

## Gladstone: God and Politics

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Colin Barr

After two substantial volumes of biography, and numerous shorter and related studies, Richard Shannon has again returned to the life of William Ewart Gladstone. This new work is not apparently intended as a simple distillation of his *Gladstone: Peel's Inheritor* (1982) and *Gladstone: Heroic Minister* (1999). Rather, *Gladstone: God and Politics* claims a different purpose. Historians did not, it seems, read Professor Shannon's earlier volumes closely enough. They were defeated by his admittedly 'too dense' style (p. xxiv), deceived by the emphasis on content, not contention. John Morley remained unvanquished; Colin Matthew and Roy Jenkins unconverted. Professor Shannon has again been compelled to bring light to the darkness. His arguments, he tells us, have been more sharply focused. Contention has been brought to the fore.

A new 550 page study of a subject to whom the author has already devoted some 1,400 pages requires justification beyond clarification and elucidation of the earlier work, not least because of the new volume's hefty £80 (hardback) price. What of those who have read Professor Shannon's earlier works? Is *God and Politics* value for money? General readers are the avowed audience, but it is likely to be practicing historians and their students who will find their way through this lengthy, densely researched, fascinating, and deeply frustrating volume. The former group – and hopefully some of the latter – will of course have read the earlier books. They will find little new to justify the commitment of either time or treasure. This is not to say that *God and Politics* is unimportant or should be ignored: quite the contrary. Its portrait of Gladstone commands attention and respect, although not necessarily consent. But those who have read *Peel's Inheritor* and *Heroic Minister* will, with one or two exceptions, find little new in the present volume.

There is, however, not a little that is old, including some of the words. Professor Shannon often simply recycles. Compare, for example, the following passages:

This curious vision of the Most High attending to the state of Gladstone's vocal chords and to the microclimate of the West Midlands for the ulterior benefit of the cause of Irish Home rule is a striking specimen of the sheer cosmic faith in his assignment which sustained and energized Gladstone.[\(1\)](#)

This vision of the most High attending to the state of Gladstone's vocal chords and to the microclimate of the West Midlands for the ulterior benefit of the cause of Irish Home Rule, with reference to the sanctified question of the East, is a striking illustration of the sheer cosmic faith in his assignment from on High that sustained and energized Gladstone (p. 405).

The first passage was picked out and criticised by E. F. Biagini in his *Reviews in History* review of *Heroic Minister*. Perhaps its re-appearance was more defiance than inertia. The same cannot be said of other instances of the pervasive recycling that disfigures *God and Politics*. Take another – paragraph length – example, chosen at random:

Was this [the cabinet's refusal to dissolve parliament in 1894] the great refusal of Liberalism? Was a golden opportunity let slip to retrieve the party's situation after the defeat of the second Home Rule Bill? Gladstone ever after, rather naturally, insisted so. A brilliant insight had come upon him, comparable, in his view, to his insight in August 1876 on the 'virtuous passion' of the masses about the question of the East. Indeed, Gladstone would go further. His insight in 1894 was not, as was the case in 1876, simply a discernment that public opinion had risen to a certain height needful for a given work. It was something much more profound, to be ranked along with his insights as to the 1853 budget, the Irish Church question in 1868, and Home Rule for Ireland. For Gladstone the 'desire for a dissolution of Parliament in the beginning of 1894, and the immediate determination of the issue then raised between the two Houses of Parliament' was elevated into the fourth of the series of supreme moments of political juncture, in his career, when his providentially inspired appreciation of the general situation and its result and his insight into the facts of particular eras generated in his mind a conviction that the materials existed for forming a public opinion and directing it to a particular end. For Gladstone it was a play for very high stakes indeed.[\(2\)](#)

Was this [the cabinet's refusal to dissolve parliament in 1894] the Great Refusal of Liberalism? Was a golden opportunity let slip to retrieve the party's fortunes after the failure of the second Home Rule Bill? Gladstone ever after, rather naturally, insisted so. A brilliant insight had come upon him, comparable, in his view, to his insight in August 1876 into the 'virtuous passion' of the masses about the question of the East. Indeed, Gladstone would go further. His insight in 1894 was not, as was the case in 1876, simply a discernment that public opinion had risen to a certain height needful for a given work. It was something much more profound, to be ranked along with his insights as to the 1853 budget, the Irish Church question in 1868, and Home Rule for Ireland in 1886. For Gladstone the 'desire for a dissolution of Parliament in the beginning of 1894, and the immediate determination of the issue then raised between the two Houses of Parliament' was elevated into the fourth of the series of supreme moments of political juncture in his career, when his providentially inspired appreciation of the general situation and its result,

and his insight into the facts of particular eras, generated in his mind a conviction that the materials existed for forming a public opinion and directing it to a particular end (p. 458).

