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Reading Gladstone

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Frank Turner

The line of modern British Prime Ministers is remarkable for the numerous authors included in its number. Lord Grey wrote a volume on the causes of the French Revolution. Disraeli produced a shelf of novels. Balfour contributed volumes of philosophy. Churchill put his indelible mark on the writing of 20th-century international and British history. Ruth Clayton Windscheffel invites us to move our attention away from the politician as author to the politician as reader in her impressive and well-grounded study of William Gladstone. Hers is a novel approach to her protagonist, but one that she demonstrates from numerous contemporary comments interested observers at the time. Windscheffel herself has devoted several years' study to the Gladstone materials housed in St. Deiniol's Library and further extensive research in other manuscript repositories. Her elegantly written volume will no doubt primarily interest a niche audience who has already read most of the major works on Gladstone, but she does introduce the reader to a private Gladstone whom even authors concerned with his intellectual and authorial life have not previously explored.

Gladstone to be sure was no mean author. Volume after controversial volume flowed from his pen on Homeric topics, constituting the largest body of 19th-century English prose on the subject. He also wrote in great depth on matters of church and state. His political pamphlets, such as *The Vatican Decrees and their Bearing on Civil Allegiance* (1874) and *Bulgarian Horrors and the Question of the East* (1876) were literary as well as political events. If collected, his journal articles would fill several stout volumes. He engaged the

major figures of contemporary science, such as T. H. Huxley, in his rejection of scientific naturalism. He wrote autobiographical fragments and edited Bishop Joseph Butler. His sheer authorial energy is nothing less than astounding. What he, as well as other Victorian authors, might have accomplished with computer word processing one can hardly imagine.

David Bebbington more than any other historian has led us through the world of Gladstone the author and religious thinker. Windscheffel picks up the stick from the other end to look at Gladstone as the reader, consumer, collector, and arranger of books and other printed materials and the founder of St. Deiniol's Library. Her approach is a refreshing one as much for the light she throws on the world of the wealthy, politically engaged Victorian working his way through the burgeoning print culture of the day as for the specific details she provides of Gladstone's bibliophilic adventures. Impressively Windscheffel resists relating oddities in Gladstone's reading and collecting and chooses rather to follow him in a very empirical fashion as he confronted the world of books as a very young man and then made them his own and eventually sought to open that world to others across the boundaries of gender and class. On the whole, it is a very attractive portrait though sadly except for the firm of Bernard Quaritch virtually all of the dealers and shops Gladstone frequently have passed from the scene. Their passing, which has occurred across the transatlantic world, represents a real loss to the culture and the loss of one (though admittedly only one) path to the encounter with the printed word.

It is well for the current generation to be reminded of a world of engagement with and dispersal of the printed word that existed before radio, television, video games, ipods, and iphones ? a world to which ironically the Kindle may be returning us. This world that we have lost at least temporarily was the world of the easily portable book that fitted into one's pocket or purse and that could be carried on journeys to fill otherwise idle moments. Here the first image of Gladstone is the young man reading in the midst of his family and then purchasing books for them, vigorously reading beyond the demands of his Eton instructors and the approval of his Eton contemporaries, and then of the young Oxford student and post-graduate traveling about both Britain and the Continent filling almost every otherwise vacant moment by reading a book. Gladstone's bibliographic activity at this period of his life and ever after is that of the compulsive reader and energetic collector working his way through vast amounts of material in several major European languages. What sets him apart is how omnivorous was his taste and the subjects that engaged him. There is also the never-fully-abandoned evangelical moral hesitancy of pursuing the utter enjoyment of reading and collecting when other callings of moral duty beckoned. In this respect, earnestness, not unsurprisingly, marked Gladstone's collecting and reading endeavor. Books were to be read for instruction and improvement. If read aloud to his family or household, they were to edify.

Gladstone's career covered more major areas of political endeavor than any other minister of the day. He could (and did) make himself at home on issues of colonial administration, taxation, finance, land reform, ecclesiastical disestablishment, and the details of local administration involved in Irish home rule so as to allow himself to dominate the parliamentary debate called forth by such issues. In each and every case Gladstone would master the complexities of the subject and inevitably their history by working his way through a vast pile of books. Gladstone more than most public figures of his own day or later informed himself on the issues of the day from reading rather than from listening (he was never a great listener) or from being briefed. Reading was his path to the mastery of his world as well as the exploration of his soul. Commendable as such activity may be and as much as one might wish later leaders had similarly determined to inform themselves through reading, it did in a sense isolate him in the world of his reader response and mean that he tended not to engage in active colloquy with others. To be sure, he was a member of the Metaphysical Society but such membership involving listening and modest debate rather than reading, processing internally, and then announcing his fully formed opinion was the exception in his long career.

Certainly there were other great Victorian readers. Indeed one only need think of any of the great Victorian intellectuals. For example, one can stand in awe of the reading that fills Darwin's footnotes in *The Descent of Man* alone. Any of the major classicists such as Bishop Connop Thirlwall or George Grote read deeply and even profoundly in the ancient sources. The list could go on. But it is difficult to think of any other contemporary who read so extensively in so many different subjects as Gladstone.

