

## Gladstone. Heroic Minister, 1865-1898

**Review Number:**

89

**Publish date:**

Tuesday, 1 February, 2000

**Author:**

Richard Shannon

**ISBN:**

9780713992530

**Date of Publication:**

1999

**Pages:**

719pp.

**Publisher:**

Allen Lane

**Place of Publication:**

London

**Reviewer:**

Eugenio Biagini

At the Gladstone Centenary Conference, held at Chester in the summer of 1998, one speaker pointed out that at that point in time there were ten or eleven new biographies of 'WEG' under contract. If such a high number of new works is indicative of Gladstone's enduring fascination and appeal, the length and calibre of Richard Shannon's work are veritable monuments to the exceptional quality of the scholarship inspired by the GOM. It is fitting that the century which opened with John Morley's towering three-volume study (1903) should end with the publication of the second volume of this impressive piece of research.

Perhaps, however, given the richness of the Gladstone archives and the statesman's historical importance, this proliferation of scholarly publications is not difficult to explain. More surprising is the extent of the revival of the political interest in the GOM. Such political revival had already been in the air for a few years when Shannon's book was published earlier in 1999. Possibly it began with the publication of issue No.7755 of *The Economist* (April 1992), which had a surprising cover illustration: it represented Gladstone wearing a flowery (perhaps 'post-modern') waistcoat and surrounded by the microphones of journalists, obviously eager to pick his brain on the current political situation. The title was: 'A prophet for the left.' The leading article presented the GOM not as a historical figure, but as a model for both the modern Liberal Democrats and, especially, the Labour party. This was certainly remarkable, particularly after twelve years of Conservative governments, who had also claimed to be intent on restoring some of the traditional values and policies associated with Gladstonian liberalism. However, what is even more remarkable is that in 1997 a general election was won by a 'new' Labour party whose ideology seemed to have been expressly shaped along the lines suggested by *The Economist* five years earlier. Not only had Labour given up 'Clause IV', but the party's rhetoric and ideological profile looked much closer to those of traditional liberalism than to any recognisable form of socialism. Significantly, New Labour was on unusually good terms with the Liberal Democrats, and its manifesto was remarkable for a novel emphasis on constitutional, rather than social, reform. This included old liberal favourites, such as reform both of the electoral system and of the House of

Lords (the focus of Gladstone's last parliamentary speech in 1894), and even Home Rule for both Wales and Scotland. Not surprisingly, by 1998 comparisons between Blair and Gladstone had become commonplace, and indeed have been encouraged by Tony Blair himself, who seems to regard Lord Jenkins of Hillhead - the Liberal Democrat peer and Gladstone's best-known biographer - as one of his 'mentors'. More recently, the Prime Minister's rhetoric during the intervention of the Western powers in the Balkans - aimed at stopping a latter-day version of the 'Bulgarian horrors' - contributed to the 'neo-Gladstonian' climate. The Tory press snapped under the weight of this strange phenomenon: a Labour PM who appropriates both free-market economics at home and a 'liberal imperialist' posture abroad, after assuming the Thatcherite mantle of 'freedom fighter'. In the end the Balkans war was neither a new edition of the 'Falklands effect', nor a 'Bulgarian Agitation'. However, the Conservative press has responded to the timely publication of Shannon's Gladstone as if it had been both at one and the same time. Excited commentators in *The Times* and *The Spectator* have acclaimed Shannon as one of their number and sneered at the final unmasking of the 'ghastly old man', Gladstone, with a wink at Labour's 'ghastly young man', Blair. However, they have not been totally fair to either Gladstone or his latest biographer. Though Shannon holds strong views on many aspects of Gladstone's career - views which the Victorian statesman might have regarded as less than flattering - this biography is a work of magisterial scholarship, far above the present-day party squabbles. It is a disservice to the academic community, as much as to Shannon personally, to try to drag his book into the gutter of day-to-day politics.

