipation and home rule. His *Memoir* speaks very strongly in support of the Irish Catholics and their treatment by the English parliament. In contrast, Gladstone also read S. E. B. Bouverie-Pusey's book *The Past History of Ireland*, and his note in the front reads that although 'excellent', he thought it was 'a little too English ... in the division of blames on certain occasions'.¹⁹

The 'Gladstone's Writing' project included only a snapshot of the Gladstonian collections held by Gladstone's Library, and an even smaller proportion of the wider paper legacy of William Gladstone held in institutions across the UK. Further work on our collections would allow us to continue to investigate the link between Gladstone's political and personal lives. This would include creating item-level catalogue records for 101 boxes containing letters from the general public and Gladstone's extended family, many of which are letters from authors and publishers that accompanied books sent to him in his capacity as prime minister and popular public figure, as well as people from all over the world writing to him to about his response to specific issues. The project also excluded more ephemeral materials, such as Gladstone's large collection of pamphlets, many of which are also annotated and

referenced in his diaries as research materials.²⁰ Another avenue to pursue would be the wider legacy of Gladstone's family and their involvement with chattel slavery and indentured labour, and William Gladstone's role in this. This research is already being done by scholars, many of whom are recipients of scholarships provided by the library, but it could be expanded through the creation of a more detailed catalogue of the plantation records and associated correspondence held at the library and potential further digitisation projects.

All of the items that we have quoted in this article can now be found online in our digital catalogue, which can be accessed through the homepage of our website. The books can be searched on the digital platform by title, author, classmark, and subject headings. They can also be accessed by links in their record on our 'GladCat' catalogue, where details of Gladstone's annotations can be found to direct you to pages of particular interest in the digitised books. The archival items can be searched by reference number, creator, correspondent, date, and to a limited extent by keyword, although this searchability is continually being expanded as a team of in-person and remote volunteers work to summarise the content of each letter and add subject headings and details about the places that letters were sent from and to. At the moment, reference numbers can be found in the main catalogue for the Glynne-Gladstone Archive in the 'Archives' section of our website, however, in the near future the catalogue will be available to search in the database Archives Hub, where you will be able to link from the record in the catalogue to the digitised file.

More information and tips about searching the digital catalogue can be found in the 'Digital Collections' section of our website. Enquiries about items in the digital catalogue can be sent to the library team through the 'Contact Us' section of the catalogue. We

look forward to seeing the research this new resource produces.

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- 1 St Deiniol's Trust and its Purposes: Preliminary Paper, 9 Oct. 1895, Glynne-Gladstone Archive, GLA/GGA/4/24/1/27.
- 2 Arthur Tilney Bassett, *The Gladstone Papers* (Cassell and Company Ltd, 1930), p. 5.
- 3 During the period the collection was at the British Museum, Gladstone's diaries and some of his pamphlets, which had remained at Hawarden Castle, were deposited with Lambeth Palace and the National Library of Wales respectively.
- 4 R. J. Olney, 'The Gladstone Papers 1822–1977', in John Brooke and Mary Sorensen (eds.), *The Prime Ministers' Papers Series: W. E. Gladstone IV: Autobiographical Memoranda 1868–1894* (Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1981), pp. 118–30 (p. 124).
- 5 'Gladstone Papers. Series B. Official Papers' <<https://www.bing.com/ck/a?!&p=ed7c9f61750b-270bJmltdHM9MTcxMTY3MDQwMCZpZ3Vp-ZDoyOGFiNTkzMio4MzY0LTZlMzktVjEoY-10oZDYzODI3MTZmNjgmaW5zaWQ9NTAwMw&pt-n=3&ver=2&hsh=3&fclid=28ab5932-8364-6e39-214b-4d6382716f68&u=a1aHRocHM6Ly9zZWYyZ2h-hcmNoaXZlcy5ibC51ay9wcm1tb19saWJyYXJ5L2x-pYndIY9hY3Rpb24vZGxEaXNwbGF5LmRvP2RvYolk-PUIBTVMwMzYtMDAyMDM4OTMoJnZpZD1JQU1TX-1ZVMiZpbmR4PTEmZHI1PWZhbHNIJmRzY25oPTEm-b25DYW1wdXMgZmFsc2UmZ3JvdXA9QUxMJmlu-c3RpdHVoaW9uPUJMmNoPXNlYXJjaCZ2bChmc-mVlVGV4dDAPTAzNiowMDIwMzgsMzQmc3Vib-WloPXNlYXJjaA&ntb=1> (accessed 03/05/2023).
- 6 C. J. Williams, 'Handlist of the Glynne-Gladstone MSS in St. Deiniol's Library, Hawarden', *List and Index Society Special Series*, xxiv (Athenaeum Press, 1990), p. v.
- 7 Anne Isba, *Gladstone and Women* (Hambledon Continuum, 2006), p. 132.
- 8 'Gladstone [née Glynne], Catherine (1812–1900)', in H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (eds.) *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, xxii (Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 373–4 (p. 373).
- 9 Letter from William Ewart Gladstone to Sir John Gladstone, 30 Apr. 1833, Glynne-Gladstone Archive, GLA/GGA/2/2/1/152/44.
- 10 Letter from William Ewart Gladstone to Sir John Gladstone, 7 Aug. 1833, Glynne-Gladstone Archive, GLA/GGA/2/2/1/152/74.
- 11 Letter from William Ewart Gladstone to Sir John Gladstone, 11 Mar. 1835, Glynne-Gladstone Archive, GLA/GGA/2/2/1/153/26.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Gladstone frequently refers to Catherine in his letters as 'my own' or 'my own own'.
- 14 Letter from William Ewart Gladstone to Catherine Gladstone, née Glynne, 21 Jan. 1840, Glynne-Gladstone Archive, GLA/GGA/2/10/1/15/19.
- 15 Letter from William Ewart Gladstone to Catherine Gladstone, née Glynne, 24 Dec. 1852, Glynne-Gladstone Archive, GLA/GGA/2/10/1/18/104.
- 16 Letter from William Ewart Gladstone to Catherine Gladstone, née Glynne, 2 May 1885, Glynne-Gladstone Archive, GLA/GGA/2/10/1/26/57.
- 17 *The Gladstone Diaries*, with cabinet minutes and prime ministerial correspondence, ed. by H. C. G. Matthew and M. R. D. Foot, 14 vols. (Oxford University Press, 1968–1994) [M 34.9 G/184].
- 18 Francis Plowden, *The History of Ireland, from its Union with Great Britain, in January 1801, to October 1810* (John Boyce, 1811) [WEG/M 46.4/PL0]; George John Shaw-Lefevre, *Peel and O'Connell: A review of the Irish policy of Parliament from the Act of Union to the death of Sir Robert Peel* (Kegan Paul, Trench & Co., 1887) [WEG/M 46.4/SHA]; Daniel O'Connell, *A Memoir on Ireland Native and Saxon: 1172–1660* (Charles Dolman, 1843) [WEG/M 46.15/OCO].
- 19 S. E. B. Bouverie-Pusey, *The Past History of Ireland: A brief sketch* (T. Fisher Unwin, 1894) [WEG/M 46/BOU], half title page.
- 20 See John Powell and Bertie Dockerill, 'The Tracts and Pamphlets of W. E. Gladstone', *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire*, 172 (2023), pp. 109–30.