

Gladstone

Paul A. Nuttall recalls William Ewart Gladstone's speech on the Armenian massacres in the city of his birth.

The Final Act of 'Liverpool's Most Distinguished Son': William Ewart Gladstone, Hengler's Circus, September 1896

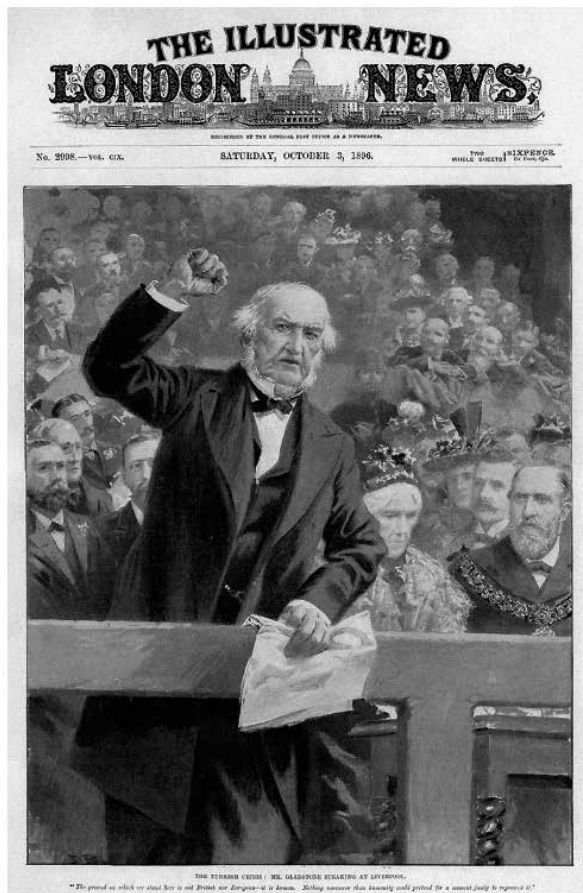
WILLIAM EWART GLADSTONE is one of Liverpool's most famous sons and was born on 29 December 1809 at 62 Rodney Street. His family had accrued their fortune through the transatlantic slave trade, and their residence was the palatial Seaforth House, not far from the banks of the River Mersey, in Seaforth. A young Gladstone was educated at Seaforth Preparatory School and then sent to Eton. He later attended Christ Church College, Oxford, achieving a double first in Classics and Mathematics. According to his contemporaries, Gladstone never lost his northern accent and always maintained familial links to Liverpool.¹

Alongside his arch-nemesis Benjamin Disraeli, Gladstone was undoubtedly the most important political figure of the Victorian period.² He sat in the House of Commons from 1833 until his retirement as an MP in 1895. His political journey was from that of a staunch early-Victorian 'High Tory' to a mid-Victorian Liberal, and in the final stage of his career, he was a late-Victorian Radical.³ Indeed, John

Morley, Gladstone's faithful disciple and biographer, asked him in later life why he remained in politics so long; he responded that 'I was brought up to fear and detest liberty. I grew to love it. That is the secret of my whole career'.⁴

Gladstone holds the honour of being elected British prime minister more times than anybody else. On four separate occasions, stretching over a quarter of century, he occupied the country's principal political position. He first became prime minister in 1868 until 1874, leading what A. J. P. Taylor has claimed to be the first and only truly Liberal government.⁵ Gladstone returned in 1880 before dividing his party over his decision to support home rule for Ireland; he fell from power in 1885, only to return briefly in 1886. His final term as prime minister came between 1892 and 1894, when he once again attempted, and failed, to achieve home rule for Ireland. Gladstone was replaced as Liberal leader and prime minister by his protégé, Lord Rosebery (Archibald Philip Primrose) in 1894. He did not contest the 1895 general

The Final Act of 'Liverpool's Most Distinguished Son'



Addressing the audience at Hengler's Circus, 24 September 1896 (Source: Ron Jones)

election and played no part in the campaign, which saw the Liberals lose and Rosebery replaced as prime minister by the Conservative peer, Lord Salisbury.

Gladstone's retirement, however, was only temporary and he was drawn back into public life for a final time by events occurring over three thousand miles away in Armenia; and this forms the subject of this article, as Gladstone's last great political act occurred in his home city of Liverpool. On 24 September 1896 Gladstone mounted the stage in front of a packed audience at Hengler's Circus, West Derby Road, Liverpool. He was 86 years of age, partially blind, profoundly deaf and struggling to walk. Although his capacity for physical exertion had deteriorated, his mind was as supple as ever, and his speech, which lasted one hour and twenty minutes, made global

headlines and had profound domestic political consequences.

The subject of Gladstone's speech was the slaughter of thousands of Armenians at the hands of the Ottoman Empire. Armenia is a small landlocked country located between the Black Sea and Caspian Sea. During the late Victorian period, the western part of the country fell within the borders of the Ottoman Empire and the east into Russia. The Armenians were considered second-class citizens by their Ottoman rulers, primarily on the grounds of their Christian faith, and they were thus treated accordingly. The massacre of Armenian civilians had begun in 1894 and it is estimated that between 50,000 and 300,000 people were killed in a three-year period. The pivotal role played by Sultan Abdul Hamid II ensured they became known as the 'Hamidian massacres'.

