Politics, Principles and Priorities: Gladstone and the Chinese opium trade

When Parliament debated the first opium war in April 1840,[1] William Gladstone, then a Conservative, denounced opium smuggling as 'this infamous and atrocious traffic' and condemned 'a war more unjust in its origin, a war more calculated in its progress to cover this country with permanent disgrace.' He argued that Britain should have suppressed the 'trade in opium, and that the war was not justified by any excesses committed on the part of the Chinese'. Rather justice, in Gladstone's opinion, 'is with them, and, that whilst they, the Pagans, and semi-civilized barbarians, have it, we, the enlightened and civilized Christians, are pursuing objects at variance both with justice, and with religion'.[2]

Since modern opinion agrees with Gladstone's assertions on both opium smuggling and the war, if not his religiosity, it would be tempting just to note his sound judgement and pass on. However, his intermittent but lengthy engagement with the opium trade gives an illuminating case study to consider the contexts within which political decisions are made and principles honoured or compromised.

Chinese civilisation was plunged into darkness

In Britain, the two opium wars are largely forgotten, but China's Communist rulers have no doubt about their significance. Their Ministry of Foreign Affairs website claims:

> With a history stretching back more than 5,000 years, the Chinese nation is a great and ancient nation that has fostered a splendid civilization and made indelible contributions to the progress of human civilization. After the Opium War of 1840, however, China was gradually reduced to a semi-colonial, semi-feudal society due to the aggression of Western powers and the corruption of feudal rulers. The country endured intense humiliation, the people were subjected to untold misery, and the Chinese civilization was plunged into darkness. The Chinese nation suffered greater ravages than ever before.[3]

Across the Pacific, the former US Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, described the treaties ending the wars as 'justly infamous in Chinese history as the first in a string of "unequal treaties" conducted under the shadow of foreign military force'.[4]

Mutual cultural incomprehension dominated relations between the nineteenth-century Chinese and British empires. China regarded other nations as inferior, refused Westerners admittance to its interior, confined European trade to Canton (now Guangzhou), and pursued a mercantilist economic policy. Britain sought European-style diplomatic relations, as an equal, and the opening

East India Company ships destroying Chinese war junks in Anson's Bay, 7 January 1841, during the First Opium War.

of Chinese ports to foreign traders. Moreover, distance delayed communications, requiring Whitehall to rely on under-informed and over assertive local officials.

The opium wars[5] were the consequence of this mutual misunderstanding. Europeans bought Chinese ceramics, silks and tea for which the Chinese wanted payment in silver but showed little official interest in British manufactures. However, the Chinese appetite for opium smoking created opportunities for the British and others to smuggle Indian grown opium – an opening ruthlessly exploited by private traders after the East India Company's monopoly of the China trade ended in 1833. For a time, the Chinese bureaucracy debated legalising opium, while corrupt officials facilitated the smuggling, until, in 1838, a hardline opponent, Lin Zexu, was sent to Canton. Lin Zexu blockaded the foreigners in their 'factories' until they surrendered their opium stocks for destruction. War ensued when, in the autumn of 1839, the Whig foreign secretary, Lord Palmerston, despatched a retaliatory expeditionary force. Intermittent fighting over two years brought decisive British victories with few casualties. The 1842 treaty ending the war gave Britain Hong Kong, indemnified the British for the cost of the confiscated opium and opened four more ports. While China never became a British colony and Britain never sought exclusive trade or political influence, China had become part of Britain's 'informal empire'.[6]

'For the liberation of my conscience'

In 1840, Gladstone was probably best known for his 1838 book *The State in its Relations with the Church*. Although he had been a junior colonial minister in Sir Robert Peel's 1834 Tory ministry, in 1841 he described himself as someone 'whose mind and efforts have chiefly ranged within the circle of subjects connected with the Church' and as possessing 'no general knowledge of trade whatever'.[7] Yet Peel, as party leader, summoned Gladstone to what are now called shadow cabinet meetings with Lord Aberdeen, Sir James Graham and others, to consider tactics ahead of triggering April's debate. From mid-March onwards, Gladstone regularly notes reading books, pamphlets, and parliamentary 'blue books' on the China question.[8]

The Whig government had lost seats in both the 1835 and 1837 elections but Lord

Melbourne's 1839 attempt to resign was frustrated by the young Queen Victoria's reluctance to part with him and by Peel's mismanagement of the Bedchamber Crisis.[9] Seeking to exploit Whig weakness, Peel tabled a no confidence motion in January 1840[10] followed, more successfully, by Graham's China motion in April, which was defeated by only nine votes. Gladstone's speech on 8 April was thus part of an effort to unseat the government and not just an expression of personal views. This is reflected in Gladstone's diary entry: 'Spoke 1¼ hour, heavily; strongly ag[ains]t the Trade & the war – having previously asked whether my speaking out on them would do harm, & having been authorised.'[11] During the final day's debate on 9 April, Gladstone 'sat long with Milnes on his vote' – persuading Richard Monckton Milnes to support his party. Winding up for the Conservatives, Peel concentrated on the limited powers of the senior British official in China and the potential damage to Chinese trade rather than condemning the opium trade.[12] After the Conservative defeat, Gladstone criticised his leader: 'Peel very skilful: but his ground seems to me narrow for such a motion'.[13]

