

Lives of Victorian Political Figures I

William Ewart Gladstone (Part II)

Edited by
Michael Partridge



LIVES OF VICTORIAN POLITICAL FIGURES I

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Volume 1:	Lord Palmerston
Volume 2:	Benjamin Disraeli (Part I)
Volume 3:	Benjamin Disraeli (Part II)
	William Ewart Gladstone (Part I)
Volume 4:	William Ewart Gladstone (Part II)

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Volume 4

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William Ewart Gladstone
(Part II)



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III. Opposition, 1874–80



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[Anon.], *Why Did Gladstone Fall from Power? How May He Regain it? An Appeal to the Right Hon. W. E. Gladstone, MP, on the Eastern Question and the Disorganization of the Liberal Party*, 2nd edn (London, London Co-Operative Printing, [c. 1886])

This anonymous piece of work was a sixpenny pamphlet published about 1879. The extract reproduced in the present volume is taken from the second edition, although it is not possible to judge from this exactly how many copies had been sold, and its selling price was not especially cheap. A copy is at St Deiniol's Library, but there is no evidence to suggest that Gladstone had actually read it.

At the time it was written, Beaconsfield (as Disraeli had become) was still Prime Minister, but his efforts at the Congress of Berlin in June and July 1878 had not made him as popular as Gladstone after the latter's publication of the *Bulgarian Horrors* pamphlet. Further setbacks in Zululand in 1879 also helped to win more support for Gladstone's anti-imperial stance. The author was particularly unhappy with the Whigs in the Liberal Party, like Lord Granville and Lord Hartington, and strongly urged Gladstone to do his duty and take up the reins of leadership of the Party.

Beaconsfield dissolved Parliament in March 1880, and Gladstone, who at this point was still only a Liberal backbencher, set off on an electoral campaign in Midlothian. When the Liberals won a stunning victory in the General Election, Queen Victoria sent for the Liberal Leader in the Commons, Hartington, to form a government. Hartington, head of the Whig element in the Liberal Party, was however all too aware that it was Gladstone who had made the difference. When he was sent by the Queen to try to dissuade Gladstone from taking office, he received only an offer of half-hearted support from the 'Grand Old Man'. Gladstone, armed with evidence such as that provided by this pamphlet, knew very well how popular he was in Liberal circles. Hartington accordingly returned to the Queen to tell her that, like it or not, she would have to ask Gladstone to succeed Beaconsfield as Prime Minister, which the former became at the beginning of April.

The pricing of the present document would suggest that it was not aimed at a particularly 'popular' audience, but rather at doubtful Liberal voters, probably from the middle class. The aim was to try to persuade them to make sure the Party was properly prepared. The pamphlet is also very much concerned with getting Gladstone back in effective charge of the Party, clearly stating that he was the only leader who could supply what the Liberal Party needed at this time.

The whole effort to raise English feeling against Russian cruelties might be apposite if Radicals proposed that Russia should annex Bulgaria, Bosnia, and Herzegovina, but is entirely beside the question when no such proposition is made. The policy of the Tory Government is to "demand guarantees" for the better government of the ruined provinces. Guarantees! Turkish guarantees are very much like Turkish bonds; they represent nothing and bear no interest. The Tory Government insists that "there is to be no question of the creation of tributary States." But this is exactly what there must be a question of. Mr. Gladstone has cried: "Better, we may justly tell the Sultan, almost any inconvenience, difficulty, or loss associated with Bulgaria—

‘Than thou reseat in thy place of light,
The mockery of thy people and their bane.’”

Why is Mr. Gladstone silent now, when England's power is to be used to reseat the Sultan over the provinces his soldiers have watered with human blood and tears? These provinces *must* be made into tributary States, so as to assure to them a future of gradual and peaceful development; to leave them under Turkish officials is to patch up the old difficulty, and to begin again the old series of guarantees, broken promises, suffering, discontent, revolt, bloody repression. Bosnia, the Herzegovina, and Bulgaria—the limits of the latter to be defined by the Powers in Conference assembled—must be put into the same position as that now held by Servia and Roumania. The experience of years has proved the success of this plan in the two latter States, and there is nothing to prevent it from being equally successful with the others. Nothing less than this will meet the difficulties of the situation, and nothing less than this will—as this is so much wanted—bar Russia from Constantinople; provinces discontented under Turkish rule will always look to Russia for assistance; tributary States under their own rulers will prefer their own self-government to incorporation in the Russian Empire. The new tributary States should be put under a European guarantee, and would thus form a barrier to Russian advance into which the whole strength of Europe would be built.

This scheme is preferable, simply because the most practicable at the present time; the feeling of distrust of Russia, however foolish, is so strong, that it is a recommendation of any scheme that it stands between Russia and Constantinople. Mazzini's dream of a great Slavonic Republic is not yet practicable; the dividing lines of creed, of custom, of education, are, and will be for many years, too strongly marked to allow of such unification; Prince Jerome Napoleon's

scheme of a great Principality, consisting of the six States, is open to the same objections, although they apply to it less strongly. Mr. Grant Duff's insane idea of forming a kingdom to be ruled from Constantinople by the Duke and Duchess of Edinburgh scarcely deserves notice among the schemes proposed by statesmen; it is only suitable to the servants' hall of the Duke's country seat. It must never be forgotten that the tendency of modern times is towards the formation of large, rather than of small, States, and that the separate independence of these six States will only be a transitional stage, wherein opportunities of education and liberal government will gradually smooth down the sharper edges of division, and prepare the princedoms to merge into one great Principality, which shall gradually develop into a strong and peaceful Republic. To endeavour to form a Republic there now, would simply be to hand the provinces over to the first successful soldier who desired to play the role of a small Buonaparte; a Republic cannot be made out of generations enslaved for ages, inheriting the habit of submission, and the tradition of bowing to the ruler strong enough to compel their obedience. Only a succession of Washingtons could build up a Republic there with the present materials.