The invention of the telegraph allowed news of the Ottoman atrocities to be reported around the world, and there was popular outcry in Britain. Gladstone placed himself at the forefront of the public outrage and gave his first speech denouncing Ottoman barbarism in Chester in August 1895. Moreover, in a letter to the *Daily Chronicle*, Gladstone accused the European powers of a conspiracy of silence on the subject.⁶ Public meetings imploring the British government to intervene began to be organised across the country in the summer of 1896. The people of Liverpool also demanded that affirmative action was taken by the government, and they were determined to make their voices heard.

To this end, the city's lord mayor, the sixteenth Earl of Derby (1841–1908), received a deputation of local notables, including the Tory East Toxteth MP, Augustus Warr (1847–1908), the local Liberal leader, Richard Durning Holt (1868–1941), former Liberal MP and editor of the *Liverpool Daily Post*, Sir Edward Russell (1834–1920), and Cllr Archibald Salvidge (1863–1928), the chairman of the Liverpool

Workingmen's Conservative Association. All were appalled by the actions of the Ottomans in Armenia, and they demanded that a public meeting be held so the city's feelings could be exhibited to not only to the country, but the world. The petition stated:

We the undersigned citizens of Liverpool, feeling deep indignation at the horrible treatment to which the Armenian Christians are being subjected to by their Turkish rulers respectfully request your Lordship to summon a town's meeting to urge upon Her Majesty's Ministers the necessity of requiring the Sultan to stop further atrocities.⁷

The lord mayor promptly agreed to the request and Hengler's Circus, which in later years became the Hippodrome Theatre, was booked for the afternoon of Thursday 24 September 1896.

The next question was who would be the star attraction to ensure that the meeting garnered maximum publicity? Edward Evans, the chairman of the Liverpool Reform Club, suggested that Gladstone would be the ideal guest to address the meeting. Unsurprisingly, this suggestion was met with some resistance, particularly in local Tory quarters. For example, Edward Lawrence (1828–1909), a Conservative alderman and prominent cotton merchant, stated that Gladstone's presence 'would not be universally welcome'.⁸ Regardless of Lawrence's objection, the former prime minister was the ideal candidate to address the meeting. His presence would not only ensure that what was said at the meeting would be widely reported, but he had been openly critical of the British government's relative ambivalence about the slaughter of the Armenians. Indeed, it is fair to say that Gladstone's views chimed with both the people and the civic leaders of his home city. Therefore, when the Liverpool Conservative Party's governing body met, the local leader, Sir Arthur Forwood, concluded that it would be

viewed as unnecessarily partisan to object to Gladstone's presence. Thus, the local party supported the plan to offer the former prime minister an invitation to speak on behalf of the people of Liverpool.⁹

The organisers found that Gladstone was more than willing to address a Liverpool audience; it would ensure that his cause garnered publicity and gained even more traction in press. The cross-party meeting would also be the first time Gladstone had spoken in the city since he had been made a freeman of Liverpool in 1892. Moreover, he enjoyed speaking at Hengler's Circus, once stating that the venue provides 'a noble presentation of the audience'.¹⁰ As soon as Gladstone's attendance was announced, there was an immense amount of public interest. The meeting was not ticketed and although the speeches were scheduled to begin at 2 p.m., the doors of Hengler's Circus opened at 9.30 a.m. and the auditorium was full by 10.30 a.m. According to the *Liverpool Daily Post*, 'nine-tenths were drawn perhaps by the hope of hearing England's most venerable servant'.¹¹

Gladstone's entourage, which included his wife, Catherine, and his son, Herbert, was welcomed to Liverpool by cheering crowds at James Street Station. Liberal leader Richard Holt escorted the family from the station to Hengler's Circus where Gladstone was introduced onto the platform by Lord Derby, who, as lord mayor, chaired the meeting. Other speakers included Forwood, Lawrence, Russell and Warr. The *Liverpool Daily Post* noted how Gladstone had aged: 'he walks a little heavier on his stick' and 'the lines of age have deepened'. It also observed how his voice had weakened and how he spoke 'with the sweetest whisper of persuasion'.¹²

Gladstone began his speech by clarifying that what he was about to say was not a denunciation of the Islamic faith. He told the audience that many Muslims had 'resisted these misdeeds with the utmost of their

The Final Act of 'Liverpool's Most Distinguished Son'



Hengler's Circus (*The Builder*, 2 December 1876)

power' and deserved 'our sympathy and admiration'.¹³ This sentiment was echoed by Lawrence, who reminded the audience that millions of Muslims in India were loyal to the queen empress, and many also served in the Indian Army. Gladstone claimed that the blame for the Armenian atrocities rested solely with the government in Constantinople and in particular with Sultan Hamid II, who he claimed was 'adding massacre to massacre'.¹⁴