Over the next few weeks, Gladstone maintained his programme of reading on China and served on a China trade select committee. Consulting his father and senior Conservatives, he contemplated moving a resolution against the opium traders' compensation claim. After the Duke of Wellington supported the government stance in the Lords, Gladstone yielded to 'the majority of the persons most trustworthy' and dropped the idea, as likely to 'injure the cause'. Characteristically he added, 'I am in dread of the judgements of God upon England for our national iniquity towards China. It has been a matter of most painful & anxious consideration.'[14] Gladstone eventually spoke about the compensation claim in July 1840 on a motion to finance the war, recording in his diary: 'spoke thereon 1½ hour for the liberation of my conscience & to afford the friends of peace opposite an opportunity – of wh[ich] they would not avail themselves'. But rather than decrying the morality of the war, he argued that any claim by the merchants lay against the government rather than the Chinese. Despite his attempts to generate dissent among the Radicals on the government benches, the supply motion was accepted without a division.[15]

The following May, the Conservatives finally defeated the faltering Whigs over proposed reforms to sugar taxes. The ensuing general election gave Peel a majority of

Chinese opium smokers.

seventy-nine, but he still required a confidence motion to remove Melbourne. Again, Gladstone was called to the shadow cabinet meetings to decide the terms of that debate. He attended with a troubled conscience. Before parliament met, he had 'walked alone in the Hawarden grounds' ruminating 'on anticipated changes. I can digest the crippled religious action of the State: but I cannot be a party to exacting by blood opium-compensation from the Chinese.' After a second conference, held at Aberdeen's to avoid 'spies', he noted, 'I attended this meeting with some pain: but I did not think it *right* to refuse.'[16] As he recorded later, Gladstone believed these meetings 'savoured of Cabinet Office'. He 'considered and consulted' with family and colleagues 'on the Chinese question which I considered a serious impediment to office of that description: and I had provisionally contemplated saying to Peel in case he should offer me Ireland with the Cabinet to reply that I would gladly serve his Gov[ernmen]t. in the Secretaryship but that I feared his Chinese measures would hardly admit of my acting in the Cabinet.'[17] On 27 August 1841, the Whigs were defeated by 360 votes to 269 – as Gladstone concluded, 'so expires the ninth life of the government.'

At the end of August, Peel sent for Gladstone and, in what must have been an awkward fifteen minutes, shattered his illusions of cabinet. Only the vice-presidency of the Board of Trade under Lord Ripon was offered – though that would make Gladstone the lead trade spokesman in the Commons. Gladstone accepted, but only after acknowledging his lack of qualification for 'this class of public office'. He confessed to Peel that, 'I cannot reconcile to my sense of right to extract from China, as a term of peace, compensation for the opium surrendered to her …' Patiently, Peel responded that, 'he thought I had better leave the question suspended, & said that in the event of my finding the Gov[ernmen]t. policy incompatible with my conviction of duty, my retirement upon such a ground, as being collateral and peculiar, would not be attended with the mischief of a retirement on account of general want of confidence.'[18] Reaching the end of his journal in September, Gladstone reflected on recent events. 'I could not have made myself answerable for what I expect the Cabinet will do in China' and was 'thankful that matters stand as they do. I feel myself to be in a place where I have an opportunity of serving my country … and also that I am in a great degree morally free.'[19] As a junior minister, Gladstone did not believe that he shared the responsibility for Peel's continuation of the assertive Whig policy on China, a policy which Peel, unlike Gladstone, considered of only limited significance.

Actually, Peel had done Gladstone a favour. Gladstone had quickly mastered his brief and outshone Ripon, while trade policies became of increasing political importance and provided him with a route to the cabinet in May 1843. But, of course, he could not accept the presidency of the Board of Trade without misgivings. Despite Peel's reassurances about 'the compromises and adjustments of opinion necessary to ensure the cooperation of a Cabinet composed of any fourteen men', Gladstone insisted on detailing his reservations – education, Welsh bishoprics, and China. Peel surprised him by worrying most about the bishoprics.[20] On China, 'his answer was that the immediate power and responsibility lay with the East India Company; he did not express agreement with my view of the cultivation of the drug, but said it was a minor subject compared with other imperial interests constantly brought under discussion.' Gladstone requested a weekend to consider. He consulted with his friends Hope & Manning,[21] who advised him that, 'the very wisest and effective servants of any cause must necessarily fall so far short of the popular

sentiment of its friends as to be liable constantly to incur mistrust and even abuse'. Stoically, he accepted Peel's offer.[22]

