

develop here, but two important omissions indicate what is meant. Nothing is said about what Liberalism and the Liberal Party came to represent in its short Parliamentary heyday from 1859 to 1916, so that in the end the book leaves the subject obscure. And reference to the wider world in which all this took place is quite minimal. Nothing is said, for instance, about the impact of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 on Liberal political opinion in Britain after the First World War, and the retreat which this great event stimulated in the politics of defensive class interest as represented both by Conservatives and Labour. A further consequence was to leave the conversion of the Liberal Party to social reform before 1914 incomplete. Arguably, among a significant minority of Liberal Democrats today, that conversion is still incomplete, and the Party has limited appeal among the industrial working class.

Book Review

H.C.G. Matthew: *Gladstone 1809 - 1874*
(OUP 1988 pbk £12.95)

Reviewed by Tony Little

Was Gladstone the Thatcher of the 19th century? Both came from commercial families whose fathers were active politicians and both went to Oxford. After a flirtation with the law, they chose politics as a career, joining the Conservative party. Their strong emotional links with sections of the working population, through their mastery of the press, intensified the distrust and loathing with which they were regarded by the Establishment including many of their own party, even cabinet colleagues. Retrenchment of government spending to cut income tax and allow wealth to fructify in the pockets of the population was their key economic policy. Free trade and nationalism were articles of faith and both acted as if they alone pursued the moral course which served to infuriate their opponents. They were masters of detail which allowed them to dominate cabinet and set the agenda for their generation. Gladstone was undoubtedly the better European and his trade union reforms were aimed at increasing rather than

reducing the power of the working class. Above all he trusted the people and that is perhaps why he created the Liberal Party and she led the Tories.

Matthew's book surveys only the period up to the end of the first premiership. Gladstone first accepted political office in the 1830s; he was in Peel's cabinet which repealed the Corn Law. Although he thought he had retired in 1874, Gladstone won his last election in 1892. The essay also betrays its origins as introductory remarks to the Gladstone Diaries which Matthew edited for publication. Yet this is what gives the volume its greatest strength. It presents Gladstone the human, rather than Gladstone the superman. He even opens up the secrets of Gladstone's sexual life in a way which almost, if not quite, strengthens our admiration. The 'Sun' would not have let The People's Willy get away with such innocent but doubtful self torture today.

Matthew brings out clearly the influence of Peel on Gladstone the Chancellor but underplays that of Aberdeen who prevented him rejoining the Tories. Gladstone's work at the Exchequer was crucial to the adaptation of the British political system to the realities of the Industrial Revolution. In making Britain a free trade nation, he completed Peel's work and constructed a tax system which removed the grievances of the working and commercial classes but which was acceptable to the aristocrats who controlled Parliament. He eliminated the obstacles to a cheap press and benefited from its hunger for news. He was the first senior politician to use the large, and reported, public meeting which, like Reagan, allowed him to appeal to the people over the head of the legislature.

Religion is the key to Gladstone. From an evangelical background, he was caught up in Oxford's attempt to revive the Church of England. He saw the state as an arm of the church but the failure of the Church and State to meet his ideals generated the tensions which drove him into the Exchequer, disestablished the Church of Ireland and created the misunderstanding between Gladstone and his non-conformist followers over education, condemning the Liberals to electoral defeat in 1874. Matthew's extensive coverage of religious issues may deter some readers. If so,

some judicious skipping in chapters 2 - 4 would still allow the reader to keep pace with the main political achievements.

All Liberal Democrats should read at least one life of Gladstone, the economic agenda he tackled is still with us, as are the problems he left unsolved in Bulgaria and Ireland. Matthew gives the best available insight into Gladstone, the man and politician.

Gladstone: Further Reading

The following very brief list is merely a starting point. Most of the works listed have their own much more extensive bibliographies for the enthusiast.

Published Sources

The Gladstone Diaries: Many Volumes: Edited by MRD Foot & HCG Matthew
Detailed abbreviated daily doings. A feast for experts and aficionados but very heavy going for the rest of us.

The Political Correspondence of Mr. Gladstone & Ld. Granville: 4 vols.: Ed. A Ramm
Granville was Gladstone's closest political confidant and friend.

The Prime Minister's Papers: W E Gladstone: 4 vols.: Ed. J Brooke & M Sorenson
Memos, mostly autobiographical, kept by Gladstone, for the record.

Gladstone's Speeches: Ed. A Tilney Bassett
14 key speeches covering 535 pages plus an 84 page list of all the major speeches!

The Red Earl, The Papers of the 5th Earl Spencer 1835-1910: 2 vols.: Ed. P Gordon
Princess Di's ancestor was a Gladstonian Cabinet Minister; an insider's view.

Background

Nineteenth Century Britain: A Wood
A standard 'A' level textbook

Politics Without Democracy: M Bentley
Inexpensive paperback which gives a brisk survey of the period with added perspective.

The Palliser Novels: 6 vols.: A Trollope
Capture the mood, mores and something of the principal personalities.

The Crisis of Imperialism 1865-1915: R Shannon
Thought provoking, poses the problems faced by successive governments and their answers to them.

The Optimists, Themes and Personalities in Victorian Politics: I Bradley
How the, sometimes contradictory, ideas which make up Liberal politics came together.

Biography

Life of Gladstone: 2/3 vols.: J Morley
Still the unreplaced classic but it lacks the personal insights and 'warts' expected of a modern life.

Gladstone 1809-1865: R Shannon
A competitor to Matthew on the early career. Long and detailed but not without humour. Where is volume 2?

Disraeli: R Blake
Gladstone's chief competitor and antithesis. Infinitely preferable to the gossipy new biography by S Weintraub.

Robert Peel: 2 vols.: N Gash
Peel was Gladstone's first ministerial employer and the mentor who inspired the rest of his career.

Politics

McCalmont's Parliamentary Poll Book 1832-1918: Ed. J Vincent & M Stenton
The election results for every parliamentary constituency over the period, the psephologist's delight.

Elections and Party Management: H J Hanham
Political organisation and campaigning in the good old days before central organisation and Focus.