But, as already noted, his own personal reading constituted only part of Gladstone's engagement with the printed word. He collected books – many thousands of them. As Windscheffel presents Gladstone, he proved to be an eclectic, even nervous, collector. He visited book dealers and book stalls and carefully read catalogues. He was not a self-conscious connoisseur though Bernard Quaritch believed him to be more of one that he would admit. Both as a private reader-collector and as a public person Gladstone was profoundly aware of the vast explosion of printed materials and the concomitant responsibility of libraries to prepare for ever-expanding collections. In his own personal libraries organized in his various places of residence he would organize and re-organize his holdings, make catalogues, seek appropriate bindings, take care in overseeing the construction of books shelves, and deaccession books from time to time, most notably many of his historical collection in the mid 1870s when he imagined he was retiring from public life. He personally indexed and annotated his books with his own private code, not an unusual Victorian activity. Eventually his collection came to reside at Hawarden, partly in his personal library denoted by his family as the Temple of Peace as well as in other parts of the home.

Much is known about the physical arrangements of Gladstone's Temple of Peace at Hawarden Castle, but unhappily not of the exact contents or arrangements of his books themselves because of their eventual removal to St. Deiniol's Library where other later family book collections were added to them. In some respects the Temple of Peace was a gentleman's library, but it was also very much a working library where books were encased for scholarly and political use rather than as decoration around the walls. Gladstone also saw his library as a local resource and allowed family members, servants, and local people to borrow books with the borrowing registers still in existence. Windscheffel also emphasizes that Gladstone allowed women as well as men to borrow books. What Gladstone's vision of the use and eventual life after his life of his library demonstrates is the remarkable Victorian faith in self-improvement through reading. The conviction of the personally transforming power of the act of reading lay behind much of the concept of the Victorian self-made man or woman. The ideal was possible because of the enormous power that literate Victorians across the social strata ascribed to the act of reading.

Gladstone's engagement with books however much rooted in his public and political life was deeply personal and even introspective. His works on Homer appeared to have convinced almost no one but he persisted in part from stubbornness and in part because he created his own private work of classical reference and understanding. His books repeatedly seem as Arnold says of Oxford the home of lost causes whether the volumes on church and state, those on Homer, or his volumes of Bishop Butler. The book was a private affair for Gladstone just as the pamphlet was a vast eruption of public spirit. His reading served to inform him but it also served to confirm him in lifelong held convictions.

Gladstone's voluminous record of publication often stood rooted in his response to the books of the day that he read. He wrote like many Victorians for money. The journals and quarterlies paid him well. But his reviewing represented another manifestation of his reading and of his reaction to books read. He had championed the repeal of taxes on knowledge. Throughout his life Gladstone's reading took him to libraries across Britain and Europe. He also gave books to libraries he admired. Through all these activities he sought to expand the access of ordinary British citizens to the world of print culture. Reading would improve citizens, improve public life, and improve the civilization of the day.

One of the interesting features of Gladstone's reading is that he appears to have often revisited work published and first read many decades earlier. In this respect Gladstone did not simply devour books, consign them to their proper shelf, and then move on to the next. His private collection of books was a work-in-progress as he constructed it, but also a work-in-progress as he consulted, understood, and then later

reacquainted himself and rethought particular authors. Here may be one of the important distinctions that needs to be recognized between the learned Victorian reader (and Gladstone was nothing if not learned) and the modern academic reader. Gladstone's library composed a universe of personal intellectual and religious orientation. Just as in the therapeutic age of the 20th and 21st centuries people revisit their early life, recollections, memories and relationships to reframe their feelings and thoughts, a reader such as Gladstone rethought and reframed his earlier life by re-reading book and rethinking their contents. Such was in his case especially true of the classics, history, theology, and religiously informed philosophy such as Bishop Butler.

Gladstone could famously change his mind and be led to such changes by reading as much as political necessity, but more than many Victorian readers with whom this reviewer is familiar Gladstone would return to authors whom he respected and in whose works he discerned political, historical, religious, and moral wisdom. Ever the man who had rejected the Anglican priesthood in favor of a public career but still wanting to combine each, Gladstone used his reading and his arranging of books as a process to hold those two vocations struggling within him together.

