

MORLEY'S GLADSTONE : A REAPPRAISAL¹

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MORLEY'S *Life of Gladstone* appeared in 1903, in 2,000 pages filling three stout volumes at 2 guineas the set. It was written as a permanent record of a great man, remarkable even among great men ; but it was written also by a personal friend, used to writing for his own generation—for the men who had known and worshipped (or detested) Gladstone, much as we have known and worshipped or detested Churchill. The book sold almost 100,000 copies before it went out of print in 1942 ; nearly 50,000 copies of shortened editions were sold as well.² Its author earned from it £13,000 ; the Gladstone family earned as much, and spent it on the students' hostel at St. Deiniol's library.³

The life forms one of the principal quarries in which historians of nineteenth-century England delve ; the latest of them has recorded a tribute to it so glowing that it deserves quotation in full :

Of the many biographies of Gladstone, Morley's official three-volume *Life* is still by far the best, especially for these earlier years where the author is writing of a Gladstone whom he did not know personally. Considering that it was published only five years after Gladstone's death, Morley managed to make amazingly good use of the formidable mass of private papers that were then uncatalogued. Time after time the modern researcher in this great collection finds that Morley has been there before him, although by modern standards of scholarship he is sometimes a little cavalier in his use of sources. His basic work, however, is sound, but his artistry surpasses his scholarship. The modern scholar may be envious of the skill with which he effortlessly draws together a wide range of information to be found in the manuscript sources or the deft touch with which he vividly recreates the atmosphere of some forgotten debate. After sixty years this great biography stands up remarkably well, despite the inevitable partiality of its author, and on some topics still leaves little to be said.⁴

Is this reputation well founded ?

¹ A lecture delivered in the John Rylands Library on Wednesday, the 16th of October 1968. The lecturer had, of course, not had the advantage of reading D. A. Hamer's subsequently published life of Morley (Clarendon Press, 1968).

² Private information ; and Sir C. Mallet, *Herbert Gladstone* (1932), p. 165 n.

³ *Ibid.* p. 165.

⁴ J. B. Conacher, *The Aberdeen Coalition* (1968), p. 46 n.

Before we can answer this question, it will be useful to know how Morley came to write the book at all. Margot Asquith, who feared no man, once asked the aged Gladstone who his biographer was to be ; he said he understood there were to be two, Lord Acton and Sir Arthur Godley, but indicated that the matter was quite out of his hands.¹ He had once or twice hinted that the idea of Godley in this role was not unacceptable to him ; but died, on 19 May 1898, without having said anything definite.² Acton's refusal was a foregone conclusion ; but he was consulted by the family at once. They wanted two books about the dead prime minister : a solid, heavy, scholarly, two- or even three-decker *Life and Letters* by a professional historian, for which they proposed initially either Spencer Walpole or Bryce ; and, to be issued much sooner, a character sketch by some close friend, for which they first approached the incomparable Lord Rosebery. Spencer Walpole, on Rosebery's and on Acton's advice, they in the end dropped unasked ; and Bryce refused, as he refused a further offer long afterwards, in 1914.³

And Rosebery at the end of the nineties, racked by insomnia and by lasting anguish for his dead wife, was disinclined for anything. His own relation with Gladstone had been so prickly, so delicate, sometimes so tempestuous, that the task of depicting his political patron might well have daunted him, had he wanted to tackle any task at all. He proposed that Godley (later Lord Kilbracken), long Gladstone's private secretary, should be asked instead. Godley also refused, for a reason that would have delighted Mr. Gladstone : at 51 he was still comparatively young, he had only fifteen years back been made permanent under-secretary of the India Office, and he felt that the public service was entitled to many years yet of his full attention, without the distractions that writing such a life would necessarily entail. He added how glad he would be to assist any biographer of whom he could approve.

¹ Note by Godley of conversation with her on 6 January 1904 (Kilbracken papers).

² Note by Godley, 25 November 1899 (ibid.).

³ James, Viscount Bryce to Herbert, Viscount Gladstone, 17 July 1914 (Lambeth papers).

