

Gladstone's faith

Michael Wheeler, *William Ewart Gladstone: The Heart and Soul of a Statesman* (Oxford University Press, 2025)

Review by Ian Cawood

James Bryce, the historian who served in Gladstone's last cabinet and founded the National Liberal Club, wrote in his biography of the G.O.M. that:

... religious feeling, coupled with a system of firm dogmatic beliefs, was the mainspring of his whole career, a guiding light in perplexities, a source of strength in adverse fortune, a consolation in sorrow, a beacon of hope beyond the disappointments and shortcomings of life.⁵

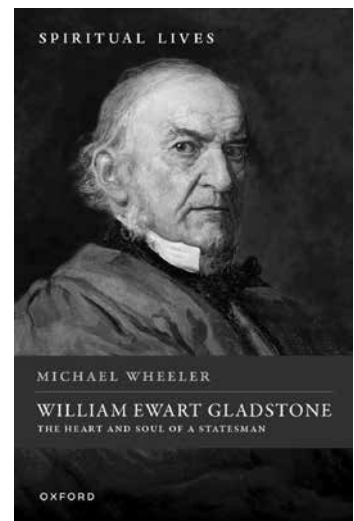
Given that Gladstone's public life, from defending the slave-ownership of his father, through his financial orthodoxy at the Treasury, to passionately pleading for Ireland to be given home rule, is so vast, contradictory and complex, it is perhaps not surprising that his religious beliefs, his spiritual practices and his relationship with organised religion has tended to be interpreted entirely as a means to explain his politics. Even David Bebbington, my illustrious predecessor at the University of Stirling and a far greater expert on Gladstone than myself, subtitled his study of Gladstone's psychology as 'Religion, Homer and Politics' [my emphasis] and made his focus clear in his conclusion that Gladstone's 'style of compassionate

Liberalism was an expression of an incarnational theology.⁶

But Michael Wheeler, a former chair of trustees at the unique Gladstone's Library at Hawarden and visiting professor of English at the University of Southampton, has attempted instead to examine Gladstone's faith as the 'mainspring' of his career, by examining his reading habits, his devotional activities, and his attitude towards the Established Anglican churches of Britain, Christian organisations and the institution of marriage. As a result, he finds Gladstone's denominational faith undergoing as dramatic a transformation as his political identity. Gladstone began at Oxford as a Tory evangelical yet retired from the premiership as a radical High Anglican (even though he eschewed party labels in both his politics and religion, as Wheeler points out). Wheeler structures his text in eight chapters – each covering a decade of Gladstone's adult life. As he confesses, Wheeler has had to be 'selective, sometimes moving swiftly over a number of years in order to focus upon periods of crisis or significant development.' This can be frustrating, as crucial moments in Gladstone's life, such as his profound emotional shock at rejection by both the Commons

and the country in 1886 (both 'the classes' and 'the masses'), barely feature at all. But Wheeler's exploration of incidents such as Gladstone's spiritual crisis of 1851 caused by Henry Manning's conversion to Roman Catholicism and his rejection of rationalist unbelief on the basis of the social and cultural harm it would do to Britain are both mapped out with precision and exemplary clarity.

The depth of Wheeler's research is impeccable: alongside Gladstone's famous diaries, he has consulted the vast family correspondence held at Hawarden as well as the 750 volumes of manuscripts await the unwary scholar at the British Library under the innocuous catalogue entry: 'Add MS 44086-44835'. As he points out, the subject matter of the



overwhelming majority of this archival material is religious, not political, as were the books which Gladstone donated (in a wheelbarrow) to the putative and unique prime ministerial library opposite his family home. Unlike the more ascetic Bebbington, Wheeler is prepared to tackle the subject which fascinates so many in our prurient age – Gladstone’s rescue work with prostitutes. Wheeler takes the view that Gladstone was guilty of ‘adultery in the heart’, particularly in his relationships in 1851 with Elizabeth Collins, in 1859 with Marion Summerhayes, an artist’s model, and from 1869 with Laura Thistlethwayte, a former prostitute who was now working as a lay preacher. Gladstone received a ring from the latter of these women and wore it for the rest of his life. Rather than Homer, Wheeler sees Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* as a crucial influence on Gladstone in this aspect of his life, especially the characters of Lancelot, who failed to uphold chivalric values, and King Arthur, who maintained his self-control. But through his faith (which Thistlethwayte apparently shared) Gladstone was not, as he told his son Stephen shortly before his death, ‘guilty of the act which is known as that of infidelity to the marriage bed’, but he made it clear that this was the full extent of his denial.⁷ This statement has puzzled Gladstone scholars for decades and Wheeler is probably right to ascribe less than noble motives to Gladstone’s obsessive pursuit of certain women.