Professor Shannon is concerned to differentiate his account of Gladstone from those of his competitors, old and new. Morley comes in for an inevitable bashing: for his omissions, for his distortions, for his lack of attention to the legacy of Peel, and thus to Gladstone as an ‘authoritarian exponent of executive prerogative’ (p. xv), for his image of Gladstone as political pilgrim, for failing to understand the damage Gladstone did to his own party, and to Ireland, and finally for his failure to comprehend (as a secularist) and grapple with (under orders) Gladstone’s sense of being God’s chosen instrument in the fallen world of politics. Morley’s unforgivably successful and sunlit portrait of the Grand Old Man has remained, Professor Shannon tells us, the ‘*fons et origo* of what must be called the standard or orthodox tradition’ (p. xiii) of Gladstone’s historical image.

Little has changed since: Matthew and Jenkins ‘stand formidably in the tradition inherited from Morley’ (p. xx). Matthew is praised for his ‘classic powers’, and for much of his reading of Gladstone, which earns the ‘reader’s entire confidence.’ But the compliment is quickly qualified: ‘The very impeccable worthiness of Professor Matthew’s text in such matters [such as his account of the Oxford mind and the Treasury mind] seems indeed to convey a corresponding impeccable worthiness on the part of its subject’ (p. xx). This will not do: Gladstone’s flaws and failures (the ‘marks of the beast’, p. xx) found little place in Matthew’s work. As for Jenkins, his study was marked by ‘winning readability’ (p. xx), but otherwise followed Matthew – a fair but hardly novel observation. Both men’s Gladstone was marked by their own ‘liberal-left political persuasion’ (p. xx) – ‘a version of Gladstone as prophet and forerunner not only of New Liberalism but of New Labour also’ (p. xxii). And the flaws run deeper than that: Jenkins displays ‘a certain shallowness of understanding’ (p. xxiii); Matthew is guilty of ‘muddled thinking’ (p. xxi) and ignorance: his apparent misunderstanding of the Home Rule precedents (principally Sweden-Norway) was ‘bizarre’, so much so that ‘one’s confidence in Professor Matthew’s historical judgment is decidedly dented’ (p. xxiv).

In the introduction there is an unpleasant sense of settling scores in a graveyard. Not everything is about the past, however. Scottish devolution comes in for a bashing, although as usual it is Gladstone who takes the blow. But this too is old ground, albeit not *Heroic Minister*. Compare the following passages:

Gladstone’s proposals of 1886 still hold the field’, Professor Matthew reminds us, ‘as the means of constitutional reorganisation of the United Kingdom.’ Indeed, and alas, they do: as the present embarrassments of the current ‘party of progress’ on the ‘West Lothian’ issue testify.<sup>(3)</sup>

However:

‘Gladstone’s proposals still hold the field’, he [Matthew] insisted in 1995, ‘as the means of constitutional reorganisation of the United Kingdom.’ Indeed, and alas, Gladstone’s proposals do still hold the field, as the embarrassments of the present ‘party of progress’ on the ‘West Lothian’ issue testify (p. xxiv).

Professor Shannon is concerned to portray the Gladstone ‘beast’ (a favourite description) not as ‘domesticated’ (Jenkins), or ‘decently concealed’ (Matthew), but as the untamed animal he was: a religious fanatic let loose on an unsuspecting party with disastrous consequences for it, and for the United Kingdom. To that end, he recalls from ‘historical limbo’ various ‘witnesses’ – usually Whiggish, invariably hostile – ‘in the Gladstone case’ (p. xviii). The legal imagery is instructive, and in Professor Shannon’s court there is no right against self-incrimination: the chief witness for the prosecution is Gladstone himself. But as a Victorian Christian of evangelical background, Gladstone’s critical introspection must be as suspect as another politician’s self-praise. To continue Professor’s Shannon’s legal metaphor, letting Gladstone speak

for himself may not quite be suborning perjury, but neither is it the best method of historical adjudication. Nor is the judge impartial; as Agatha Ramm noted of *Peel's Inheritor*, 'one is tempted to say that by the end he [Shannon] has come to dislike the diarist as much as the diarist seems to dislike himself'.<sup>(4)</sup>