In terms of the depth of the research and originality of the interpretation Shannon's work is perhaps comparable to Morley's. Though the present writer finds some of its arguments less than convincing - as we shall see - there is no question but that this is a great achievement. Of course, it could be said, 'it was all already in the Diaries', but Shannon has rendered historically intelligible an enormous amount of primary source material. On many issues his work challenges well-established stereotypes and assumptions.

Allegedly, Shannon's central thesis is that, to the end of his days, Gladstone was an unreconstructed Peelite, 'a Peelite ... in Liberal guise ... He became a Liberal ... the better to be a Peelite' (p.xv). In particular, his "'instrumental" view' of the Liberal party was typically Peelite (p.5). Likewise, many of his policies were Peelite one way or the other. Thus, in 1869-71, '[t]he intensity and authenticity of Gladstone's evocation of Peel as the tutelary genius of the work and purpose he was now about leave no doubt as to his sense of the reality and material relevance of that filiation' (p.62). Indeed, we are told that Gladstone 'did not need Liberalism' (p.xv) to become what he was. Of course, this raises a question which Shannon does not address, i.e. whether Peel himself was really a Liberal in disguise, or whether Gladstone was the true - albeit unacknowledged - leader of Victorian Conservatism (a view which Disraeli and Salisbury would, no doubt, have found interesting). Whatever the case, it is regrettable that Shannon has not argued for his Peelite interpretation with greater consistency. As the book moves (amazingly smoothly) through hundreds and hundreds of pages, the readers are magisterially led - or sometimes misled - into the meanders of a high politics, while the Peelite heritage becomes less and less easy to identify. The few occasional references to Sir Robert's enduring influence are so isolated and out of context that they look like flimsy traces of a thesis the author in which is only marginally interested. What is Shannon's real thesis then? One of the fascinating aspects of this book is that it can be read and interpreted in different ways according to the reader's perspective. In this respect, it is - one is tempted to say - a triumph of post-modern scholarship. On the other hand, there is here an anti-Gladstonian thrust which at times becomes unpleasantly intemperate and prevents the author from either understanding or explaining the evidence he has so skilfully unearthed. In this connection, Shannon's insistence on Gladstone's Peelism risks giving the unhelpful impression that the Grand Old Man (GOM) never quite managed to outgrow his youthful self. The real question concerns rather the extent to which both Gladstone and Peel hailed from a similar, non-party specific, cultural milieu. The latter included - as Boyd Hilton and David Bebbington have pointed out - Anglican constitutionalism, Protestant piety and the experience of governing the first industrial nation, but also the abiding influence of Burke, Butler, Aristotle and Plato. Though some of these aspects were examined in Shannon's first volume (1982), they continued to play such a central role in shaping Gladstone's outlook that it would have been helpful to discuss them again in the context of the GOM's later career.

In this respect Shannon has missed an opportunity: despite his concentration on 'the mind' of Gladstone, scant attention is paid to the intellectual dimension of such a mind. Yet Gladstone was an intellectual in politics, if ever there was one. Occasionally, this neglect generates the discomfiting suspicion that Shannon is trying to trivialise his topic - an impression which seems to appeal to some of his Tory reviewers. But perhaps this is merely an accidental consequence of Shannon's somewhat Cowlingesque approach. In contrast to H.C.G. Matthews broad thematic chapters, the structure of Shannon's book is strictly chronological and follows the daily minutiae of Gladstone's story so closely that sometimes little attention is paid to the broader picture.

Together with the intellectual dimension of Gladstone's life, Shannon neglects three other important aspects of his multifaceted subject: Gladstone's popular appeal, his concept of Europe and his Christian culture. The vexed question of the rise of the statesman's personal popularity from 1866-8 is not really explored, nor is any attempt made to explain his miscalculation of the electors' mood in 1873-4 and subsequent disastrous defeat. More surprisingly, the author of a celebrated work on the Bulgarian Agitation has chosen to examine the events of 1876 from an exclusively high-politics point of view. Shannon is at his best when discussing the construction of the cabinets in 1880 and 1885. By contrast, the triumphs and commotion of the Midlothian campaigns are represented only as a faint echo, as they may have been remembered in the quiet of Gladstone's study, when he jotted down his diary entries.