Why is the proposition for the formation of tributary States rejected by the Tory Government, although endorsed by the voice of the nation with an intensity and an unanimity unparalleled in our times? Why is Lord Beaconsfield using the nation's name, although, by his own confession, at variance with the national will? Why is Mr. Gladstone powerless to carry out the policy he desires, although the national will has cried to him to take his rightful place? The answer to this question is the answer to the failure of every Liberal agitation during the last two years and a half. Look over the history of the Tory administration, and the *fiasco* of the Bulgarian atrocity agitation has been less forcibly performed over and over again, with exactly the same results. Never has existed a Ministry more rebelled against by the mass of the people; never has existed a Ministry more impossible to overthrow. Agitation against two Slave Circulars; agitation against withdrawal of Merchant Shipping Bill; agitation against purchase of Suez Canal Shares; agitation against Royal Titles' Bill; agitation against Foreign Policy. Some of these have been successful, yet still the Ministry exists. Lord Beaconsfield audaciously proclaims that his Government is not in accord with the nation, yet Lord Beaconsfield remains Prime Minister. The Tory Cabinet is just like one of those india-rubber toys that children play with; you may knock it, and squeeze it, and pinch it out of shape,

but the moment the pressure is removed it springs back to its original form.

What is the reason of this wasted energy? What is the secret of this invariable failure? Why does an unpopular Ministry retain office? Because the Whig party is paralyzed, and the Liberal party is so divided that there is no Liberal leader ready to form a Government. Because Lord Hartington cannot, and Mr. Gladstone will not. The confession is a humiliating one, but it is nevertheless true, and the sooner its truth is recognized the better for the Liberal party. The present Government must be overthrown if England's honour is to be saved; but who will lead the Liberals to aid their country in her need? Mr. Gladstone? Lord Hartington? Lord Hartington may at once be thrown aside. He can command much ducal countenance, some Whig votes, *et voilà tout*. What influence has Lord Hartington outside Parliament, save among the dependants of the house of Cavendish? What title can he show to our trust? What past has he given us as pledge of his future? A good-natured country gentleman, with the ordinary amount of brains, he is doubtless an admirable companion, a most courteous host, but we want a leader. Some think him wise because he is silent, and statesman like, because he hides his political emptiness under a mask of prudence. He sits still admirably, with great dignity, as befits a Cavendish, and makes an ideal head of the opposition from a Tory standpoint, for he does nothing, and never risks a move which might throw upon him the dreaded responsibility of being called to form a Cabinet. The jealousy of the Whig nobles for the great Commoner pitchforked him into his present position, and there he remains, obviously ever asking himself plaintively the question, "*que le diable fais-je dans ce galère?*" A Hartington "leading" a Gladstone is as funny a political joke as could be imagined even by the mocking genius of a Disraeli.

Mr. Gladstone, then, remains as the only possible leader. What of him? Mr. Gladstone threw up the leadership of the party in 1874. As a mere question of generosity, he acted scarcely as a Gladstone should, for the moment of defeat is not the moment in which to desert the hosts that had enabled him to win victory in many a bitter fight. But Mr. Gladstone, it is said, felt himself ungratefully used by several of his subordinates—such as Sir William Harcourt and Sir Henry James—and misunderstood by the people, and he indignantly resigned the captaincy which those whom he had laboured for failed to endorse. Mr. Gladstone—like Napoleon III.—was unfortunate in his choice of subordinates; he

chose men who, however brilliantly clever, were essentially small; men incapable of whole-souled loyalty, men whose petty ambitions were dearer to them than their honour. It was not *the people* who were in fault in that sad defeat of 1874; it was those great Whig houses who, since the unhappy accession of the Brunswicks, have regarded the government of England as the appanage of their families, to be, at most, varied at intervals by a Tory interregnum. It is to these we owe Liberal disunion, Liberal disorganization. They have always bitterly resented the rise to power of William Ewart Gladstone, a rise due to genius and not to the accident of noble birth, and while they fawned upon him to his face in the day of his power, they constantly laboured to undermine him, persistently and continuously maligned him, and cordially rejoiced in his overthrow. His Premiership was to them a standing reminder that the supreme power in the State was passing from the great governing houses to the democracy, and they hated the man who was the herald of the decadence of a class, and of the rise of a nation. While Mr. Gladstone was in power the bitter antagonism of Lord Granville to the great Minister was the common talk of the *salons* of London, Paris, and Florence; it was well known that Lord Granville hoped for his fall, and was ready to welcome any Whig combination that should exclude the people's favourite from the Cabinet, and so throw the Government once more into the hands of his own order. The great acts of justice to Ireland forced by Mr. Gladstone, with the country at his back, on his unwilling colleagues, completed their hatred and disgust; the disestablishment of the Irish Church, depriving them of many a sinecure for the younger branches of their houses; the Land Act, threatening the whole landowning interest by acknowledging that the tenant had some rights in the land he cultivated; both these aroused their fear of what reforms he had yet in store. When he was known to have expressed an opinion that the House of Lords itself might be a possible subject of Reform, it was too much; the same spirit lately evidenced by the letter of Lord Fitzwilliam, resenting Mr. Gladstone's action and rejecting his leadership, animated the whole course of procedure of such men as Lord Granville and Lord Hartington; they used their whole influence against him, inspired the "Liberal" clubs—where the old Whig traditions are still powerful—to counteract him, and thus, paralyzing the Whig support, they turned against him the election of 1874, and overthrew the most popular minister the people had ever called to power.

Since the election the same influences have been at work, checking and thwarting every effort made by the Liberal party. Meanwhile, Mr. Gladstone, impelled by his earnest patriotic spirit, flings himself now and again into political strife, and yet wavers, vacillates, disappears once more into retirement. At each call of his, ringing like the trumpet note of battle, the people half spring up, ready to rally round him, but only to fall back disappointed when he murmurs something about Lord Hartington's leadership, or apologises for speaking at all. Before long, if he vacillates thus,