This is a difficult book to review: nearly everything has been said before because, well, nearly everything has been said before. Professor Shannon clearly does not like his subject, but Ramm, Walter Arnstein and others noted that long ago <sup>(5)</sup>; in 2001, Bruce Kinzer wondered how Shannon could bear even to complete *Heroic Minister*.<sup>(6)</sup> Affection is no requirement for biography – how else studies of Hitler or Stalin? – but Professor Shannon's visceral distaste for his subject permeates and disfigures the text. At least some of the sneers earlier critics noted have gone: the 'With his first budget he launched his myth as the keeper of the Victorian financial conscience' <sup>(7)</sup> criticised by Arnstein, has become 'With his first budget Gladstone had launched his reputation as the keeper of the Victorian financial conscience' (p. 88). Still, Gladstone does not speak to crowds, he 'harangues' them (e.g. p. 309), or makes a 'manipulative foray among the populace' (p. 163); he does not hold an incorrect or impractical view of Irish Home Rule, but suffers from 'delusions' (p. 409); he is not stubborn, nor committed, nor even blinkered, but is rather possessed of a 'God-driven style of vanity' (p. 398), a 'God-driven obstinacy' and 'God-driven stubbornness' (p. 352); he is not simply self-confident, but 'imbued manically with overweening-self confidence' (p. xxv), and so on. Even domestic tragedy is turned to sinister account: George Lyttleton's suicide is termed (probably correctly) an 'inescapable finding'. 'But then the Guardian Life Assurance people took an interest. Then Gladstone, after inspecting the fatal site, persuaded himself after all that it was an accident' (p. 273). The reader is left to draw the obvious conclusion – but surely a Christian horror of suicide is more plausible an explanation than the implicit suggestion of greed? What praise there is, is tempered. Gladstone's proposals to end the Crimean War by offering reasonable terms to Russia are described as 'golden words of wisdom, extraordinarily perspicacious.' But, of course, 'Their effect was spoiled by a note of dogmatic zealotry' (p. 101).

Professor Shannon does his own case a disservice. It is one thing to provide a more nuanced, critical portrait than Morley, Jenkins, or even Matthew; this is reasonable and perhaps desirable. The neutral reader, however, is more likely to react against Shannon's invective than be convinced by it. Professor Shannon is in the same position as Lord Clarendon thought the Liberal Party of the mid-1860s was: there seems 'a determination to distrust him [Gladstone], and to find fault with whatever he does or does not do' (quoted on p. 210). It is the unexpected achievement of *God and Politics* to turn Gladstone into a victim who commands our sympathy. It is difficult to believe that this was the author's intention.

Despite the promise of its title, suggestive of relatively recent biographical re-evaluations such as Roland Sarti's *Mazzini: A Life for the Religion of Politics* (1997), *God and Politics* is very much a traditional political biography. The subject is high politics, considered chronologically and in great detail. When the deity appears, it is in passing: a remark about Gladstone's sense of vocation, or a sneer at his taste for theological reflection (e.g. p. 173). Bishop Butler is mentioned occasionally, receiving some four entries in the index to Laura Thistlethwayte's seven, but neither the bishop's thought nor his acolyte's understanding of it are examined in detail; Gladstone's late work on Butler's *Analogy* receives only passing mention, although Leslie Stephens' hostile review earns a favourable paragraph (p. 470). This is all perfectly defensible, but it is not placing religion at the centre of an account of Gladstone's life. In short, in *God and Politics* there is rather a lot of politics, but not so much of God.