Meanwhile of course all literary London—not then an empty or a frivolous phrase—rang with the question, who was to write the life of Gladstone; and when Morley, a leading London literary lion, was asked by Herbert Gladstone whether he would write the character sketch, his mind was made up. He soon convinced the family that to ask someone so fully qualified as himself to compose a mere character sketch would hem him in unduly; and secured the prize of an invitation to write the full life, at whatever length he saw fit.¹ “My nearest friends, public and private,” he recorded long afterwards, “men of much experience both in books and in affairs, and well acquainted with the ground to be covered, were unanimous in discouraging. The first sight of the huge mountain of material at Hawarden might well make the stoutest literary heart quail.”²

A few months later E. W. Hamilton’s skilful and revealing monograph³ covered almost exactly the ground the family had intended for the character sketch; Hamilton, like Godley, had spent years in the family as private secretary. The way for Morley was thus open and ready.

In several ways the choice of him was sound. He had not Rosebery’s command of mellifluous English; but he wrote with limpid clarity, and he had one quality Rosebery lacked—the stamina to finish a long book. Any full life of the foremost figure of his age, who had been in public life for over sixty years and had kept a daily journal for his inmost thoughts for over seventy, was bound to be long. Moreover, Morley had known his subject well, even intimately, since the middle eighties. When they first met, at the country house of Lubbock the geologist in 1877, Gladstone confided to his diary, “I cannot help liking Mr. J. Morley”—a remark that Morley had the good taste to quote in part, without saying to whom it referred.⁴ Morley had indeed been—with Rosebery—one of the two last people

¹ This account rests mainly on the reflective correspondence, in the mid-nineteen-twenties, between Gladstone’s surviving executors—his sons Henry and Herbert—about the disposal of their father’s papers (Lambeth MSS.).

² Morley, *Recollections* (1917), ii. 90-91.

³ Published by Murray late in November 1898.

⁴ Gladstone diary, 10 March 1877; Morley, *Gladstone*, ii. 562.

outside the Hawarden household to see Gladstone on his death-bed. He had himself won and lost a seat in parliament; he had twice sat in a Gladstonian cabinet, and had borne the burden and the heat of the Irish secretaryship in Gladstone's last great political struggle, for home rule.

Moreover, he was an eminent man of letters. He had entered parliament late, at forty-four, after—indeed because—he had carved himself out a place of standing as a radical journalist, and because he was the bosom friend of Joseph Chamberlain.¹ He had written much already on literature, political theory, and political biography; notably, the official *Life* of Cobden. He was deep in his life of Cromwell in May 1898, when Gladstone died.

His public reputation was founded, in fact, on the passion of his radical faith and on his persuasive skill in debate—particularly in written debate: he was not an exceptional fencer in the routine cut-and-thrust of the House of Commons.² He had acquired a reputation for being outspoken and straightforward: summed up in the nickname "Honest John". To his close acquaintances, that nickname may have carried undertones of irony.

It is usually said that he wrote his book quite unfettered by conditions of any kind. He had to begin with a strong disclaimer of any family influence on himself: the relatives, he said, "left with the writer an unqualified and undivided responsibility for these pages, and for the use of the material that they entrusted to him".³ There was, though, one restriction, of cardinal import, that the family had laid on him: they told him to make no attempt to survey Gladstone's religious life in any detail. Such a survey would have been as repugnant to Morley as to themselves, for he was a convinced, indeed a deeply pious, atheist: he no more wanted to investigate beliefs with which he could not sympathize, than they wished the religious mainspring of Gladstone's existence to be analysed by an unbeliever.⁴

It was agreed, then, that Morley should—so far as he could—leave religion alone. He detested the subject, and knew that the

¹ Cf. *Fortnightly Review*, mlii. 17 (August 1954); Morley, *Recollections*, i. 160, 163; M. Hurst, *Joseph Chamberlain and Liberal Reunion* (1967), p. 381.

² Cf. *DNB*, 1922-1930, p. 620.

³ Morley, *Gladstone*, i. p. viii.