Not being interested in the popular dimension of Gladstone's politics, Shannon is similarly unresponsive to his sense of Europe. The latter has been superbly analysed by Matthew (in particular Gladstone, vol.II [1998], pp.1-40), but in Shannon's account is related in such a cursory and unsympathetic way that it becomes altogether unintelligible, like a bad caricature. Thus, commenting on the invasion of Egypt, he contrasts Gladstone's own attitude with the logic of imperial security which inspired most British policy makers at the time. 'That logic had no bearing on Gladstone's actions or intentions, any more than did his bondholding [in the Suez company]. He acted throughout for Europe, with a European frame of assumptions and intentions' (p.305). Granted that 'Europe [eventually] became a fig leaf to cover the nakedness of Empire' (ibid.), what does 'Europe' actually mean in this context, and did Gladstone's successors behave differently in this respect? Neither question finds an answer in Shannon. Yet the answer is quite simple here, especially if one compares Western European attitudes to the Egyptian bankruptcy with Anglo-French attitudes to both earlier and later financial crises. Financial probity was the mark of 'true independence' - it offered evidence of a country's ability and entitlement to self-government. Therefore, bankruptcy involved political, even more than financial, disaster. It could (and did) legitimate temporary military occupation and the imposition of Western controls on a country's fiscal and financial management. This happened to Egypt, but also to Greece in the aftermath of the Greek-Turkish war of 1897, and it had been ventilated as a possible outcome of the Italian financial predicament, as the post-Risorgimento governments struggled to balance the budget between 1870-6. That bankruptcy could legitimate joint military intervention by the western powers was taken for granted by Salisbury, as much as by Gladstone. In the 1897 Greek crisis Salisbury's government took a line no different from that followed by Gladstone's in 1882, but he had the benefit of Western European support (largely because Greece was of marginal strategic interest, while Suez was a rich platter for any imperialist appetite). Likewise, if Gladstone stressed the 'temporary' nature of the British occupation of Egypt, so did all his Tory, Liberal imperialist and Labour successors until 1953: of course, formally Egypt was never a British colony, and (again formally), it became independent in 1922.

'With Gladstone theology was ever the prime concern' (p.285) writes Shannon. Yet he seems bemused, and often greatly annoyed, by the Victorian statesman's piety. For example, writing about the 1886 election he reports the build-up of religious enthusiasm as Gladstone identified Home Rule with God's will, and the Nonconformists as His electoral messengers. When, instead of triumphing, the Liberals were defeated, Gladstone saw the electoral result as 'the will of God for my poor country'. Shannon's mocking comment is that '[t]he supreme moment had metamorphosed in a grotesque parody' (p.448). This lack of sympathy and failure to understand Christian providentialism in politics is quite surprising in a scholar of Shannon's standing. It is no mystery that for devout Protestants (and for other Christians too) God's Providence is always sovereign: like Cromwell, Gladstone believed that when the saints triumph, it is God who triumphs;

when the saints suffer, God triumphs nevertheless. Another example of Shannon's incomprehension of Christian spirituality is contained in the following quotation:

After a speaking foray outside Birmingham Gladstone stayed with the Philip Stanhopes at Wodehouse, Wombourne, 8-9 November. "I woke without a voice: and in the pouring rain, after four days of fair weather while we needed them. How He maketh all things in measure & number. I think there have been since 1879 not less than fifty of these fair days: and not one has failed us. And I am asked to believe there is no Providence, or He is not 'Knowable'." 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. (p.478)