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he will lose the people's trust, and the sun of his glory will set for evermore. We contend that Mr. Gladstone is now divided in mind between the support of the great Whig houses and that of the people; his noble English heart, his generous instincts, his political genius, all urge him to break with a dead Whigism, and to embrace a living Radicalism, but he wavers, influenced by those who surround him, and who ever whisper in his ear distrust of the people. Nay, does not he himself, in his moments of weakness, share the distrust which is so skilfully inculcated on him? How exactly this hypothesis of his position would explain his whole conduct during the Suez Canal agitation. His upright and pure character revolted from the shameful nature of the trick then perpetrated on England; a hint that he was ready to challenge the proceedings of the Government was whispered, and meetings sufficient to show the people's willingness to endorse his action answered his questioning glance; more the people could not do, unless he came more boldly to the front, for a pointless and fruitless agitation is a weapon not used by real Radical politicians. Mr. Gladstone, according to our hypothesis, felt anxious to act with the people, but sought counsel of the old Whig leaders; they, not wishing to see him once more triumphantly borne into power by the people's will, demurred to any action being taken, prevented the Liberal clubs from taking the matter up, chilled and discouraged him; he wavered, dallied, drew back, and the Radicals, disgusted at his vacillation, refused to be the catspaw of a minister who did not know his own mind, or who felt himself bound by promises—of which the people knew nothing—to the very men who had intrigued to drive him from office. The same thing has gone on over this last agitation; if Gladstone, after his Blackheath speech, had stood forward as leader, ready to challenge the Government, and signifying his readiness, the Government would have been overthrown, and he would have had the deathless glory of solving the question which has troubled Europe for so many years. It was no fault of the people's that he withdrew from them; they answered swiftly to his call; they prayed him to lead them: meeting after meeting begged him to take his rightful place; the great meetings at Exeter Hall craved his support; but all was in vain, and once more, pained and disheartened, the people fell back, puzzled at what appeared to be his inconsistency and wistfully reproachful of his desertion.

This game of hide-and-seek with England cannot go on much longer; a man like Mr. Gladstone has no right to play fast and loose with his followers, to use his great influence to rouse the people, and then to retire and leave them leaderless, ironically committing them to the guidance of the brilliant statesmanship of Lord Hartington. Mr. Gladstone must make his choice, and that right speedily, between the great Whig houses and the people. Men like Lord Granville, and Lord Fitzwilliam, posing as leaders of Liberal opinion, forget that the political situation is rapidly changing, and that power is passing into new hands. The Household Suffrage Bill of Mr. Disraeli has, so far as the boroughs are concerned, introduced a new factor into the problem. The political education of the people by the

press and by the tongue is awakening the masses to a sense of their rights and of their strength : the *London* press is no longer the *English* press ; provincial journals are beginning to run it close ; each great centre of national life has its own organs, and the public opinion of Newcastle, Manchester, Sheffield, and Birmingham, is influenced by their own papers far more than by the London journals ; those who rule England must learn the drift of the country by marking the tone of provincial thought reflected in provincial journalism, instead of as of yore, taking as England's will the thought of the London press. The politics of the past have been a game between the great Whig and Tory Houses, who have monopolized the Government, and have divided it between themselves for the benefit of the players ; the politics of the future will be the business of the people, carried on for the benefit of all the sharers in the national life.

Let Mr. Gladstone choose !—choose between the support of the great Whig Houses, who secretly despise him since he is not of their order, and who will only smile on him to his face, to betray him behind his back : between these and the People, who still love him, who still trust him, but whose faith is sorely shaken by his recent conduct. Let him choose ! if he choose to cling to the Whig lords the day of his power is gone from him, never to return, and the people will leave him to those whom he prefers. But, for England's sake, let Gladstone choose the people ; let him give her again his genius and his golden tongue ; let him take the helm once more, while younger men grow up, braced by his example, worthily to fill his place when he is gone. For the sake of the country to which he owes all duty ; for the sake of the people who ask his help in their need ; for the sake of England's honour, now so foully stained ; for the sake of Europe's imperilled peace and the lives of myriads of human beings ; for the sake of these who look to him in their sore need, let Gladstone choose the people's side, and cast in his lot with the nation, not the few, and Gladstone's name shall shine with a glory in the coming years that shall dim even the glory of his past, and shall be written in the heart of a grateful country as the Minister of a people instead of the Minister of a class.



IV. Second and Third Ministries, 1880–5



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Stuart Reid (ed.), *Memoirs of Sir Wemyss Reid, 1842–1885* (London, Cassell, 1905)

Sir (Thomas) Wemyss Reid (1842–1905) was a journalist and biographer, born in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, and second son of Alexander Reid, a Congregationalist minister and his second wife, Jessy. He began work as a journalist at the age of fifteen, and by 1861 had become chief reporter for the *Newcastle Journal*. He moved to the *Preston Guardian* in 1864, and then the *Leeds Mercury*, of which he was editor between 1870 and 1887, and during which time the ‘Hawarden Kite’ was flown.

The ‘Kite’ was a letter written by Herbert Gladstone to the *Leeds Mercury* on his father’s ‘Authentic Plan’ for Irish Home Rule. It was published on 17 December 1885. When its unpopularity became immediately apparent, Herbert’s father hastily explained it away: he had not yet committed himself to Home Rule, or the separation of Ireland from the rest of the United Kingdom. The Liberals won the 1886 election with 334 MPs, securing no seats whatsoever in Ireland; the Conservatives gained 250 seats and the Irish nationalists 86 – an election result which gave Gladstone food for thought.

Wemyss Reid remained loyal to Gladstone, despite his apparent change of mind and even though his own conversion to Irish Home Rule predated that of the Prime Minister. In 1890 he became founding editor of the weekly paper *The Speaker* and was knighted in 1894. In the later 1880s he wrote two biographies of eminent Liberal figures: W. E. Forster (1888) and Richard Monckton Milnes (1890). In 1899 he published a 752-page *Life of William Ewart Gladstone*. Gladstone had reviewed Reid’s biography of Forster in *The Nineteenth Century* in September 1888 and he did not find it particularly satisfactory.

The earlier part of Wemyss Reid’s memoirs was finally published after his death, in 1905. The editor, Stuart J. Reid, was Wemyss Reid’s younger brother. Stuart Reid spent some time between 1890 and 1899 writing a column for his older sibling in *The Speaker* and was also on the literary staff of the *Leeds Mercury*. Stuart Reid, like his brother, also completed biographies (in his case, Lord John Russell and Sydney Smith).