⁴ Memoranda by Herbert Gladstone, autumn 1925 (Lambeth papers); a source distant in time from the event, but of unimpeachable veracity.

family distrusted any handling he could give it. Yet, though he abhorred it, it fascinated him ; there are several long and complicated chapters in his book, dealing with ecclesiastical controversies which even when he was writing were some of them already half forgotten. Morley tackled such problems with the decision, the firmness, and the detachment of a surgeon : once or twice his abhorrence can be detected through his fascination. He refers for example to " an elaborate article " of Gladstone's in the *Quarterly* about the 1857 divorce bill : " Here he flings himself upon the well-worn texts in the Bible familiar to the readers of *Tetrachordon*,—if, indeed, *Tetrachordon* have any readers,—with a dialectical acuteness and force that only make one wonder the more how a mind so powerful as Mr. Gladstone's could dream that, at that age of the world, men would suffer one of the most far-reaching of all our social problems, whatever be the right or wrong social solution, to be in the slightest degree affected by a Greek word or two of utterly disputable and unfixed significance."¹ But most of these passages were on church politics, not on theology or belief ; on which, in fact, the two of them " never exchanged a word ".²

He found that in his book he sometimes simply could not avoid such subjects, for in Gladstone's day religion and politics were often intertwined. In fact, had there not been many religious subjects to handle in Parliament, Gladstone would never have gone there ; did he not once say, " the pole-star is clear. Reflection shows me that a political position is mainly valuable as instrumental for the good of the Church ; & under this rule every question becomes one of detail only " ?³ Wide fields of speculation open up if we pause to consider what else Gladstone might have been, had he turned his back early on the Treasury bench : another Laud, another John Nicholson or Colin Campbell,⁴ a serious rival to John Stuart Mill in speculation or to Lister in medicine ; but from these fields we too must turn away and return to Morley.

¹ Morley, *Gladstone*, i. 568-9.

² *Ibid.* iii. 471.

³ *Diary*, 16 August 1840 ; quoted in Morley, *Gladstone*, i. 182.

⁴ An analyst of his handwriting, who did not know whose hand it was, remarked : " The writer would have made a good general or admiral—large power over practical detail " (British Museum Add. MS. 44322, fol. 214.)

His method of composition cannot, by today's standards, be described as scholarly: "sometimes a little cavalier in his use of sources", Conacher's phrase, lets down quite lightly a man who could make some forty transcription errors on a single page, right in Conacher's period.¹ No one should ever think of quoting Morley if he can go behind him to his sources. But this is a pedantic point, on which there is no need to linger. Nor need we dwell here on minor points of fact or interpretation on which later and fuller research suggests that Morley was mistaken.

How in fact did he work? Lady Frederick Cavendish lent him the Red House at Hawarden for some months in the summer and autumn of 1899, and he worked there with F. W. Hirst as his research assistant—recommended for the post by H. A. L. Fisher, who refused it. Later, at Elm Park Gardens in Chelsea, Morley had the help of the young William, son of W. T. Stead, his successor as editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette*.² He was glad to get away from Hawarden, where he hated the Octagon, the fireproof annex to Gladstone's study³ where about a quarter of a million documents were kept, roughly arranged by the secretaries in categories and bundles.

The task of preparing the *Life* on the spot, at first virtually in the widow's presence—Mrs. Gladstone died in June 1900—must have had its complexities. Herbert Gladstone was, like Morley himself, much busied with current politics—he became Liberal chief whip in April 1899; Henry was often preoccupied with India business; and Stephen was a busy parish priest. But their sister Mary, who had revelled in secretarial work for their father (she specialized in ecclesiastical appointments),⁴ was the wife of Harry Drew, formerly the curate at Hawarden, then vicar of Buckley, hard by; fending her off politely must have tried her beautiful manners as well as Morley's.

When he was in London, as of course he often had to be, he could consult with former colleagues and enemies of his subject;

¹ Morley, *Gladstone*, i. 492, mistranscribing B.M. Add. MS. 44778, fols. 167-174, on the origins of the Crimean war.

² Morley, *Recollections*, ii. 91.

³ F. W. Hirst, *In the Golden Days* (1947), p. 179 n.