Here Gladstone confided to his diary a spiritual attitude to life in general (and politics in particular) which the British Prime Minister would have shared with any Nonconformist pastor in the country, or indeed with the humblest Primitive Methodist who ever attended chapel. It was a basic Christian conviction that God cared for His people and was in control of all the details of life, be they more or less important in human eyes. There are many other examples in the Diaries (as well as in other autobiographical writings by less famous Victorians) of such a frame of mind. For example, one paradox of Gladstone's later career is that his wish to retire was genuine enough - on this point Shannon (e.g. p.284) confirms Matthew's interpretation - and yet, for a variety of reasons, he postponed the actual decision time and time again for fifteen years. Quite apart from personal ambition and the will to power, part of the explanation must be found, again, in his religious providentialism. Like many other Christians, he perceived his own existence as guided or inspired from above. Unlike most other Christians he made no secret of this and left abundant written evidence about his convictions. However, his world-view should not be imputed to him as a peculiar fault: if it was a fault, it was that of an age and indeed of a religious faith which is still with us.

As for Gladstone's Irish policy, Shannon is not impressed at all. He flatly dismisses the 1881 Land Act as more or less irrelevant, and ridicules Gladstone's strategy: 'The Three Fs sounded terrifying but in practice would make little difference. They were much more important as a political slogan than as an agrarian reality. They represented the ultimate dead end of a pointless policy' (p.274). Indeed, we are told that even the Irish National party regarded the Act 'as mainly an alien irrelevance as far as land was concerned and a possible danger as far as politics was concerned' (p.276). Yet, later we discover that '[b]etween the end of 1882 and late 1884 the Irish problem was relatively quiescent' (p.357): did this change have anything to do with the effects of the Act and its successive amendments? This is the line taken by Matthew and many other scholars, but obviously not by Shannon, though he offers no alternative explanation. Shannon's impatient dealing with Gladstone's attempt to solve the land problem is not only partisan: it is also incredibly Anglocentric, neglects the Irish dimension of United Kingdom politics, and takes no notice of the Land League's revolutionary potential.

Yet, Shannon is right in stressing that 'the Irish Land Bill of 1881 was indeed a landlord's bill' (p.277). In 1880-1 land reform could be pursued in two different ways. One option was to strengthen the 1870 Act: this could imply 'tenant right' and the adoption of 'The Three F's' - fixity of tenure, fair rent and freedom of sale - as campaigned for by the Land League. The other possibility was to buy off the Anglo-Irish landlords at public expense by means of a Treasury advance repayable by terminable annuities. This would enable tenants to purchase the farms on which they worked, but would involve complex financial and political arrangements. Furthermore, Gladstone preferred, if possible, to preserve the Anglo-Irish gentry in their role as the economic élite, something which could only be achieved if they retained ultimate control of the land [A. Warren, 'Gladstone, land and social reconstruction in Ireland, 1881-1887', *Parliamentary History*, vol.2 (1983), pp.153-90]. Significantly, here he agreed with C.S. Parnell, who believed that the Ascendancy class, to whom he belonged, would be able to rejuvenate itself and recover part of its ancient prestige if it joined the national movement and provided its leadership [L. Kennedy, 'The economic thought of the nation's lost leader', in D.G. Boyce and A. O'Day (eds.), *Parnell in Perspective* (1991), pp.171-200]. For all these conservative and 'pro-Ascendancy' reasons, in 1881 some watered-down version of 'tenant right' was Gladstone's preferred approach. Though the 1881 Land Bill offered less than the Land League demanded, in social terms it was still a radical proposal: it implied the establishment of a sort of condominium between