Inevitably, Gladstone soon lost his moral freedom and learned to compromise. A month before he joined the cabinet, Conservative MP Lord Ashley[23] had presented petitions from three missionary societies calling for an end to the opium trade. Rejecting Ashley's request, Peel pleaded the potential loss to the Indian revenues, but he also revealed that British negotiators had promised the Chinese that, under British control, Hong Kong would not be allowed to become a smuggling base.[24] The motion was not pressed to a vote. Although present, Gladstone did not speak, merely noting, 'I could only in part accept Sir R. Peel's Speech'.[25] In August a government proposal allocating the compensation paid by China to the opium traders was opposed by the Whigs as insufficient. As before, Gladstone remained silent but loyally voted with the government. His diary notes only his attendance in parliament.[26]

Abominable opium and other stimulants

Opium later became a personal as well as a political anxiety for Gladstone, reinforcing his disapproval of the trade. Laudanum, a tincture of opium and wine was commonly and legally consumed. On 25 August 1839, Gladstone mentions his wife taking it for toothache.[27] Unfortunately, Gladstone's sister Helen became an addict when her doctors prescribed laudanum for depression after her broken engagement and conversion to Catholicism. In October 1844, Gladstone notes Helen's use of 'abominable opium and other stimulants'. Her addiction persisted until her death in 1880.[28] Conversing about Lady Lincoln with her husband, in 1848, Gladstone used his sister's addiction to illustrate how 'laudanum goes to destroy responsibility'.[29]

The most pernicious, demoralising, and destructive of all the contraband trades

When the Chinese seized *The Arrow*, a Chinese-manned but British-flagged ship, on suspicion of piracy in 1856, the 'high handed'[30] British far eastern plenipotentiary ordered gunboats to shell Canton. During the *Arrow* War, the French allied themselves with the British while, separately, Americans and Russians undertook military operations against the Chinese. Furthermore, Chinese forces were also fighting a civil war, which killed tens of millions between 1850 and 1864.[31] Since China had nothing comparable to the steam powered British warships or as effective as British artillery, the second opium war proved almost as much of a mismatch as the first.

After the initial attacks on Canton and Tientsin (Tianjin), the Chinese agreed a settlement locally, but this was not ratified and in 1860 Anglo-French forces attacked Peking (Beijing) destroying the imperial summer palace and causing the emperor to flee. The subsequent treaties legalised opium imports, opened further ports and the Yangtze River to foreign trade, compensated the allies, and finally established diplomatic representation at Peking.

If militarily the second war was a repeat of the first, so was the British political situation. Foreign policy was guided by a weak Whig administration under Palmerston, uneasily buttressed by the Radicals. After the repeal of the Corn Laws, Peel's closest followers formed a parliamentary group separated from the main body of Conservatives under Lord Derby. As a leading Peelite, Gladstone was impatient for office in order to continue the tax reforms he initiated in the 1852 coalition but was distrusted by both the larger parties.[32]

Seeking to exploit the government's weakness, Derby attacked its Chinese policy in the Lords on 24 February 1857, highlighting the doubtful legality of *The Arrow*'s

Britishness, the excessive aggression of British officials, and the potential damage to the silk and tea trades. On 26 February, Richard Cobden, a Radical, extended the assault to the Commons, criticising the government's 'violent measures' and calling for a select committee. The hint of a crisis quickly filled the public galleries. The possibility of Palmerston's defeat became apparent after Cobden spoke, 'when it was made known by the cheering which came from all parts of the House what numbers of Members, of all parties, were prepared' to support the attack. A feeling reinforced when former Whig leader Lord John Russell joined the rebellion.[33]