⁴ Cf. B.M. Add. MS. 44826.

but in fact, in a metaphor he would hardly have approved, he seems to have played with his cards fairly close to his chest. He did get in touch at once with Godley, who recorded at length his opinion of their relation, in terms that reflect his own straightforwardness and make Morley look rather odd.¹ They had two long opening talks together, in which Godley was able to display his closer intimacy with Gladstone's personality, based on years of residence alongside the Gladstone family in Downing Street² and at Hawarden, and on common religious interests. Morley in fact found the degree and kind of contact with his dead hero that Godley could offer him uncomfortably close, and sheered off: for over three years, Godley heard not a word from him.

Pursued by goodness knows what private daemons, Morley fell deep into a book of his own; complaining, rightly, of the "solitude" of authorship on such a theme.³ Anybody who has had to grapple with a great subject in print—a subject so great that he feels it already almost, or perhaps entirely, slipping out of his grasp—will have fellow-feeling for other unfortunate authors in the same predicament. Morley's private view of who Mr. Gladstone had been came to possess his imagination with such power that he could not bear to encounter views that contradicted his own.

When the book got into proof, he sent about half of it to Godley, with whom he had much correspondence; but to whom he could only once bear to talk at length. When they ran into each other accidentally in Pall Mall in the summer of 1902, Morley sustained a few minutes' conversation on the coronation decorations, and walked on. Godley may have felt justified in his comment to Hamilton back in the summer of 1898: "To choose J. Morley to write Mr. G's life is, in my opinion, very much like choosing a man who has been blind from his birth, but is a clever writer, to do the biography of Millais or Burne Jones."⁴

¹ Memorandum by Godley, 22 November 1903 (Kilbracken papers); cf. Kilbracken, *Reminiscences* (1931), pp. 227-8.

² Cf. *ibid.* pp. 91-3.

³ Morley, *Recollections*, ii. 91.

⁴ Godley to Hamilton, 22 August 1898, confidential (B.M. Add. MS. 48616, bundle 8).

Undoubtedly Godley's reason for this severe analogy was religious. He knew that religious thoughts and religious hopes had ruled all Gladstone's life, and had counted for far more in it than any of the impostors of political triumph or disaster. Politics for Gladstone were superficial; Christian belief was fundamental. For Morley, politics were important, if not all-important; and no belief but unbelief was acceptable at all.

No God, no Gladstone: in that short phrase the matter is summed up. Morley's Gladstone, on whom we have centred for three generations our image of late nineteenth-century politics, may in fact be a literary device, and not the true portrait it has been taken to be. Morley was anxious not to offend good Christians by a display of unctiousness in religious matters which they were bound to feel insincere, as it came from a notorious unbeliever, who liked to write god with a small g. So he tried to turn his readers' attention towards politics, depicting Gladstone as a primarily political character. Of course Gladstone took a prominent part in politics; in Parliament, as Tory, Peelite, Liberal-Conservative, and Liberal, for over sixty years; a member of nine cabinets, and first minister of four of them; by the nineties, a sort of national oracle, to whom people would write on the most diverse subjects, as nowadays they write to *The Guardian* or *The Times*. As Morley put it himself, unveiling that characteristic statue round the corner in Albert Square, "he sailed on a full floodtide of popularity in this country that, I feel pretty sure, has never been equalled in depth, duration and intensity by any of the most conspicuous leaders of either party"¹ He had been *a*, and could have been *the*, leading figure among the mid-century Conservatives; he was *the* leading Liberal of the seventies and early eighties, had the Liberal Party break beneath him in the home rule crisis of 1885-6, and lived to re-form it in his own eighties, for the second vain assault on the bastion of unionist hatred of home rule.

These assaults were noble enough in intent to inspire Lawrence Hammond to compose *Gladstone and the Irish Nation*, which Warden Sumner once described as "one of the dozen best

¹ John Morley in Manchester Town Hall, 23 October 1901.

history books ever written ”;¹ a book which, for all its wealth of political detail, no one would describe as a political history.

Gladstone was only thrown into politics by filial obedience and by chance : this was the profession in which he passed his life, but not where his heart lay. His father would not let him follow his vocation and take orders. Christ Church invited him to stay up and teach ; he did not want to. A young nobleman who was up with him, son of the borough-mongering Duke of Newcastle, persuaded the duke to give the fascinating and forceful young Gladstone a seat in Parliament. John Gladstone approved. Gladstone took strictly the rules about honouring thy father and thy mother;² he entered the Commons because the chance was there and his father told him to take it. Once there, he continued to act as the servant of Christ crucified and resurrected : all his parliamentary and all his personal life were devoted to the service of the Anglican Church, as he envisaged it.