landlords and tenants, in the sense that the latter would share some of the rights commonly associated with property. Particularly radical was the 'fair' rent aspect of the Bill: tenants were expected to pay a rent ultimately regulated not by the law of supply and demand and other market considerations, but by social concerns. Rents ought to be 'fair', i.e. commensurate with the tenant's ability to pay. Special Land Courts would be appointed to ensure that they would be adjusted when and where they were found to be excessive. This judicial imposition of socially acceptable rents sanctioned an unprecedented degree of state intervention in the labour market. Simultaneously, in order to curb the agrarian terrorism of the Irish Land League, Gladstone introduced a Coercion Bill. This combination of concession and repression had the desired effect. On the one hand, coercion held down the Land League, whose leaders (including Parnell) were either imprisoned or forced to emigrate; on the other, concession undermined the motivation of the rank and file. When the farmers found that the law was of more advantage to them than revolution, they began crowding the newly established Land Courts, rather than supporting the League. By December 1881 the land agitation was decimated and Parnell was ready to co-operate with the government. The change was ratified by the so-called 'Kilmainham treaty', which let Parnell out of prison in exchange for his promise of support for law and order, while the Arrears Act extended the operation of the Land Act to those tenants who had contracted debts. Thus, one of the long-term effects of this blending of reform and repression was to transform a semi-revolutionary situation in Ireland into one in which grievances were voiced through legal and political channels. By showing that violence was counterproductive, and that the law provided more effective instruments for protest, Gladstone laid the ground for a rebirth of Irish constitutional nationalism. In a sense he was trying to transplant 'popular liberalism' into Ireland.

However, as we have already seen, Shannon is not interested in anything popular, whether British or Irish. Is he then interested in the extension of the franchise and the whole question of democracy? Not really. His account of the 1884-5 Reform crisis has enormous evocative power and his insights into the world of Westminster are, as usual, penetrating. Yet, the broader electoral context does not seem to command his attention. Thus, while the constitutional debates originated by the Lords' refusal to pass the 1884 Reform Bill are reviewed in detail, there is no discussion of Gladstone's view of the principles behind either redistribution or franchise reform. Then Shannon outlines the expected outcome of 'household democracy' in Ireland - namely, the extinction of the Liberal party and the growth of sectarianism. He concludes that 'Gladstone chose to take the view that the new labourer vote in Ireland was "quite as likely to establish a dual current in the constituencies, as to increase the volume of that single force [nationalism] that now carries all with it"' (p.323). Why did he do so? This quotation is reported more or less as wishful thinking on the side of Gladstone. However, his miscalculation or self-deception prefigured a major problem in Irish political history: the missed development of class politics and the consequent suffocation of the political expression of some social tensions by the successful rhetoric of 'national unity' [see Claire Fitzpatrick, 'Nationalising the ideal: Labour and nationalism in Ireland 1909-1923', in Biagini (ed.), *Citizenship and Community* (1996), pp.276-304].

Indeed, this 'peculiarity of the Irish' was at the root of one of Gladstone's old political problems: for his attempt to 'pacify Ireland' was a deliberate attempt to Anglicize Irish politics. His was indeed a Peelite strategy. While Peel and the free traders had succeeded in assimilating the labouring classes into the mainstream of party politics, Gladstone tried unsuccessfully to do the same with the Irish. His strategy involved gambling on the Irish response to the Gladstonian combination of 'big Bills' and revivalistic political preaching. But something substantial had to be delivered in order to make 'big Bills' and charismatic rhetoric effective. Indeed gambling with the Irish entailed what had already been involved in 'gambling' with the artisan reformers in Britain in 1864-7: namely, conceding them a substantial measure of equality. For this reason in 1884-5 Gladstone rejected Hartington's case for the retention of a limited franchise in Ireland, and insisted that 'to refuse equality to Ireland would be a blow to the Union and to the Empire' (p.324). This quotation deserves more attention than Shannon is prepared to pay to it. Why were equality and the Union so intimately linked to each other in Gladstone's view, and how do they relate to the Home Rule proposal of two years later? Readers are left to reach their own conclusions while Shannon - whose sympathies obviously lie with Hartington - shifts his attention to the Gordon affair in Sudan. True, the latter was exploited by the Conservatives who, 'terrified by the county franchise and horrified at the prospect in store