To cries of 'shame', Gladstone told his audience that 'men are beaten, human excrement rubbed in their faces ... women and girls are insulted and dishonoured and dragged from their beds naked at night'. He called for the British government to intervene, but he

believed that they would only act if forced by popular outcry. 'It has become necessary to strengthen the hands of the executive government by an expression of national will', he stated. Gladstone also did not confine his criticism to the British government. He argued that 'Concert Europe' had 'failed in what is known as the Eastern Question', and its inaction was a 'miserable disgrace'. Gladstone concluded with a call for the 'civilised states of Europe' to combine and put an end to the atrocities. The *Liverpool Daily Post* proudly announced that 'through its most distinguished son and free-man, Liverpool has spoken'.¹⁵

The British press was divided over the contents of Gladstone's Liverpool speech. Whereas *The Times* called on 'all sober

politicians to part company with him',¹⁶ the *Morning Post* claimed that Gladstone's words would have 'a salutary effect, both home and abroad'.¹⁷ The international coverage was equally divided, especially in France. The *Éclair* newspaper claimed that Gladstone's speech amounted to a war with 'Britain and France against the rest of Europe',¹⁸ yet *Rappel* claimed that Gladstone's speech showed that 'Great Britain alone defends the cause of humanity'.¹⁹

The prime minister, Lord Salisbury, sympathised with Gladstone's arguments, but he was not prepared to jeopardise peace in Europe; especially after being warned by the Russian monarch, Tsar Nicholas II, that the collapse of the Ottoman Empire would result in instability and possibly a 'European war'.²⁰ He therefore simply ignored the Liverpool intervention. The Liberal Party, however, could not ignore the return of its former leader, and the press contrasted Gladstone's call for action with the inaction of its current leader, Lord Rosebery, who had previously warned against acting on 'impulse'.²¹ The *Daily Chronicle* called Rosebery 'weak', and *The Spectator* accused him of being 'ridiculously inadequate'.²² Rosebery was furious with Gladstone's Liverpool speech and, to the amazement of both his party and the country, he resigned. He also wrote Gladstone a private note stating that:

I will not disguise that you have, by again coming forward and advocating a policy I cannot support, innocently and unconsciously dealt the coup de grace.²³

Although Roy Jenkins has concluded that the Hengler's Circus speech had 'more effect on the internecine warfare within the Liberal Party' than it did on British foreign policy,²⁴ there can be no doubt it was Gladstone's last political act. The atrocities in Armenia ceased the following year and Gladstone died on 19 May 1898. The speech therefore represented one of Liverpool's greatest ever citizens,

conducting his final political act in his home city, and what is more, it was at the behest of the local people. It was a fitting end to a long and glittering career in public life. ■

This article originally appeared in *Liverpool History*, the journal of the Liverpool History Society, and is reprinted with the kind permission of the Society.

- 1 Gladstone's older brother, Robertson, was the Tory mayor of Liverpool in 1842–43, and resided at Court Hey Hall, Roby, which is now the National Wildlife Centre.
- 2 For an account of the political and personal rivalry between Gladstone and Disraeli see Richard Aldous, *The Lion and the Unicorn: Gladstone vs Disraeli* (London, 2006).
- 3 For a comprehensive account of Gladstone's long career see Roy Jenkins, *Gladstone* (London, 1995); Richard Shannon, *Gladstone 1809–1865*, vol. 1 (London, 1982); Richard Shannon, *Gladstone: Heroic Prime Minister 1865–1898*, vol. 2 (London, 1999).
- 4 Cited in A. J. P. Taylor, *British Prime Ministers and Other Essays* (London, 1999), p. 40.
- 5 Taylor, *British Prime Ministers*, p. 36.
- 6 Shannon, *Gladstone: Heroic Prime Minister*, p. 582.
- 7 *Liverpool Daily Courier*, 21 Sep. 1896.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 *Liverpool Daily Post*, 22 Sep. 1896.
- 10 Neil Collins, *Politics and Elections in Nineteenth Century Liverpool* (Aldershot, 2000), p. 200.
- 11 *Liverpool Daily Post*, 25 Sep. 1896.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 *The Times*, 25 Sep. 1896.
- 17 *Morning Post*, 25 Sep. 1896.
- 18 *Eclair*, 25 Sep. 1896.
- 19 *Rappel*, 25 Sep. 1896.
- 20 John Charmley, *Splendid Isolation? Britain and the Balance of Power 1874–1914* (London, 1999), p. 242.
- 21 *The Times*, 14 Sep. 1896.
- 22 Leo McKinstrey, *Rosebery: Statesman in Turmoil* (London, 2005), p. 390.
- 23 Rosebery to Gladstone, 7 October 1896, in Robert Rhodes James, *Rosebery* (London, 1963) pp. 392–393.
- 24 Jenkins, *Gladstone*, p. 628.