Morley saw, but dared not cite, the introspections in Gladstone’s diary, in which the diarist, having set himself an impossibly high standard, steadily bemoans himself as the chief of sinners because he falls so far below it. Undoubtedly the chief influence that made him set his standard so high was his elder sister Anne, who died when he was an undergraduate of nineteen. Morley, like Magnus, gives her four lines³; her enormous influence on her brother, who was also her godson, deserved more. But Morley may have felt he would do better to leave both sisters out ; Helen the younger was, as we know from Magnus,⁴ a drug addict and long a source of grief and trouble to her family. But this is no place to discuss such private embarrassments.

It should by now be clear that Morley either misapprehended, or misdescribed, the principal purpose of Gladstone’s life. It is no proper defence for Morley that he did, in a number of passages,⁵ refer to the overwhelming interest for his subject of forwarding the purposes of the Christian revelation. The revelation had not been received by Morley ; he did not believe

¹ In conversation with the present writer, 4 October 1947. ² *Exodus*, xx. 12.

³ Morley, *Gladstone*, i. 17 n. and 160-1 ; Sir Philip Magnus, *Gladstone* (1954), p. 7.

⁴ Magnus, pp. 59, 74-5, etc.

⁵ E.g. i. 152-9, 183, 201, 204; ii. 590; iii. 462.

in it; and the whole tone, temper, and structure of his book draw the reader's attention away from this central, indispensable point. Beside this fault, all others pale.

I must take Morley's advice to a fellow journalist, "Be sure to select salient points only, and not to attempt to exhaust the matter"¹; but the main architecture of his book is important enough to deserve a word of comment. The last third of it covers the last twelve years of Gladstone's political life, that followed on the disaster in the Phoenix Park in May 1882 when Lord Frederick Cavendish, his nephew by marriage and almost a fifth son to him, was deliberately murdered.² In this closing volume we get a great deal of the Gladstone Morley knew best, and a lot of useful detail on the Anglo-Irish politics which were Morley's chief concern at the time. This is an unavoidable result of history by participants. But proportionately much more attention to the tremendous Gladstone of the fifties and sixties, before age had worn and Cavendish's death had crippled him, would nowadays be welcome material for historians.

And even in depicting Gladstone, in a slanted perspective, as a figure mainly involved in and preoccupied with politics, Morley did not get his slant quite right: for he misappreciated Gladstone's political as well as his religious character. This was not really avoidable in the political context in which Morley wrote. When Gladstone had last, in 1846, sat in a purely Tory cabinet, Morley was a child of seven; by the time the younger man was taking a personal and informed interest in politics, the surface liberalism of the older was apparent; and Morley's own Cabinet experience had all been in Whig-radical coalitions that bore the name of Liberal. He was himself, at the time he wrote this *Life*, a strong though not currently a public candidate for the succession to the Liberal leadership; he was a prominent member of what would be called today the shadow Cabinet, with the certainty (if he lived) of high office in the next Liberal government, in which in fact he was a Secretary of State. He made the best speech of his life, denouncing the impending imperialist

¹ J. W. Robertson Scott, *Life and Death of a Newspaper* (1952), p. 21.

² Tom Corfe, *The Phoenix Park murders* (1967), shows that Cavendish's death was intended, and not the accident it is usually held to have been.

war in South Africa—that speech which rang with a chorus of “it will be wrong”—here in Manchester in September 1899, coming over from Hawarden to do so. Though consciously writing for eternity, he was also consciously and conscientiously writing for the British Liberal Party of the early twentieth century. He was in party duty bound to hush up the strong vein of Canningite toryism that ran through Gladstone’s life, and caused Balfour to remark in 1896 that his host at Hawarden “is, and always was, in everything except essentials, a tremendous old Tory”.¹