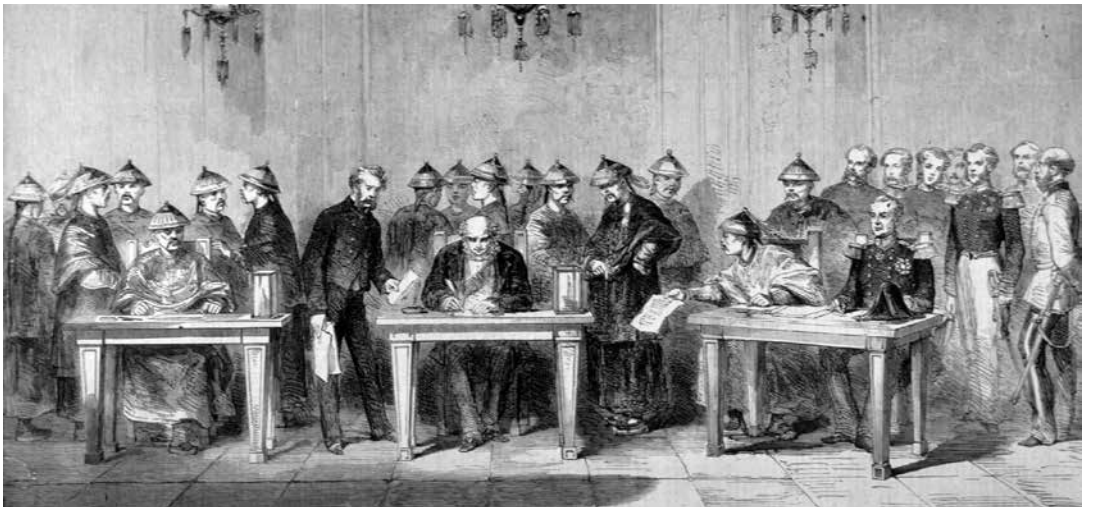
Gladstone spoke on the fourth and final night of the debate. He had prepared by reading parliamentary papers and speaking to political colleagues 'ab(out) the China division'.[34] A decade earlier, Palmerston had declared, 'We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow'.[35] Gladstone proclaimed a very different creed: 'our prime and paramount duty is to consider the interests of humanity and the honour of England.' He condemned the government for sheltering behind its officials, shirking responsibility, and attacked British aggression against a militarily weak nation, excusing the Chinese response as the understandable reaction of the powerless. Again, he vehemently condemned the opium trade. Rhetorically asking 'Is there anything peculiar in your smuggling trade on the coast of China?', he answered, 'It is the worst, the most pernicious, demoralizing, and destructive of all the contraband trades that are carried on upon the surface of the globe … Your greatest and most valuable trade with China is this trade in opium. It is a smuggling trade. You promised to put it down; you bound yourselves by the terms of the treaty as far as possible to suppress it.' Instead, Hong Kong was used for 'sustaining and organizing a fleet of coasters whose business it is to enlarge, who have enlarged, and who are enlarging, that smuggling traffic.'[36]

The civil servant and diarist Greville compared 'A magnificent speech of Gladstone' with Palmerston's, which was 'said to have been very dull in the first part, and very bow-wow in the second; not very judicious, on the whole bad, and it certainly failed to decide any doubtful votes in his favour.'[37] Despite 'every art and manoeuvre which the science and skill of the "Whips" could bring to bear', the government lost by 263 to 247.[38] Gladstone's diary noted euphorically, 'a division doing more honour to the H[ouse] of Commons than any I ever remember. Home with C[atherine] and read L[or]d Ellesmere's Faust being excited wh[ich] is rare with me.'[39]

The excitement was short lived. Two days later Palmerston dissolved parliament and, despite a challenge from Gladstone, persisted with his war plans.[40] Although united by hostility to Palmerston, the discontented parliamentary groups had agreed no alternative. Gladstone met Derby but would not promise an electoral truce between Peelites and Conservatives, conceding only that he would be fighting the Palmerstonian opposing Gladstone's brother-in-law, Sir Stephen Glynne, for Flintshire.[41] Glynne lost. The electors backed Palmerston against his opponents; the Conservatives, Peelites and Radicals lost ground. Cobden was among those losing their seats.

This China affair is very unpleasant

When the war resumed after the temporary diversion of British forces to put down the Indian Rebellion, both the fighting and subsequent negotiations were directed by the men in China rather than Westminster. These two wars, fought more than fifteen years apart, might be taken to illustrate the consistency of Palmerston's gunboat diplomacy, always ready to enforce British 'rights' through naval power.



SIgning the Treaty of Tientsin, June 1858. The treaty opened more Chinese ports to foreign trade and effectively legalised the import of opium.

Except that, in both cases, Palmerston had been obliged to defend and reinforce initiatives taken by local officials exceeding their instructions in an area he considered less important than the European balance of power. Throughout the same period, Gladstone consistently opposed the opium trade and the use of force against a populous but technologically weak state, a stance informed by the Christian humanitarianism which later dictated his reactions to the Bulgarian atrocities and the Zulu and Afghan wars. But his principles had not prevented him taking office under Peel.

Nor did they preclude Gladstone becoming chancellor of the exchequer in Palmerston's 1859 Liberal government despite opposing the resolution that paved the way for its formation. At the time, he explained this volte-face in terms of sympathy for Liberal electoral 'reform and foreign policy', later elaborating that the 'overwhelming weight of the Italian question, and of our foreign policy in connection with it', combined with his 'entire mistrust' of Derby's Italian policy were the decisive factors.[42]

Within months, Gladstone had written assuring Palmerston that, 'the sad news from China' (a British defeat at the Taku forts guarding the river route to Peking) will 'draw us together'. Palmerston replied that, 'This China affair is very unpleasant' and urged the necessity of 'avenging so unprovoked and faithless an outrage'. On 17 September, Gladstone attended the cabinet which dispatched 'an adequate force' to China, in 'close concert with France' to force the ratification of the previously negotiated treaties and guarantee access to Peking. The destruction and looting of the Imperial Summer Palace followed. Gladstone recorded no qualms or doubts.[43]