Stuart Reid’s work on the extract reproduced in this volume, however, is largely invisible, although he contributed a thirty-page introduction. He pointed

out that his older brother ‘was the trusted friend’ of both Gladstone and Rosebery, and felt that ‘no other journalist was so absolutely in the confidence of the leaders of the Liberal Party – a circumstance which was due as much to his character as to his capacity.’ (S. Reid (ed.), *Memoirs*, p. xiii). But he was careful to point out how discreet his brother was, taking as an example the controversy of 1880 about whether Gladstone would return to office as Liberal Prime Minister: Wemyss ‘held his peace with all the materials for his own vindication in his hand, rather than embarrass Mr. Gladstone’. (Ibid., p. xiv)

This selection of short extracts from Wemyss Reid’s *Memoirs* provides, on the whole, an objective appraisal of Gladstone’s character and circumstances in the early 1880s. They give an interesting view of how an alert political adviser assessed Gladstone’s physical fitness and political charisma when he visited Leeds in October 1881. Wemyss Reid comes out of these pages as a friend of Gladstone and of Liberalism, providing noteworthy insights into both Gladstone and the later Victorian Liberal Party.



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CHAPTER XIII.

THE GENERAL ELECTION OF 1880.

Mr. Gladstone's Position in 1879—His Decision to Contest Midlothian—How he came to be Adopted by the Leeds Liberals—The Conversation Club—A Visit from John Morley—The Dissolution of 1880—Lecture on Mr. Gladstone—His Triumphant Return for Leeds—His Election for Midlothian—Mr. Herbert Gladstone Adopted as his Successor at Leeds—Mr. Gladstone's Visit to Leeds in 1881—A Fiasco Narrowly Avoided—A Wonderful Mass Meeting—Mr. Gladstone's Collapse and Recovery—My Introduction to Him—An Excursion to Tunis—"The Land of the Bey"—Mr. A. M. Broadley's Prophecies—Howard Payne's Grave—A Series of Coincidences.

THE misfortunes described in the last chapter befell me in 1880; I must now retrace my steps and go back to the year 1879. That year was largely spent in preparations for the General Election. Party spirit ran very high. Lord Beaconsfield retained his great popularity in London and among the classes, and the Press and the clubs in consequence believed that the General Election, when it came, would provide him with another victory. Mr. Gladstone was hated more than ever by the London journalists, and by all who had been attracted by the showy foreign policy of Lord Beaconsfield. I am afraid that he was not at this time over popular in the inner circle of his own party. He had resigned the leadership in 1875, and had ostensibly gone into retirement. He had emerged from that retirement in 1876, in order to be the voice of the nation in its outburst of indignation against the Sultan.

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From that time forward he had occupied a curious position. He was neither leader nor follower, but a great force, acting independently of other persons, and disconcerting them visibly by the unexpectedness of his movements.

I had access, years afterwards, to the records of the meetings of the leading members of the Liberal party during the period between 1874 and 1880. It was easy to gather from these secret and confidential memoirs that Mr. Gladstone was found to be an uneasy bedfellow by his old colleagues. When he was moved by any strong impulse he was very apt to forget that Lord Hartington was the nominal leader of the Opposition, and to take some line of action without waiting to consult his ostensible chief. He did, I believe, consult Lord Granville with frequency, if not with regularity. Lord Granville was, in his opinion, the leader of the whole party, whilst the only post held by Lord Hartington was that of leader of the Opposition in the House of Commons. The result of his frequent interventions in public affairs was undoubtedly to throw the Opposition into some confusion. The *Times*, and the other chief organs of the London Press, constantly poured ridicule upon his speeches, and did their best to accentuate the differences between himself and his former colleagues. It followed—not unnaturally, perhaps—that there were those among the leaders of the Liberal party who desired to prevent Mr. Gladstone's return to power. But whilst the great chief was thus assailed and intrigued against in London, his position in the country was every day becoming stronger.

It was known that he meant to retire from

the representation of Greenwich when the Parliament elected in 1874 came to an end. A score of different towns contended for the honour of securing him as the Liberal representative. Leeds, amongst other great constituencies, sent a deputation to Harley Street, where Mr. Gladstone was living. To all these offers he turned a deaf ear, and to the amazement of everybody it was announced that he had decided to contest Midlothian, at that time represented by Lord Dalkeith, whose father, the Duke of Buccleuch, was the recognised leader of Conservatism in Scotland. Many years afterwards I learned from Mr. Gladstone himself that before accepting the candidature for Midlothian he consulted Lord Granville and Lord Hartington, pointing out to them that if he were to enter into a colossal struggle like that involved in the fight for the great Tory stronghold of Midlothian, instead of accepting one of the safe seats offered to him elsewhere, his position in the party would of necessity be altered. In short, he could only fight Midlothian as a leader. Lord Granville and Lord Hartington, undeterred by this consideration, still pressed him to stand for Midlothian. From the moment he consented to do so Mr. Gladstone undoubtedly regarded himself as the leader in the great campaign upon which the country was about to embark.

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It was in October, 1881, that the Prime Minister came to Leeds to thank us for his election in the previous year. Among the many political meetings, or series of meetings, that I remember, I can call to mind none like this. For weeks before the event we of the Liberal Committee were engaged in preparing for it. Mr. Gladstone was to arrive on the Thursday evening, and to leave on Saturday evening. Into the forty-eight hours of his visit

a series of engagements was packed to which a week might well have been devoted. On the first evening he was formally welcomed to the town, which had been decorated for the occasion as though for a royal visit. Afterwards a large dinner party was held at the residence of his host, Mr. (now Sir James) Kitson. On the Friday he received an address from the Mayor and Corporation, and another from the Chamber of Commerce, to both of which he replied in speeches of some length. A little later in the day a great meeting was held in the Victoria Hall, at which addresses were presented to him from all the Liberal Associations of Yorkshire, and he responded in a very fine speech that lasted an hour. In the evening he attended a great banquet at which thirteen hundred persons sat down to dinner in a noble hall specially erected for the occasion, whilst the day's work ended with a vast torchlight procession from the dining-hall in the heart of Leeds to Kitson's residence at Headingley.