This is unfortunate, because Professor Shannon is absolutely correct about the centrality of faith to Gladstone's character and political behaviour. He is also right that Morley's biography did not, and perhaps could not, fully reflect that. It is difficult enough to understand Gladstone, but utterly impossible without a close attention to his religion. Shannon carefully points out Gladstone's own sense of special election, of providence, and of vocation. But this is not sufficient: it is not enough to simply state that Gladstone thought he was in some peculiar way God's agent on earth. Different Victorians understood God differently. What was Gladstone's understanding? What was the content of his 'doctrinal conservatism' (p. 181)? How did it develop, and with what consequences? What did he mean by vocation? By providence? Why did he revere Butler, or enjoy talking about hell? There is something odd about Professor Shannon's emphasis on

Gladstone's religion, as it appears only to account for Gladstone's otherwise inexplicable fanaticism; he makes no effort to understand it, nor does he seem to recognise that it was by no means unique unto the Grand Old Man (GOM). Religion is not so much an interpretive tool for Professor Shannon as a stick with which to beat Gladstone. (This animus leads him astray in other areas: the assertion that in the early 1870s the 'Nonconformists, being unable to dominate religious provision in schools, wanted religion kept out of schools' (p. 228) is a gross distortion.) It is not of course necessary that Professor Shannon share – or even sympathise with – Gladstone's faith. But it is necessary that he understand it. For that, curiosity seems the necessary first step. Even Lord Hartington – whom Professor Shannon admires – reputedly took the trouble to ask his private secretary what transubstantiation was.

A number of historians, including Agatha Ramm, Boyd Hilton, E. F. Biagini, and David Bebbington (and even Colin Matthew) have been more inquisitive, with striking results. Bebbington's *The Mind of Gladstone: Religion, Home, and Politics* (Oxford, 2004) in particular demonstrated the extraordinary fruitfulness of such an approach. He struck out beyond the Diaries and political correspondence that are Shannon's métier and revealed an almost entirely new Gladstone. Above all, he takes his subject's faith seriously, and interrogates its content in light of the GOM's political behaviour. For example, Bebbington argues that Gladstone's increasing emphasis on the Incarnation informed (and explains) much of his apparent political journey by modifying his understanding of human nature and human dignity. Professor Shannon, of course, is free to disagree with this interpretation. Instead, he ignores it completely. In the select bibliography, Bebbington's book is relegated to the section on 'Literary and Intellectual Interests'; it appears not to have been cited even once in *God and Politics's* some 1,700 endnotes. There was time: *The Mind of Gladstone* appeared in 2004, and Professor Shannon has certainly been kept abreast of current scholarship. In the preface, he regrets that his attention was drawn too late to Jenny West's (not 'Jean' as Shannon gives it) article on the Gladstone-Laura Thistlethwayte relationship to include its findings in the present book. No doubt West's attack on one aspect of what she calls the continuing 'protection of Gladstone's reputation' by the likes of Colin Matthew was congenial.<sup>(8)</sup> Perhaps it is just Bebbington that Professor Shannon objects to: his *William Ewart Gladstone: Faith and Politics in Victorian Britain* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1993) does not even qualify for the select bibliography, despite the fact that Professor Shannon reviewed it.<sup>(9)</sup>

In *God and Politics*, Professor Shannon seems no more interested in popular Liberalism than he was in *Heroic Minister*. The oddly inert and easily manipulated party out of doors is largely portrayed as a kind of drug to which Gladstone became increasingly addicted. There is some truth to this, and attention is correctly drawn to more than one condescending or illiberal remark about the people. But Gladstone was more than simply a demagogue (although he could be that, too): he had a genuine and enduring connection based on more than oratory with a large and enthusiastic section of the population. As E. F. Biagini has at different times pointed out, issues as diverse as retrenchment and Home Rule bound popular Liberalism to the 'People's William'. This is important, because it is one of Professor Shannon's central arguments that 'the Liberal Gladstone was never a Gladstonian Liberal' (p. xiii). His point is that Gladstone never really fit in his own party (or the Reform Club), hardly ever consulted it, and had little loyalty to it. When the interests of the party clashed with his own sense of what was right, the party came off second best. This was partly an inheritance from Peel's executive style, partly the result of the GOM's direct line to the Almighty. This is indeed a tempting argument: it certainly helps explain Gladstone's maddening behaviour from 1874–8, and after 1886. It is also true that Gladstone at times sought to use elections as a way of chastising elements of his own party.