When, as chancellor, he had to meet the cost of the war, he was predictably asked, 'How is it that that which in 1857 was considered so very immoral becomes in 1860 so very right and proper?' After unconvincingly distinguishing between the two campaigns, he claimed, 'I hope I have never spoken of [the war] in any other terms except those of the deepest regret and lamentation,' adding, 'while we deemed it to be our duty, in the interests of our countrymen and humanity at large, to send a considerable force to China,' after the Taku forts setback 'we at the same time manifested a desire to make that force the bearer of a message containing terms as moderate as it was possible for us.'[44]

By 1860, Gladstone had twice denounced wars with China in powerful speeches to persuade MPs of the moral iniquity of British support for opium traders. He had entered both debates to force Whig governments out of power and had once, temporarily, succeeded. But he had also twice accepted cabinet office in governments which continued those policies. Was his rhetoric merely insincere partisan posturing?

Certainly, in 1840, his oratory was harnessed to the Conservative cause and, in 1857, while he intended to defeat a government, the animosity was directed more personally against Palmerston. The diary entries and the reservations expressed to Peel before accepting office, neither intended for publication, show his qualms to be genuine. How then did Gladstone justify accepting ministerial appointments? In 1841–43, he allowed family, friends and colleagues to talk him out of his doubts. In 1859, Italian freedom was the higher priority. But in 1880, Gladstone gave a further explanation, reminding the Commons that, during the first opium war, he had 'denounced, in the strongest terms, the opium traffic' before adding that 'the nation, however, did not take the part of those who protested against that war.' 'From the opinions expressed' in 1857, he added 'I have not in the slightest departed':

> What then happened? The House declared its judgment, and [Lord Palmerston] appealed to the people. In that appeal he was emphatically sustained, and many Members were dismissed from their seats in that House upon the vote which they gave, and the country returned a very large majority to support an Administration pledged to carry on a second Opium War.[45]

The war 'was approved of by the people upon the only occasion on which a distinct appeal was made to them'.[46] Gladstone had bowed to the people's judgement.

A wholesale druggist administering poison to another nation

After 1865, Gladstone became Palmerston's eventual successor and refashioned the Liberal Party in his own image, dominating politics for thirty years. The opium trade remained a political issue sporadically requiring his attention, though not by his initiative. Nevertheless, those incidents help illuminate his view and how he determined priorities.

In May 1870, during Gladstone's first government, Sir Wilfrid Lawson, a temperance campaigner, proposed a Commons resolution condemning 'the system by which a large portion of the Indian Revenue is raised from Opium.' From the 'principle that what is morally wrong can never be politically right', he argued that, 'the traffic in opium, fostered and promoted by our Government, is in itself immoral and injurious'. Britain had become a 'wholesale druggist, administering poison to another nation, and calling this process the opening up of China.' Noting that Gladstone had recently written that, 'few would deny the obligation of a State to follow the moral law', Lawson taunted the premier by quoting his 1840 speech against the opium war.[47]

Although a junior minister responded officially, Gladstone could not resist intervening. He claimed that, after China's 'wise resolution' to legalise and tax opium imports in 1860, the 'growth of opium became wholly detached from all political considerations, and became a matter of fiscal arrangement'. The resolution failed to show how to replace India's £6 million opium tax revenues or how to compensate opium farmers. He contended that we could only 'denounce the use of opium as 'universally, essentially, and irretrievably bad', 'after it has been proved that the use of opium is to be broadly distinguished from the use of every other stimulant – a point which is not settled yet.'[48] Lawson replied that, 'he had quoted the evidence of doctors, of East India Directors, and of a Select Committee ...

to show the injurious nature of the traffic in opium'. 'Such evidence ought to be quite sufficient to convince anybody who did not sit on the Treasury Bench, and probably they would be convinced by no evidence whatever.' The motion was dismissed on a technicality.[49] The debate went unremarked in Gladstone's diaries.