for Ireland, found the Gordon issue a convenient means of getting at Gladstone by the displacement method: they could not attack Reform directly, because that would mean insulting and alienating the new voters; but they could direct their displaced energies into the government's embarrassments in the Sudan' (p.330). Within certain limits, their ploy worked. At the ensuing general election in 1885, the Liberals failed to achieve that overall majority for which their leader was hoping. Why? Shannon argues that 'the Liberal failure in 1885 is simply the effect of the maturing of fundamental social and demographic trends which had been apparent to perceptive Liberals in 1868 and 1874. Analysis of the vote in the great conurbations in 1880 revealed that it was there that the Conservative vote was expanding fastest. The effect of Redistribution was to optimize the urban and suburban vote, which accelerated this expansion' (p.390). The trouble with this argument is that it explains either too much or too little: for the Liberals did win other elections after that of 1885, and indeed their greatest triumph was to be achieved on a largely Gladstonian platform at the election of 1906. On the other hand, it explains too little: for even at the 1885 election the Liberals emerged as the strongest party in Parliament and in Britain, well ahead of the Tories. Their problem was, of course, not so much the English conurbations as Parnell's Irish party, which had achieved an astonishing success in Ireland and had managed to weaken the Liberals also in Britain. Here the Irish vote went to the Conservatives or (as in Liverpool) to the Irish National party itself.

Both the strengths and the shortcomings of Shannon's interpretation are highlighted by his analysis of the Home Rule crisis. Here he becomes really partisan and heavy-handed (pp.376-96). There is little attempt either to understand or to account for Gladstone's behaviour in terms of Peelite political strategy or Burkean political philosophy. Though he admits that there was no sudden conversion on the part of Gladstone, who had considered the option of Home Rule as early as 1874 (p.137), Shannon looks at the unfolding of events in 1885-6 more or less as Lord Hartington or Queen Victoria would have done, with similar indignation fuelled by a narrowly insular, Anglocentric outlook. Ireland is treated as a mere 'object' of high-political duels between contestants for the leadership of the Liberal party. There is neither to understand, nor even interest in, either the point of view of the Irish nationalists or of their 'high-politics' spokesmen, Parnell and the National party. While Gladstone's references to constitutional experiments in Norway and Austria-Hungary are dismissed as 'exotic', Canada and the British North America Act - the real precedents and constitutional models for Gladstone - are hardly mentioned. Ulster and its problems receive only cursory mention. Allegedly, Gladstone was maniacally devoted to a figment of his own imagination: in Shannon's book there is no sense of the urgency and complexity of the Irish crisis as a United Kingdom problem, the most long-standing and as yet unsolved question in the history of the British Isles.

Moreover, Shannon's denunciation of Gladstone's 1885-6 Irish 'obsession' is inconsistent with the other focus of his analysis: the struggle for the Liberal party leadership. Perhaps the latter was the main goal in a game in which Ireland itself was merely a pawn: this is of course a line of interpretation with which readers of Cooke and Vincent's *Governing Passion* (1974) will be familiar. Though Shannon's account is more forceful and precise, his unrestrained polemical fervour merely reiterates late-Victorian anti-Gladstonian propaganda without casting any new light on the questions under discussion. However, if indeed we were to admit that power was the real issue at stake, then Gladstone, far from being a misguided visionary, was right in choosing Home Rule as his battle cry. For he did achieve what he is alleged to have desired, and much more: he remained in control of the party almost until the end of his life, his competitors were driven out and Gladstonianism became the trademark of 'real' Liberalism for another twenty or thirty years.

In conclusion, this is a complex biography. Extremely rich in detail and based on magisterial command of the archival material, it will be invaluable as a reference work. As an interpretation of the political significance of the Gladstone's career, it is both fascinating and controversial: indeed it is already a classic - a classic of Tory historiography.

#### **Other reviews:**

[2]

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/89#comment-0>

#### **Links**

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/641>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>