But Professor Shannon's view of that party is very much the view from Westminster. If Gladstone was such a poor Liberal, how could he lead the party without serious rival for so many years? If the Liberal Party was co-extensive with the parliamentary party it is hard to see how he could without manipulation on a heroic scale on the one hand and supine malleability on the other. In fact, the Liberals were an unstable coalition, incorporating Nonconformist artisans as much as often anti-clerical parliamentary Whigs; Irish Catholics in uncomfortable alliance with Scots ultra-Protestants. Gladstone's political genius was that he was able to command the loyalty of a larger portion of this coalition than any of his potential successors. That much of that support was found out of doors did nothing to diminish its power. If Gladstone could not offer the party

perfect unity except in special circumstances, he could still regularly provide the closest thing to it; Hartington might indeed have better suited the parliamentary party, but both he and it knew that he would quickly become a general with few troops. Gladstone was more of a Liberal (and more of a politician at the sub-heroic level) than Professor Shannon seems to allow; certainly this is more likely than that the Liberal Party was so stupid – or so weak – as to harbour a cuckoo in its nest for nearly 30 years.

Both the introduction and the book itself conclude with what must be Professor Shannon's most striking claim: the tragedy of Gladstone's Home Rule plan was not that its failure fatally alienated Ireland, but rather that his stubborn, God-driven unwillingness to accept something less proved a catastrophe to both the Liberal Party and to Ireland itself. This is an interesting and challenging argument. Shannon points out that from 1881 Gladstone determinedly and apparently perversely frustrated nearly every measure of Irish reform that had a chance of pacifying the island, not least tenant purchase. (Although Gladstone insisted in the face of Whig opposition that franchise reform be extended on an equal basis to Ireland.) By offering such generous terms, he made it impossible for the Irish to settle for anything less. This is important, because to Professor Shannon Home Rule – at least as Gladstone envisioned it – was simply impossible: the party was not ready for it, and did not want it; the vexed problem of representation (West Lothian *avant la lettre*) was left unresolved, and was perhaps irresolvable; and there was anyway no chance that it would pass the House of Lords. Worse, Gladstone was unprepared to accept anything less than the text of his own bill, thus making compromise impossible. He wrecked his party and lost Ireland for nothing. But how accurate is this? Certainly the Liberal Party lost some elections, but it won a famous victory in 1906 with Home Rule still on its agenda. And much of popular Liberalism was and remained emphatic in support of Irish self-determination. As for Ireland, would local government in the 1880s really have prevented 1916 or partition? The ambitions of Irish nationalism were not artificially inflamed by an over-generous Gladstone. Still, the argument has some merit: perhaps incremental reform would have reached a better solution in a more placid climate. Perhaps by being kind to Ireland Gladstone was really being cruel. Perhaps. But as Professor Shannon admits, such speculations are necessarily counter-factual.

Professor Shannon's previous portraits of Gladstone have been seen in some quarters as quintessentially Tory. The pervasive hostility makes this plausible, but not quite right. Rather, he seems to be in the same position as were the Whiggish sectors of the parliamentary Liberal Party. They were perplexed by Gladstone, whom they did not much like, and embarrassed by his piety, which they did not understand. Yet they found to their frustration that they could not manage without him. What Richard Shannon has again written is not a Tory history, but rather a Whig interpretation of Liberal history in general and William Ewart Gladstone in particular.

The Publisher has asked Reviews in History to draw to the attention of readers that since this review was written a paperback version costing £25 has been published.

## Notes

1. R. Shannon, *Gladstone: Heroic Minister 1865–98* (London, 1999) p. 478.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Shannon, *Gladstone: Heroic Minister*, p. 559.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. R. Shannon, 'Matthew's Gladstone', *Parliamentary History*, 15 (1996) 250.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. A. Ramm, review of R. Shannon, *Gladstone: Peel's Inheritor 1809–65* (London, 1982) in *The English Historical Review*, 99 (1984), 838.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. W. Arnstein, review of Shannon, *Gladstone: Peel's Inheritor* in *The Journal of Modern History*, 57 (1985) 730-732.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. B. Kinzer, review of Shannon, *Gladstone: Heroic Minister 1865–98* in *Victorian Studies*, 43 (2001) 541–3.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Shannon, *Gladstone: Peel's Inheritor 1809–65* (London, 1999) p. 272.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. J. West, 'Gladstone and Laura Thistlethwayte, 1865-75', *Historical Research*, 80 (2007), 368–92, 392.[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. R. Shannon, review of D. Bebbington *William Ewart Gladstone: Faith and Politics in Victorian Britain*

(Grand Rapids, MI, 1993) in *The English Historical Review*, 111 (1996), 765–6.[Back to \(9\)](#)

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