In January 1880 Gladstone travelled to Cologne to be with his dying sister. The night before her death, he recorded that, 'The evening was for the most part distressing from her piteous cravings.' A few days later, he 'read through the uncut vol[ume] on Morphia-Craving' found among her possessions.[50] By April he had formed his second government and by June they faced a resolution from the Quaker, Joseph Pease, seeking to ban the opium trade as being 'at variance not only with international, but moral law.' The government had a difficult night and Gladstone rose to bolster support for his new secretary for India, Lord Hartington. This was the debate quoted above where Gladstone defended his stance in 1857. He conceded that, 'this opium revenue, instead of being a sound and solid, is a slippery and a dangerous, part of our Indian Revenue. India cannot be economically safe as long as she is dependent upon it.' However, with no obvious alternative revenue source, he countered Pease's claim to morality by asserting that, 'I am quite certain there is no principle which lies nearer the root of political morality … than the principle which dictates that no promise shall ever be given by a responsible Minister … to the House of Commons until that Minister knows that it will be in his power to accomplish that to which he has engaged himself.'[51] He summarised the Commons proceedings as 'No less than three touch & go affairs: opium especially.'[52]

Ahead of a further debate in 1881, the chief whip, Richard Grosvenor, warned Gladstone that the government would 'probably be beaten' rather than suffer 'a bad division, i.e. a small majority'. Fearing defeat as 'a moral as well as a Parliamentary calamity', Gladstone told Hartington, 'if we are to have a fight I should wish two things', to know 'whether the disconnection of the Government from the growth would practically do good or harm' and to show 'that we do not by what I may call treaty compulsion prevent the Chinese from increasing their duties if they are so inclined.'[53] Hartington and the whips soothed the Radicals sufficiently to conclude the debate without a division or Gladstone's intervention.[54]

It was stiff work

In 1891, with the Liberals in opposition, only technicalities had prevented Pease and his supporters from passing an anti-opium resolution. After Gladstone returned to office in 1892, Lord Kimberley, the new Indian secretary, offered the reformers an official inquiry into the opium trade but warned that prohibition would not be funded by the British exchequer.[55] On 30 June 1893, a royal commission was approved to investigate:

- Whether to prohibit the growth and sale of non-medical opium in India;
- How to terminate opium transit arrangements between Native States and British India;
- The effect on Indian finances of prohibition;
- Whether changes short of total prohibition should be made;
- The effect of opium consumption on the moral and physical condition of the Indian people;
- The willingness of Indian people to bear the cost of prohibition.[56]

The drama behind Gladstone's laconic note that, 'Between Ireland and Opium, it was stiff work, but thank God went well'[57] is revealed in Kimberley's papers. 'The anti-Opium party have at last got a day … for their motion. Our position is not a pleasant one. No less than six of the present Cabinet and eleven other

members of the Government, voted for the motion of April 10th 1891. G[eorge] Russell (junior India Office minister) has also given strong pledges to his constituents on the subject and there is a large increase of Members who have given similar pledges. I can think of no better way out of our difficulties than the appointment of a commission.'[58] On the day of the debate, Kimberley wrote:

> After we had agreed on the amendment on the anti-opium resolution, Mr. G wanted at the last moment to come to terms with Pease by inserting 'when' instead of 'whether' in the first par[agraph] … This of course begged the whole question at issue, and I refused to agree saying that if this change was agreed by the Gov[ernmen]t. I must part company. Harcourt came up to the H[ouse] of Lords to try to persuade me to give in. He was as usual in a terrible 'funk' of a beating, and ready to concede anything and everything to the anti-opium fanatics. However I would not be moved & the result was a very satisfactory majority for our amendment, thanks to Mr. G's admirable speech, in which he utterly pulverized the resolution.[59]

With last minute negotiations and Kimberley's threatened resignation, it is unsurprising that Gladstone's diary entry concluded, 'All the circumstances not only invite but force me to the life of faith. And without it I do not feel that I could get through a day. *He* will not break a bruised reed. So be it.'[60] The incident illustrates how a determined minister could restrict Gladstone's room for manoeuvre but also how Gladstone's oratorical skills were deployed against his natural sympathies. The commission disappointed reformers, however, by concluding that Asian opium consumption was analogous to alcohol consumption in Europe and that Chinese concerns were primarily financially driven. Policy remained unchanged till 1910, well after Gladstone's lifetime.[61]

I should be viewed as a traitor

When Gladstone consulted Hope and Manning in 1843, he noted 'I well remember that I pleaded against them that I should be viewed as a traitor and they observed to me in reply that I must be prepared for that if necessary.'[62] Should Gladstone be viewed as a 'traitor' over opium?

The key to Gladstone's life was his Christian faith. His faith drove his belief that British support for the opium wars was at 'variance with justice and with religion'. His sister's addiction can only have reinforced his conviction. He had no doubts about his condemnations of Palmerston either in 1840 or 1857, especially as his principles aligned with his political inclinations and his animosity towards Palmerston. Because Peel continued Palmerston's Chinese policy, those same principles made him hesitate to join the 1843 cabinet. He required the support of friends and family to overcome his doubts.

Once in the cabinet, Gladstone accepted the consequences. Compromises were made and priorities determined despite the inevitable accusations of hypocrisy. In accepting office under Palmerston, he prioritised Italian national independence over distaste for Palmerstonian jingoism. But personal ambition reinforced principle. The exchequer brought him out of the political wilderness and gave him the opportunity to enhance his reputation as a tax reformer.