In exploring Gladstone as a reader attempting to pursue the life of actively promulgating morality, Windscheffel moves her analysis into the fraught world of her protagonist's efforts to rescue fallen women. She writes of "the eroticization of Gladstone's reading" (p. 121) as he pursued this treacherous pastime. In some cases, he gave women Bibles or prayer books or other works he regarded as morally improving. He also read to them from Shakespeare, Longfellow, and Tennyson and presumably other contemporary poets as well. He also became fascinated with Tennyson's *Guinevere*, reading and re-reading the poem. Gladstone appears not to have collected pornography, but he was known to read books then regarded as pornographic in bookshops. He also read classical authors whose works were sexually explicit, such as Petronius. Windscheffel sees a parallel between Gladstone's collection of books and fallen women: "His 'collection' of women was undertaken in similar ways to his collection of books ? he sought them out and established distinct and regular patterns for the activity. In his own mind, the pursuits shared moral and epistemological functions: the revelation, discovery, and the learning of truths, the provision of opportunities to act upon them, and the medium by which to transmit them to others." (p. 128)

Windscheffel's volume is particularly informative about the founding of St. Deiniol's Library and carries the story well beyond Gladstone's simple concern about the fate of his book collection. Toward the end of his long life Gladstone had become concerned with this, hence his founding and endowment of St. Deiniol's Library. To that institution, happily still functioning to the benefit of Victorian scholars, he transferred over 30,000 volumes as well as substantial endowment later supplemented by public and family gifts. To give some comparative idea of the size of such a personal library, it is well to recall that when the United States Congress purchased the library of Thomas Jefferson early in the century, the collection consisted of approximately 6,400 volumes. Gladstone over the years had sold or given away many thousands of other books. The possession of so extensive and varied a library cannot be ascribed to any other British Prime Minister.

Windscheffel convincingly connects the founding of St. Deiniol's to Gladstone's evolving concern and anxiety over the fate and future of the Church of England. At the same time she makes clear that Gladstone never spelled out his goal as explicitly as might have been expected or desired. From at least the 1860s onward Gladstone stood deeply troubled with the inroads upon the culture of scientific naturalism and agnosticism. Temperamentally he was religiously conservative, but intellectually and theologically he came to believe that the Church of England must accommodate itself to modern thought through the championing of late-century Anglo-Catholic liberalism manifested in the *Lux Mundi* (1889) group. In particular he was drawn to Charles Gore and Edward Talbot. These late-century Anglo-Catholics were a different breed than the Tractarians to whom Gladstone had been briefly attracted as a young man but between whom and himself he placed a firm distance during the early 1840s. The *Lux Mundi* group emphasized Catholicism, history, and the Incarnation rather than the clericalism and denominational exclusiveness of the Tractarians. Gladstone agreed with Gore and Talbot that religious truth had evolved and was evolving over time and that one could find good in other non-Anglican Christians. Gladstone read approvingly not only the eclectic essays of *Lux Mundi* but also other works by those authors.

Gladstone appears to have founded St. Deiniol's, which was originally very modest tin structure housing most of his books, as an outpost for liberal Anglo-Catholicism – a bastion that might in an undefined manner combat the advancing skepticism of the day he found embodied in Mrs. Humphrey Ward's Robert Elsmere. That fictional young clergyman had lost faith by reading in the library of a skeptical squire. St. Deiniol's would provide its patrons with another kind of library and reading experience. The very founding of the library emphasizes the importance that Gladstone attached to the experience of reading itself. For a time Gladstone had imagined that St. Deiniol's might include a religious community such as Gore's Community of the Resurrection, but after much consultation he rejected "the idea of St. Deiniol's as a counter-cultural religious community" (p. 183) Instead it would serve daily readers and eventually short-term residential readers. Gladstone also founded St. Deiniol's in the conviction that the eventual disestablishment of the Church of Wales would require its clergy to have new supportive institutions of learned resources. By the late 20th century the Library assumed the role as a center for modern learned Anglican dialogue across the spectrum of that communion demonstrated in Gladstone's centennial year by lectures of the controversial American Bishop John Selby Spong.

The religious communions originally represented in St. Deiniol's as drawn from Gladstone's own personal library reflected the religious spectrum of Gladstonian liberalism itself. The shelves included works by Anglicans, Nonconformists, and Roman Catholics as well as studies of Judaism. Such was a far cry from the Oxford denominational rancor of Gladstone's youth when Churchmen denounced both Dissent and Roman Catholicism. From the standpoint of Gladstone's evolving religious and theological convictions, it seems quite likely that the lived experience of high Victorian politics may have affected his reading tastes and habits as much as the reverse, a dynamic to which Windscheffel might had given more attention. Gladstone at mid-century remained a firm Anglican resistant to Dissenters and Roman Catholics. By 1875 he had forged political alliances and friendships with major Nonconformist clergy. He would be sure remain a vocal critic and opponent of papal pretensions and Roman Catholic clericalism, but he sacrificed his political career for the cause of Irish Home Rule and displayed unprecedented public sympathy for Irish Roman Catholics. Moreover, despite his efforts to hold back the forces of scientific naturalism Gladstone's library contained works by naturalistic anthropologists and other advanced scientific works. Gladstone stood prepared to combat opinions he disapproved, but not to prevent his fellow citizens from reading those works.

Historians and other scholars of Victorian culture are privileged to be able to benefit from Ruth Clayton Windscheffel's exploration of Gladstone's reading and the world that he created through that reading.

Dr Windscheffel would like to thank Professor Turner for his very generous review of her book. She has no substantive comment to make other than to record her gratitude for the additional insights and suggestions Professor Turner has offered, undergirded as they are by his prodigious knowledge of both Gladstone and the cultural world of the nineteenth century that he inhabited.

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