Much of Gladstone’s toryism showed itself in domesticities, such as his old-world courtesy at table or his detestation of the telephone; but often it spread over into politics as well. As witness, for a detail, his reluctance to promote Joseph Chamberlain to the cabinet *per saltum*, before that heretical Birmingham magnate had held any other government office at all; or, for a broader example, his whole policy of Irish home rule, which represented a constitutional and decorous and conservative solution of the Anglo-Irish difficulty. Offer the Scottish or Welsh nationalist of today as little real independence as was offered by either of Gladstone’s home rule bills to Ireland, and he or she will brand you as reactionary. And look where pursuit of the unionist ideal has led Ireland, or at any rate 26/32nds of it: into a wholly independent republic, cut off from the united kingdom of 1801 by methods (and, it is fair to add, in reply to methods) Gladstone would have abhorred. Morley could not, of course, appreciate the conservative nature of a cause for which he had fought, long and bitterly, as a radical liberal in the teeth of conservative opposition. And his share in that fight must have helped to blind him to his hero’s conservatism.

There was another aspect of Gladstone’s life about which Morley must have known a good deal, but of which even he dared to say very little. I refer of course to Gladstone’s long continued efforts to rescue prostitutes from the streets of London: how long, and how full of effort, and how much or how little attended with success, we shall see when the full Gladstone diary in due course appears. One cannot theorize ahead of one’s

¹ A. J. Balfour, *Chapters of Autobiography* (1930), p. 76.

data ; moreover those in charge of the Gladstone diary have laid down that none of it is to be quoted out of context. So one or two things only can be said at this stage.

When Morley remarked to Hirst that he "wonders whether Mr. G. will seem greater or less when all is unfolded",¹ he probably had this rescue work in mind ; probably also he had not yet probed it, and may never have had a chance to do so. All Gladstone's close friends knew of this work, in which his wife was his principal helper. They could all see how ingenuous, how imprudent, how generous-hearted it was ; and it is a tribute to the magnanimity of late-nineteenth-century politicians that hardly any attempts were made to discredit Gladstone publicly by mobilizing against him that bitter, narrow, puritanically conformist "nonconformist vote" that ruined Dilke and was fatal to Parnell. Morley wore a double gag over this whole delicate business. He lived in a society in which prostitutes, though universally accepted as a social necessity, were, also almost universally, held unmentionable. And Morley himself had lived for many years with another man's wife, in a strictly honourable but socially inadmissible *ménage*. Lady Morley, as she eventually became after her first husband's death and John Morley's advancement to a viscountcy, was never received, or at least never went out, in society ; and bore moreover on her face that *ravaged* look of one who has suffered greatly.² In the social context of his day, Morley therefore felt himself necessarily silenced, beyond a couple of embarrassed hints which he never made opportunity to expound,³ about the oddest and to a post-Freudian age the most fascinating of Gladstone's major preoccupations.

A myriad of intriguing questions here arise, which we have not yet got the evidence to discuss.

Now it will be clear to those who have followed the argument so far that there are reasons for holding that Morley's *Life of Gladstone* is in some ways at least unsatisfactory. So are all the other lives of him, for divers reasons : written without adequate

¹ On 8 September 1899 (Hirst, *Golden Days*, p. 180).

² Robertson Scott, *Life and Death of a Newspaper*, pp. 54-56.

³ Morley, *Gladstone*, i. 99-100 ; iii. 419.

sources, sometimes just copying from each other ; written from too laudatory or too hostile an angle ; written too near his time to be frank, written too far from it to understand it ; too long ; too short ; too dull. Among them all—and there are already about thirty—only two are any real good, Magnus's and Morley's. And of these two, Morley's is by some way the better.

And there is more to be said of Morley's *Life* than that it is the best of a bad—or at least of an inadequate—lot. Morley had moral as well as literary qualities that fitted him excellently to deal with Gladstone. When, just now, he was called a pious atheist, the adjective was used advisedly. Morley was much concerned with morals and behaviour. He was sure that life had a meaning, even if he did not know what it was ; that men lay under various stern dictates of duty, to reason and to justice and to goodness, though he did not know who or what had dictated them. This made him a good biographer of the man whom he quoted on the last page of his own text¹ as having said : “ Be inspired with the belief that life is a great and noble calling ; not a mean and grovelling thing, that we are to shuffle through as we can, but an elevated and lofty destiny.”

¹ Ibid. iii. 552.