It has to be said, however, that, after the richness of detail he has uncovered, the conclusion to Wheeler’s book is something of a disappointment. To state that Gladstone was ‘the quintessential Victorian’, owing to ‘the very complexity of his spiritual life’, seems somewhat bathetic, compared to Bebbington’s piercing insight that the combination of classical republicanism and incarnational theology in his world view meant that Gladstone was neither an orthodox Liberal nor an evangelical – rather he was a communitarian with a passionate belief in the potential goodness of every living person.⁸ Nevertheless, the man that Wheeler depicts is, in both the classical and the modern sense, entirely heroic, with an almost superhuman ability to respond to a crisis, either personal, spiritual or political, with renewed vigour and energy – even into his eighties. As the greatest journalist

of the late nineteenth century, W. T. Stead, noted in a review of a collection of cartoons which appeared shortly after Gladstone’s death, ‘the attacks of his opponents acted as a stimulus to his power. Even more than most men, he owed much to the malice of his opponents.’⁹ Gladstone was a man with demons but who sought the company of angels, and it is refreshing to see him fully contextualised within the nineteenth century of religious revival, rather than merely as a prelude to the twentieth century’s social upheavals. ■

Dr Ian Cawood is Associate Professor in Modern British Political & Religious History at the University of Stirling. His most recent book is *The Many Lives of Corruption: The Reform of Public Life in Modern Britain, c1750–1950* (Manchester University Press, 2022), co-edited with Tom Crook.

1 Jonathan Parry, *Democracy and Religion: Gladstone and the Liberal Party, 1867–1875* (Cambridge, 1986); *The Rise and Fall of Liberal Government in*

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Liberals and Trade Unions: The General Strike of 1926

One hundred years ago, from 4 to 12 May 1926, the TUC held the General Strike in support of the mineworkers, who were being forced to accept lower wages and work longer hours to maintain their employers' profitability. It was one of the most dramatic peacetime events in twentieth-century Britain, affecting people and communities throughout the country, and remarkable more for its discipline and restraint than for street battles and picketline violence.

The General Strike deepened divisions with the Liberal Party. The party leader, the Earl of Oxford (H.H. Asquith) and the Liberal shadow cabinet were clear that society was obliged to secure victory over the strikers, while Lloyd George blamed the Conservative government for the crisis and demanded further negotiations. Yet the trade unions had once found the Liberal Party a reliable ally.

Join **Anne Perkins** (author of *A Very British Strike 3 May – 12 May 1926*), **Dr Alastair Reid** (Life Fellow, Girton College, Cambridge University) and **Dr David Yates** (Honorary Research Fellow, University of Leicester) to discuss the dispute and its implications for the Liberal Party.

6.00pm, Monday 27 June

Lady Violet Room, National Liberal Club, London SW1A 2HE

Those unable to attend in person will be able to view the meeting via Zoom. Please register for online access via the History Group website (<https://liberalhistory.org.uk/events/>). For those attending in person, there is no need to register.

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- 1 *Victorian Britain* (New Haven; London, 1993); *The Politics of Patriotism: English liberalism, national identity and Europe, 1830–1886* (Cambridge, 2006).
 - 2 Jonathan Parry, *Promised Lands: The British and the Ottoman Middle East* (Princeton and Oxford, 2022). The volume under review includes a full Parry bibliography.
 - 3 Maurice Cowling, *1867: Disraeli, Gladstone and Revolution – The passing of the Second Reform Bill* (Cambridge, 1967); *The Impact of Labour, 1920–1924: The beginning of modern British politics* (Cambridge, 1971); *The Impact of Hitler: British politics and British policy, 1933–1940* (Cambridge, 1975).
 - 4 'Lord Bonkers' Diary', *Liberator*, no. 297, Aug. 2004, p. 24. See also Stuart White, 'Why do the Liberal Democrats oppose the Child Trust Fund?', *Public Policy Research*, 14(1) March–May 2006, pp. 24–30.
 - 5 J. Bryce, *William Ewart Gladstone: His Characteristics as a Man and Statesman* (Century Company, 1898), p. 97.
 - 6 D. Bebbington, *The Mind of Gladstone: Religion, Homer and Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 312.
 - 7 R. Aitken, *The Prime Minister's Son: Stephen Gladstone, Rector of Hawarden* (University of Chester Press, 2012), pp. 194–5.
 - 8 Bebbington, *Mind of Gladstone*, p. 312.
 - 9 W. T. Stead, 'Book of the Month: Mr Gladstone in Contemporary Caricature', *Review of Reviews* (June 1898), p. 616.