On the Saturday, after some minor engagements, the character of which I forget, but which involved a certain amount of speech-making, Mr. Gladstone was entertained at luncheon in the Victoria Hall by the Leeds Liberal Club, of which I was the honorary secretary; and after speaking there he went direct to the temporary building erected in the Cloth-hall yard, and there addressed a mass meeting of many thousands of persons. Afterwards he attended a large dinner party at the house of Mr. Barran, and at ten o'clock departed from Leeds by special train for Hawarden. It will be seen that the burden of work laid upon him was enormous, especially considering the fact

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that he was already in his seventy-second year. Yet his wonderful constitution and untiring energy enabled him to go through the whole programme not only with apparent ease, but with an exuberant vitality that seemed to suggest that if his engagements had been twice as numerous he would have been equal to them all. I doubt if any other statesman ever before got through so much work and speech-making in the course of a couple of days.

As I look back now, after the lapse of many years, upon that memorable time—for the Leeds visit was memorable, not only in Mr. Gladstone's career, but in the political history of the country—the two speeches which stand out in greatest prominence are those which he delivered at the banquet on the Friday evening, and the mass meeting on the Saturday afternoon. The banquet narrowly escaped being a terrible fiasco. For the first time in my association with them, I had a difference of opinion with Kitson and Mathers regarding the arrangements for the dinner. The cost of erecting the special dining-hall was, of course, very considerable. I proposed that it should be met by a uniform charge of two guineas for the dinner tickets. My friends, on the other hand, prepared an elaborate plan by which the tickets were to be charged at different rates from one guinea up to five, according to the position of the seats. In this way more money was to be obtained, but it was at the cost of extra labour on the part of the executive, and of a good deal of grumbling from those local Liberals who had helped us most earnestly in the 1880 election, but who could not afford to pay the very high price demanded for the best seats. The

allotment of these variously priced seats at the banquet was a heavy task, and it was undertaken by Mathers. Somehow or other he was delayed in his work until two days before the dinner was to take place, and then he was seized with sudden illness.

I was called in to take his place, and discovered an alarming state of affairs. It was Wednesday night, Mr. Gladstone was to arrive on Thursday, and his heavy round of engagements was to begin on Friday morning. More than thirty thousand tickets had to be sent out to all parts of the country for the various meetings, and on Wednesday night not one ticket had been despatched. Moreover, Mathers had prepared so elaborate a scheme for the allotment and registration of all the tickets applied for, that a rapid calculation satisfied me that we could not possibly despatch the last of the tickets until at least two days after Mr. Gladstone's departure from Leeds. This was rather a terrible discovery to be made on the eve of the Premier's arrival. The knot had to be cut instead of being unravelled. I put aside the elaborate and irreproachable volumes in which Mathers and his staff had been entering the tickets at the time when he was seized with illness, and, with the help of a sixpenny memorandum book and half a dozen smart bank clerks, succeeded in allotting and posting the whole of the thirty thousand tickets between ten o'clock on Wednesday night and eight o'clock on Thursday morning. I never worked harder in my life, but when my work was done, and the tickets had all passed beyond my control, I fell into a terrible state of panic. I was firmly convinced that in my rapid allotment

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of seats to the five different orders of banqueters I had made the most hideous blunders, and I expected nothing less than a riot when the company assembled in the dining-hall. To my unfeigned astonishment, my fears proved to be utterly unfounded. There was a seat for everybody, and everybody got a seat, though to this day I have a shrewd suspicion that more than one gentleman who had paid five guineas for his place found himself relegated to a one guinea seat. But what did it matter? People had come to hear Mr. Gladstone, and so long as they succeeded in this they were indifferent to everything else.

Mr. Gladstone's speech at the dinner was the famous one in which he discussed the Irish question, warned Mr. Parnell of the dangers of the course upon which he had embarked, and declared emphatically that the resources of civilisation were not exhausted. He did not take his seat at the high table in the hall where Sir James Kitson presided until dinner was over and the speeches were about to begin. I observed that when he did so, after having gazed with admiration upon the brilliant scene, he leant forward, and, covering his face with both hands, remained for some time in that attitude. On the following evening I sat next to Mrs. Gladstone at dinner at Sir John Barran's house. She asked me if I had observed this action of her husband's, and on my answering in the affirmative, she said to me, "He was praying. You know, he always prays before he makes an important speech, and he felt that speech very much. What do you think he said to me last night after he had gone to his dressing-room? 'My dear, if I were twenty years younger, I should

go to Ireland myself as Irish Secretary.'” The speech was a great oratorical success, and at the close of the banquet, as I have said, an immense torchlight procession, which had been carefully organised by the local committee, conducted the Premier and his wife from the banqueting hall to the residence of Kitson at Headingley. The procession had to pass across Woodhouse Moor, and I do not think I ever witnessed a more effective spectacle of the kind.

The speech which, to my mind, ranked next in importance and interest to this at the dinner was that which Mr. Gladstone delivered on the following day to the mass meeting of Leeds working men. Fully thirty thousand persons attended this meeting, which, like the dinner, took place in a temporary building. It was crowded to suffocation—literally to suffocation. When I arrived, shortly before the proceedings began, I found that the whole thirty thousand people were gasping for breath, and that many were fainting. We had quite forgotten to arrange for the ventilation of the vast hall! Things looked very serious. The hubbub was indescribable, and the sufferings of the crowd were so great that it was clearly impossible that, under the conditions prevailing, any meeting could be held. Fortunately, there were active and willing workers on the spot, and a band of young men was organised who, mounting to the temporary roof of the hall, tore the planking open, and quickly relieved the pressure upon the sufferers beneath. But even when they had been supplied with air the thirty thousand were anything but comfortable. They were tightly packed together in a sweltering

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mass, and in no condition to listen patiently to speeches. The noise and hubbub was little short of deafening.