After 1860, the circumstances governing policy towards the Chinese opium trade were, for Gladstone, transformed. Firstly, the 1857 election had endorsed Palmerston's policy and Gladstone never sought to challenge that verdict. Secondly, by legalising opium imports (albeit at the point of a gun), China could control the trade itself, through import tariffs.

Liberal campaigners argued, increasingly from the 1870s, that the British government was morally responsible for this pernicious trade through its supervision and taxation of

the Indian opium growers. As Liberal leader after 1868, Gladstone required these critics to prove that opium was more damaging than alcohol and, applying the 'political' morality of practicality, to offset any tax losses to the Indian administration. Under parliamentary pressure, he gave the campaigners their opportunity in the 1893 royal commission. That opportunity was missed.

After the consultations with his friends, Gladstone had written 'I am certain that Hope and Manning in 1843 were not my tempters but rather my good angels'.[63] They had set him on his path to political ascendancy, but it was a road marked by compromises, political tactics and aspirations abandoned. Gladstone's career was longer than most and his lasting achievements greater than most. As leader, Gladstone repeatedly identified the Liberal Party with important reforms and campaigned vigorously for the parliamentary majorities to implement his policies. Because the opium trade never became a priority for such action, it must be counted a blemish on that career. ■

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1 For the background, see Julia Lovell, *The Opium War* (Picador, 2011) or Stephen Platt, *Imperial Twilight: The Opium War and the End of China's Last Golden Age* (Atlantic Books, 2018) which adds an American perspective.

2 Hansard, Parl. Debs. (series 3) vol. 53, cols. 818–20 (8 Apr. 1840).

3 *Resolution of the CPC Central Committee on the Major Achievements and Historical Experience of the Party over the Past Century*, updated: 16 Nov. 2021. http://english.www.gov.cn/policies/latestreleases/202111/16/content_WS6193a935c6d0df57f98e50b0.html, accessed 7 Jun. 2023.

4 Henry Kissinger, *On China* (Penguin, 2012 edn) p. 54.

5 'Opium War' was an 1840 coinage of *The Times*.

6 Jürgen Osterhammel, *Britain and China, 1842–1914*, pp. 146–169 in Andrew Porter (ed.), *The Oxford History of the British Empire: The Nineteenth Century* (Oxford University Press, 1999).

7 M. R. D. Foot and H. C. G. Matthew (eds.), *The Gladstone Diaries*, vol. 3, 1840–1847 (Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 144, 135.

8 *Gladstone Diaries,* vol. 3, pp. 16–21.

9 Peel was looking to exchange some of the queen's Whig ladies-in-waiting for Tories, but the queen believed she was being required lose all of them and refused.

10 Norman Gash, *Sir Robert Peel: The Life of Sir Robert Peel after 1830* (Longman, 1972), pp. 238–43.

11 *Gladstone Diaries*, vol. 3, p. 21.

12 Hansard, Parl. Debs. (series 3) vol. 53, cols. 898–925 (9 Apr. 1840).

13 *Gladstone Diaries,* vol. 3, p. 21.

14 Ibid., p. 29.

15 Ibid., p. 49; Hansard, Parl. Debs. (series 3) vol. 55, cols. 1029–372 (7 Jul. 1840).

16 *Gladstone Diaries,* vol. 3, pp. 130, 132

17 Ibid., p. 140.

18 Ibid., pp. 135–6.

19 Ibid., pp. 144–5.

20 Gladstone opposed merging the bishoprics of St Asaph and Bangor to create a see for Manchester.

21 James Hope (later James Hope-Scott) and Henry Manning were high church Anglicans whose friendships with Gladstone were later damaged by their conversion to Catholicism. Hope became an important legal advocate for railways and Manning became Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster.

22 *Gladstone Diaries,* vol. 3, pp. 279–83; John Morley, *The Life of William Ewart Gladstone* (Macmillan & Co, 1903), vol. i, p. 259.

23 Later Lord Shaftesbury.

24 Hansard, Parl. Debs. (series 3) vol. 68, cols. 461–8 (4 Apr. 1843).

25 *Gladstone Diaries,* vol. 3, p. 270.

26 Hansard, Parl. Debs. (series 3) vol. 71, cols. 240–95 (4 Aug. 1843). *Gladstone Diaries*, vol. 3, p. 304.

27 M. R. D. Foot and H. C. G. Matthew (eds.), *The Gladstone Diaries,* vol. 2, 1833–1839 (Oxford University Press,1968), p. 623.

28 *Gladstone Diaries,* vol. 3 p. 405–6; Richard Shannon, *Gladstone,* vol. 1, 1809–1865 (pbk edn, Methuen, 1982), p. 103.

29 M. R. D. Foot and H. C. G. Matthew (eds.), *The Gladstone Diaries,* vol. 4, 1848–1854 (Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 59.