The Chairman, having briefly addressed the meeting in dumb show, called upon one eminent Liberal after another to move the preliminary resolutions. Not a word that any one of these gentlemen said could be heard a yard beyond the limits of the platform. It seemed that nothing could be done to reduce the vast audience to silence, and we were in despair at the thought that Mr. Gladstone would have to face so severe an ordeal. When at last his turn came, and he stepped to the front of the platform, thirty thousand throats sent up such a shout that it seemed to shake the building. Again and again for a space of some minutes it was renewed, whilst the orator stood, pale and motionless. What could one voice have done against thirty thousand? Then, just as the cheering seemed to be subsiding, someone started "For he's a jolly good fellow," and the whole thirty thousand joined in the song. After that it took some minutes for them all to settle down again, and still there went on that undercurrent of murmuring talk which seemed to make the attempt of anyone to address the gigantic meeting hopeless. But suddenly Mr. Gladstone raised his hand, and it was almost as if a miracle had happened. In an instant there was a deathlike silence in the hall, and every man in it seemed to be holding his breath. The speaker's voice rang out, clear and musical as of old, and it reached to the furthest corners of the mighty apartment. But he had not got further than the conventional opening words when his audience seemed to go mad with

delight. A frenzied burst of cheering, far exceeding that which had welcomed him on his first appearance, proclaimed the joy with which they had heard the voice of the man they adored.

Again it was some minutes before Mr. Gladstone was allowed to proceed, but once more his uplifted hand ensured silence, and from that moment until he had reached the end of an hour's speech, every syllable that he uttered was heard distinctly by his thirty thousand listeners. It was, I think, the passionate eagerness of the audience to hear his voice, and their outburst of delight when its notes first fell upon their ears, that formed the most striking feature of that great meeting. Perhaps there was something almost idolatrous in the reception given to the statesman. It would have turned the heads of most men. The wonder is that it affected Mr. Gladstone so slightly. Yet I must say again that one must have been present at scenes like this in order to appreciate the real position of this remarkable man at this the very zenith of his political career. I remember that this speech, which was received with so intense an enthusiasm by all who heard it, contained the speaker's defence of what is known as the Majuba Hill policy. To those of us who were under the wand of the magician it seemed that no other defence was needed.

I had an opportunity, when the meeting was over, of seeing what effect the physical effort of making an hour's speech to an audience of thirty thousand had upon Mr. Gladstone. When I went into the committee room he was half reclining in an armchair, wrapped in a large cloak. His eyes were closed, his face was deathly pale, his whole

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aspect that of a man who was absolutely exhausted. Mrs. Gladstone brought him a cup of tea, but even as he drank his eyes were shut. To me, who had never seen him in this state before, it was alarming to observe him in a condition of positive collapse. Yet a few hours later he was the life and soul of a large dinner party. That dinner is memorable to me, because it was the first occasion on which I met Mr. Gladstone in private. I had a good opportunity of seeing that charming personal courtesy which distinguished him in all his social relationships. I was introduced to him by our host across the dinner-table, and he immediately plunged into a discussion about newspapers and distinguished journalists who were known to me personally. I remember he paid a great compliment to the *Standard*, saying that it was a newspaper he always liked to read because he always found it to be fair and honest. "When I read a bad leader in the *Standard*," he said, "I say to myself, Mr. Mudford must be taking a holiday." I duly reported this saying to Mudford afterwards, and I know that this praise from one whom he had often criticised so severely afforded that distinguished editor intense pleasure.

Egypt and Gordon were the topics which I chiefly discussed with Forster during our years of intimacy after 1882. The fate of Gordon, in particular, excited in him a degree of emotion of which few would have thought him capable. More than once I have seen the tears in his eyes when he was speaking of Gordon, surrounded by his savage foes in his desert capital. The Ministry, as everybody knows, was floundering in those days. Even those of us who were the warm friends and admirers of Mr. Gladstone were troubled and perplexed. Some of us knew, indeed, that Mr. Gladstone was not the only, nor the chief, sinner in the matter of Gordon; but he was the scapegoat behind whom those who had a greater responsibility for the mismanagement of the Soudan business were only too glad to hide themselves. Forster was filled with indignation and contempt by the confused utterances of the Ministry, and by Mr. Gladstone's elaborate attempts to prove that though General Gordon was "hemmed in" he was not surrounded. Poor Mr. Gladstone! It was sad indeed that he should have to undertake this thankless task, and should be compelled to make out a case for a Cabinet which had practically got out of hand. It was in connection with one of his apologies for the Ministry that Mr. Forster charged him with being able to persuade most people of almost anything, and himself of everything. This chance phrase, used in the heat of debate, was treated by Lord Hartington as being a direct imputation upon Mr.

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Gladstone's sincerity, and Forster was lectured and denounced in terms which made the breach between himself and his old colleagues wider than ever. There was no truth in the charge made against him. He always had, and always expressed, a profound admiration for Gladstone's character, and he had never for a moment doubted his honesty. He felt the violent invective of Lord Hartington keenly. When he met the latter in the lobby on the same evening, he said to him, "You were very unfair to me to-night, and you knew it, but you had such a d——d bad case that I forgive you."

at their doors, and tried in every possible way to evade them. Mr. Gladstone, with the collar of his overcoat turned up to his ears, used suddenly to dash out of the garden door at the back of Downing Street, and attempt, by running across the parade at full speed, to get rid of his bodyguard. Occasionally he succeeded, but I am told that as a consequence he had so severe a wiggling from the Home Secretary and the Chief Commissioner of Police that he was at last compelled to abandon his efforts to secure his unfettered liberty of action. Forster managed to obtain exemption from the obtrusive services of a bodyguard, but a policeman kept watch and ward by day and night in front of his house in Eccleston Square, not only to his disgust, but to that of one of his neighbours, who quitted his abode rather than continue to live near so dangerous a character. "I often wonder," said Forster to me one day, "what I shall do if I find an infernal machine on my doorstep when I come home some night. I know what it is my duty to do. I ought to take it up, and throw it into the middle of the square, but I am terribly afraid that I shan't have the pluck, and shall simply turn round and run away." Nobody who knew Forster could believe that he would ever have acted in any such fashion.

Thomas O'Connor, *Gladstone's House of Commons*
(London, Ward & Downey, 1885)

Thomas Power O'Connor (1848–1929) was an Irish journalist and politician, born in Athlone. Educated in Ireland (BA, Queen's College, Galway, 1866) he took up a post on a Dublin daily paper, *Saunders's Newsletter*, before moving to London in 1870. He became a freelance reporter in the 1870s and published his first book, a violent attack on Disraeli, in 1876. Convinced by Parnell to adopt the policy of Irish Home Rule, O'Connor was elected for Galway borough in 1880. From 1883 to 1898 he was President of the Irish Nationalist League of Great Britain, yet he remained perhaps best-known as a journalist.

In 1880 John Morley, at that time editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, took him on to write a nightly sketch of House of Commons proceedings. Morley apparently thought very highly of O'Connor's ability to write character sketches and it is from these that the volume entitled *Gladstone's House of Commons* was created. In 1885 O'Connor married Elizabeth Howard, daughter of a United States judge. In the election of that year he wrote an address to the Irish Nationalist supporters in Great Britain, urging them to defeat the Liberals by voting Conservative. But with Gladstone's later adoption of Home Rule, he changed his mind and from this time forward became much more overtly friendly to the Liberal leader. It is perhaps fitting that his last recorded piece of work is a two-page defence of Gladstone, published in *TP's Weekly* on 29 December 1928, a journal O'Connor himself had founded in 1902. This, he declared, was a portrayal of 'the real Gladstone'.

The material for *Gladstone's House of Commons* was written at a far earlier stage in O'Connor's career. According to its author, '[t]he justification of the title is the commanding position held in the last Parliament by the overwhelming personality of Mr Gladstone'. It is a very detailed account of the life of Gladstone's second ministry, extending to 537 pages.

The extracts selected for this edition show Gladstone at various moments during his second ministry. Given his Parnellite views, O'Connor was, at this point in his career, unlikely to be a close friend of Gladstone or his policies and was not afraid to make his views public. Yet the result is somewhat unexpected. O'Connor was working for an editor who was a staunch Gladstone supporter

and clearly would not have wanted to produce anything that was too opposed to the activities of the 'Grand Old Man'. It seems that O'Connor himself came to view his subject in a more favourable light as he began to put his impressions down on paper. He gives Gladstone personal credit for speaking on the Irish Land Bill in 1881, for example. Even at seventy-two years of age, Gladstone seems 'as alert and vigorous as if he were still in life's auroral youth'. O'Connor was keen to present his writings as an objective assessment of Gladstone's time in the Commons. One example of this is a description of Gladstone's return to the House in 1883, following an absence because of illness: O'Connor stresses that the politician was simply not as popular as some newspapers had it.

Gladstone's House of Commons also contains a lot of information on the Prime Minister's foreign policy difficulties between 1884 and 1885, relating to events in the Sudan in the wake of Gordon's death at Khartoum and the crisis in Anglo-Russian relations over the future of Afghanistan's Penjdeh province. On one occasion O'Connor remarks how these events actually led to Gladstone being heckled by Tories who were upset by rumours of a deal with Russia. It was not until May 1885 that this crisis finally passed: Britain did not go to war with Russia.

O'Connor's observations are a very useful source for Gladstone's second ministry, recorded by a witness who was by no means friendly. It is obvious from these extracts that their author regarded himself as an observer and a chronicler.



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MR. GLADSTONE ON THE LAND BILL.

HOUSE OF COMMONS, *May 16, 1881.*

THE adjournment of the debate on the second reading of the Land Bill had been moved on Thursday night by the Solicitor-General for Ireland—a conscientious, conciliatory, but prolix speaker, whose rise is not a subject of universal rejoicing; and it was therefore with joyful surprise that Mr. Gladstone was seen to rise in the stead of his subordinate. The Prime Minister stated that he was indisposed; and his face, pale and suffering, the ominous presence of the now too frequent stick and a glass of suspicious-looking fluid—all confirmed the truth of the statement; and the low, feeble, and husky voice in which he spoke his first sentences seemed to prepare his hearers for a weak and feeble effort—an effort which had the additional disadvantage of being addressed to members at that critical hour when the ordinary

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parliamentarian craves for food. With everything thus dead against him, Mr. Gladstone sat down, after a speech which created astonishment, passion, bewildered admiration, and which must rank among one of his most extraordinary oratorical triumphs. This is not the place to go through anything like even an epitome of a speech that occupied an hour and twenty-five minutes in delivery; suffice it to mention just a few of the chief points. First, he gave it to be understood that he was open to reason on the question of arrears, leaseholders, and the composition of the Land Court. On this last point he made the important announcement that, as the framers of the measure intended, but not as the draughtsman had executed, the tenant was meant to have the option of passing the court by and going direct to the Commission. But the most striking part of the speech was that in which he dealt with the attitude of the Conservative Opposition and of the Parnellite abstentionists. In the determination of the Conservatives to support the amendment of Lord Elcho, he saw—this part of the speech, solemn enough in matter, was heightened by the grave and deep tones in which it was uttered—he saw the first effect of the death of Lord Beaconsfield. Then he went on to pay a tribute to the readiness with which his great rival recognized the hopelessness of vain struggles, as instanced by his action on the Irish Church Bill and the Land Act of 1870; and contrasted the temper with this unyielding spirit of his successors. But, asked Mr. Gladstone, with a flash of triumph that gave his eye the piercing look of the eagle, could a smaller bill than the present be brought in by a Conservative Ministry?—and he had to pause, panting, elated, with a haughtily uplifted head, and a pose of statuesque grace, for several seconds, until the wild burst of cheers from the Ministerialists had died away. Then he went on with concentrated force to declare that the bill which a Conservative Government would bring in would, according to the probabilities of the case, be a stronger instead of a weaker bill; and he followed this by the important expression of opinion that it was the interest of the Parnellites to help in changing the Government from a

Liberal to a Conservative Ministry. The peroration was especially fine; the feebleness of voice had passed completely away; his whole frame was swayed by inspiration, and the words rang out clear, piercing, and passion-laden.

There was, of course, a rush after this, and for the rest of the evening dulness reigned supreme; though there were just sufficient members to show that something really was going on. More than once the Treasury Bench was left without a single occupant. Colonel Stanley first broke silence from the front Opposition bench, and announced that he would vote with Lord Elcho. He made a long speech, temperate as a rule, but in some parts sufficiently hostile to the measure. Mr. T. P. O'Connor, who was the first speaker of any note among the Parnellites to break the seal of silence, delivered a brisk attack on the measure, and Mr. Chaplin moved the adjournment of the debate. The House pottered over some minor orders until the sitting came to a miserable end at a quarter-past two, succumbing to a count out at the awful hands of Mr. Biggar.