30 William White, *The Inner Life of the House of Commons* (Richmond Publishing Co.,1973 reprint), p. 24.

31 A war against followers of a cult religion derived from Christianity, known as the Taiping rebellion.

32 See Angus Hawkins, *Parliament, Party and the Art of Politics in Britain, 1855–59* (Stanford University Press, 1987), esp. chs. 2–3.

33 White, *Inner Life*, p. 26.

34 H. C. G. Matthew (ed.), *The Gladstone Diaries*, vol. 5 1855–1860 (Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 201–2.

35 Hansard, Parl. Debs. (series 3) vol. 97, col. 122 (1 Mar. 1848).

36 Hansard, Parl. Debs. (series 3) vol. 144, cols. 1787–1809 (3 Mar. 1857).

37 Charles Greville, *The Greville Memoirs* (Longmans Green & Co., 1888), viii, p. 97.

38 White, *Inner Life*, pp. 26–8.

39 *Gladstone Diaries,* vol. 5, p. 202.

40 Hansard, Parl. Debs. (series 3) vol. 144, cols. 1913–19 (5 Mar. 1857).

41 *Gladstone Diaries*, vol. 5, p. 203.

42 Morley, *Life*, vol. i, pp. 627–8. The reference is to Garibaldi's campaign for Italian Unification.

43 *Gladstone Diaries*, vol. 5, p. 425; Philip Guedalla (ed.), *Gladstone & Palmerston being the Correspondence of Lord Palmerston with Mr. Gladstone 1851–1865* (Victor Gollancz, 1928), p. 111.

44 Hansard, Parl. Debs. (series 3) vol. 159, cols. 1892–1900 (13 Jul. 1860); the Radical J. A. Roebuck posed the question.

45 Hansard, Parl. Debs. (series 3) vol. 252, col. 1276 (4 Jun. 1880).

46 Ibid.

47 Hansard, Parl. Debs. (series 3) vol. 201, cols. 480–90 (10 May 1870).

48 Hansard, Parl. Debs. (series 3) vol. 201, cols. 515–522 (10 May 1870).

49 Hansard, Parl. Debs. (series 3) vol. 201, cols. 523–524 (10 May 1870).

50 H. C. G. Matthew (ed.), *The Gladstone Diaries*, vol. 9, 1875–1880 (Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 475–8.

51 Hansard, Parl. Debs. (series 3) vol. 252, cols. 1227–81 (4 Jun. 1880).

52 *Gladstone Diaries,* vol. 9, p. 535.

53 H. C. G. Matthew (ed.), *The Gladstone Diaries*, vol. 10, 1881–1883 (Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 55.

54 The debate is reported at Hansard, Parl. Debs. (series 3) vol. 260, cols. 1451–1514 (29 Apr. 1881).

55 H. C. G. Matthew (ed.), *The Gladstone Diaries*, vol. 13, 1892–1896 (Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 128.

56 Hansard, Parl. Debs. (series 4) vol. 14, cols. 591–634 (30 Jun. 1893).

57 *Gladstone Diaries,* vol. 13, p. 256.

58 John Powell (ed.), *Liberal by Principle: The Politics of John Wodehouse 1st Earl of Kimberley, 1843–1902* (The Historians' Press, 1996), p. 210, letter to Lord Lansdowne. Powell cites evidence that 240 members supported the anti-opium cause, including Asquith, Campbell Bannerman and Gladstone.

59 Angus Hawkins and John Powell (eds.), *The Journal of John Wodehouse First Earl of Kimberley for 1862–1902* (Camden Fifth Series, 1997) p. 415.

60 *Gladstone Diaries*, vol. 13, p. 256.

61 For more details see John F. Richards, 'Opium and the British Indian Empire: The Royal Commission of 1895', *Modern Asian Studies*, 36/2 (May 2002), pp. 375–420, accessed 7/2/2025 via https://www.jstor.org/stable/3876660.

62 John Morley, *Life*, vol. i, p. 260.

63 Ibid.

Letters to the Editor

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retention of capital punishment. Allen's internal memo is scathing on Churchill's failure of logic. One may readily guess from the tone that Allen was an abolitionist. Home Office liberalism, I think it may be said, survived until the early 1990s, after which it was downhill all the way including (and especially) under New Labour.

The book argues that Churchill's 1910–11 reforms and philosophy regarding criminal justice are highly relevant to today, with its acknowledged prisons scandal, especially WSC's declaration to Parliament, cheered by progressive reformists, that how a state deals with offenders is 'an unfailing measure of the level of a state's civilisation'. With the recent change of government the Justice Ministry has new ministers. These include Lord James Timpson, Minister of State for Prisons, Parole and Probation. Timpson's attitude is very much that of Churchill the Liberal reformer of 1910–11; perhaps there is progressive liberal hope in this field? ■

Duncan Marlor