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ONE effect of the prominence of the Land Bill has been to make the general politician forget that there were several other occasions on which Mr. Gladstone displayed qualities quite as marvellous as those he developed on the great Irish measure. The Premier has sunk from sight the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and the Land Bill the Budget of the year; but those who have been retentive spectators of the entire session will look back on the Budget nights as perhaps affording proof even more striking than the Land Bill discussions of that truly marvellous readiness, mastery of detail, and far-reaching patience which are among the most marked endowments of Mr. Gladstone. It was a subject worthy of never-failing wonder to see this Minister, loaded with all the crowding responsibilities of the Premiership, discussing the question of worts with practical brewers like Mr. Watney and Mr. Bass, the rival claims of public and privately made beer with farmers like Mr. Pell and Mr. Hicks, of Irish and Scotch whisky with Mr. O'Sullivan, specific gravity with Mr. Wiggin, an accomplished chemist, the currency with Mr. Hubbard, a past master of finance, licences wholesale and retail with Mr. Callan, as representative of the publicans. The Budget Bill is a document of portentous length—to the ordinary eye as full of interest as “Bradshaw's Railway Guide,” and to the unfinancial mind as devoid of significance as the columns of the money market. But every line, it need scarcely be said, contains some provision, a change in which might reduce or increase by millions the interest of some of the many national industries; and it was marvellous to watch the Chancellor as, with this portentous volume in his hand, he hour after hour, in the sweltering and even abominable atmosphere of the House of Commons, followed every amendment, rejected or accepted every suggestion, and with his own hand marked in with his pen every alteration, from the omission of a clause to the change of “the” to “an.”

The history of the Land Bill in the triumph of its later stages is so well known that the darkness and gloom of its first youth has been forgotten. Its reception on the first night of its production forecast nothing; for, if the truth were to be told, the overwhelming majority of those who listened were unable, amid the vast and teeming provisions, complicated and apparently contradictory, some excepting, some supplementing, to gather the real meaning of the changes which the measure proposed. When the public woke up during the recess everything looked bright and promising; but the horizon again lowered on the reassembling of legislators. The debate on the second reading stage extended to apparently interminable length; the Parnellites had declared war. There was still the vista of sixty clauses, each involving some important principle, each capable of any amount of discussion; and in that vista stalked the menacing spectres of certain obstruction from the Fourth Party and contingent obstruction from the Home Rulers. When at last the bill did get into Committee the first few days more than realized the gloomiest forebodings. The bill contained something like fifteen hundred lines; at the end of three or four days' discussion the House had not disposed of half a dozen lines out of this grand total. The patient persistence, the never-failing hopefulness of Mr. Gladstone had much to do with inspiring the high tide of enthusiasm and determination which overcame these portentous dangers. The Radicals either held their peace or spoke out clearly; the front Opposition bench was timidly reticent; the patience of all sections of the assembly broke down under the petty turbulence of Lord Randolph Churchill. The first clause of the bill was got through and the future of the bill was made tolerably certain. Throughout the many evenings of discussion which followed, Mr. Gladstone was the most prominent figure; and nobody who was not a witness of it all could well appreciate the vast amount of labour, the intellectual alacrity, the restraint of temper, the mingled concentration and dispersal of intellectual vision which such a task involved. The notice paper daily teemed with amendments the mastery of which would alone supply an ordinary mind's

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full share of work for a day; but, besides all this, during every hour of discussion in the House proposals were started from every part of it the significance of which even an unusually quick mind would often fail to grasp on the moment. It was in the promptitude with which he is able to master all such proposals that the Prime Minister stands above any man in the House of Commons.

On all the great occasions in which he has been called to take part—in all save one—the Premier has been equal to the height of the situation. When the time came for his speech on the second reading of the Land Bill he was, as he said, indisposed. But, in spite of all these disadvantages, the speech was a triumph, delivered in splendid voice, and, in parts, of majestic eloquence. A perhaps more difficult task was the speech on proposing the monument to Lord Beaconsfield. The Premier performed his task in such a way as to elicit from Sir Stafford Northcote the well-deserved eulogium that the speech was a monument more lasting than brass to the memory of Lord Beaconsfield. All difficult points were skilfully kept out of sight, and the delivery of the speech was a perfect example of elocution. The one important occasion on which Mr. Gladstone was not equal to himself was in the debate on the Transvaal. On closing the debate he was somewhat confused; but he spoke at an advanced hour, on a very hot night, had an enormous quantity of matter to go over which he had not properly digested, and spoke to a House which had made up its mind, and which, so far as some of the parties were concerned, was post-prandially exuberant and noisy. So much for Mr. Gladstone's more important and serious appearances. He has perhaps been more surprisingly successful in impromptu little speeches thrown off in a lighter mood and on the spur of the moment. One of his happiest moments was when the House was about to rise for the Easter recess. This was the occasion when he informed Sir Stafford Northcote that he would not “penetrate into the sanctuary of his mind,” and when Colonel Tottenham, who made a plea for delay in recommencing the debate on the Land Bill, was exhorted to “rise to the height of the great occasion and start for his home

on a Saturday instead of on a Monday." The reply to Lord Sandon's complaint that the Government had not published the French tariff in English was also intensely amusing; and the retort to poor Mr. Ashmead-Bartlett is still fresh in everybody's mind. The restless energy which had no longer a vent in answering objections, or meeting opponents, or in soothing unreason, was not to be kept wholly in bounds, and the Premier was to be seen roaming in happy vagabondage over the vacant seats. At one moment in an upper bench below the Radical gangway in talk with a North Country member; the next, on the front Opposition bench, in friendly colloquy with Mr. Arthur Balfour; now at the bar of the House, in consultation with Lord R. Grosvenor; anon behind the Speaker's chair, pointing an argument with outstretched finger to some amicable opponent—in short, at seventy-two as alert and vigorous as if he were still in life's auroral youth.