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*Solid, interesting work*

Gladstone - A Biography

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Gladstone - 1809-1874

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Two aspects of William Gladstone's life that are examined by Philip Magnus in his book Gladstone - A Biography are Gladstone's remarkable metamorphosis from a hard core Tory to the foremost representative of the Liberal cause and his extraordinary ability to repeatedly come back from political defeat. Magnus shows how Gladstone, as a young man, was the epitome of Tory intransigence and upper-class arrogance. On May 16, 1831 Gladstone made a speech against the Reform Bill which he called "unwise and unscrupulous" and in which he equated reform with revolution (page 10). On page 19 Magnus writes that "Gladstone was uninhibited in opposing almost every forward-looking measure which came before Parliament." Gladstone "opposed the abolition of sinecures, the abolition of flogging for minor offences in the Services, the adoption of a secret ballot at elections, the admission of Dissenters to the Universities, and the admission of Jews to Parliament. He advocated <sup>strong</sup> ruthless coercion in Ireland and the maintenance of all privileges of the Anglican Church Establishment in that country. He argued strongly for retention for the Corn Laws" (page 19). In short, Gladstone favored a staunchly conservative policy which he expressed in the most clear and unequivocal terms. It is amazing that he would be the man who would later "[tower] in moral grandeur over his contemporaries and [stand] before the world as the inspired prophet of the nineteenth century liberal experiment" (page xii). This advocacy of exclusion and oppression was also reflected in Gladstone's early belief in what he thought should be the role of the Anglican

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Church in the nation. Magnus writes that Gladstone had published a book with the theme "that membership of the Church of England, which possessed a monopoly of religious truth, ought to be the fundamental qualification for membership in the national community. It followed that the Anglican Establishment should be maintained at all points, if necessary by force, and that the Roman Catholics should be excluded from civil office throughout the British Isles" (page 41). Gladstone later admitted that the book had been a mistake, "but he never suppressed the book, and it ran into several editions" (page 42). This harsh, intolerant position is in stark contrast to Gladstone's call in 1868 for the disestablishment of the Irish Church (see page 192) and his bill abolishing religious tests at the Universities which was passed by Parliament in 1871 (see page 204).

Gladstone, during the earlier part of his life, also had a hostile attitude toward his sister Helen who was a drug addict and had converted to Roman Catholicism. Magnus writes how Gladstone urged his father to expel his sister from the house and "begged in vain that priests should be kept away from his sister and felt that she "was not a convinced Roman Catholic" (page 82). According to Magnus, "Helen was terrified of her brother" (page 82). It is extraordinary how the man who later became the leader of the liberal cause had inspired fear in his own sister.

Yet, as Magnus, shows, Gladstone's outlook changed. Why it changed is a matter for speculation, but Magnus cites certain

episodes in Gladstone's life, such as the fall of Peel (see page 80), his disillusionment with the ability of the Church of England to win back Nonconformists (see page 96), and his attitude toward Disraeli (see page 102) which could account for his transformation from arch-conservative to the paragon of liberalism. In addition, Magnus notes that Gladstone had "an instinct for self-mortification" which meant "checking, repressing, quelling the inclination of the will to act with reference to self as its centre" and believed that he must act "according to the will of God" in order to attain sanctity (see page 104). This conviction may also have contributed to Gladstone's apparent sense of mission.

Gladstone's ability to survive political defeat was uncanny. Magnus writes of the many political reversals that Gladstone weathered which would have permanently destroyed the political careers of almost any other politician. In 1855 Gladstone was accused of "running away and his actions were regarded as irresponsible, cowardly and unpatriotic" after he resigned from the Palmerston government in light of an investigation of conditions in the Army during the Crimean War. Gladstone was also denounced "as a traitor, a pious fanatic or a conceited clown" for pressing for peace by negotiation (see pages 121,122). This was strong criticism, yet his career did not end. In 1866, as Chancellor of the Exchequer under the Russell government, Gladstone suffered a tremendous political defeat, when his Representation of the People Bill was defeated in <sup>Parliament,</sup> ~~government~~ resulting in the resignation of the Russell government and the

formation of a Conservative government with Gladstone's rival Disraeli succeeding Gladstone as Chancellor of the Exchequer and leader of the Commons (see pages 177-181). In 1872 Gladstone "earned much unpopularity" (page 206) in his handling of the Alabama claims. On January 11, 1878 Gladstone was publicly described as a Russian agent after assuming a pro-Russian anti-Turkish position during the Russo-Turkish War (see pages 246-249). Magnus writes that Gladstone "was a constant object of hostile demonstrations ... [and] was anathematized by society" (page 249). But perhaps the worse debacle that befell Gladstone during his political career was the fall of Khartoum and the death of General Charles Gordon in 1885. This was a disaster for which Gladstone was held fully responsible. Gladstone's government was "deluged beneath a cataract of universal execration" (page 321,322; also see pages 308-321).

*But he remained popular for his stand. Why discuss this as a combat from a defeat?*

What Magnus brings out in his book is that despite these major political setbacks, Gladstone not only persevered but repeatedly triumphed as shown by his record of having been Prime Minister four times during the nineteenth century. Such a record of political durability is astonishing and makes Gladstone a giant in British political history.

*A well-written, nicely-argued essay*

Gladstone - 1809-1874 by H.C.G. Matthew is not only a conventional biography which chronicles the accomplishments of one of the great figures in British political history. It also casts light on some interesting aspects of William Gladstone's background and personality which may have helped to shape his political outlook. Matthews shows that despite his Tory upbringing, Gladstone at an early age was already demonstrating a predisposition toward liberal thinking. For instance, Matthew shows that in 1827 "Gladstone seemed to have been consistently in favor of Catholic Emancipation, in contrast to many Tories" (see page 13). Matthew also writes that "Tory though Gladstone saw himself to be, his experience at Eton was essentially Whiggish, in the sense that it taught him to see society in terms of politics, and to see the history of Britain in terms of development and of the centrality to that development of constitutional politics...." (page 14). Gladstone also evidenced signs of religious tolerance while a teenager. According to Matthew, "the most surprising item in [Gladstone's] religious studies at Eton [was] his Sunday reading of 'the Roman Catholic Prayer Book' in 1826" (page 16).

A liberal leaning is also to be found in Gladstone's educational experience. Matthew writes that Gladstone was "the product and defender of liberal education in its purest form" (page 18). Matthew also writes that at Oxford, Gladstone exhaustively studied Homer, Plato, Aristotle, Joseph Butler and Thucydides which provided him with "a sufficient acquaintance with the Greek and Latin language and ancient history ... and

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In addition to discussing Gladstone's religious convictions, Matthew addresses a particularly bizarre aspect of Gladstone's life which could have also had a major impact on the development of Gladstone's liberal views. Matthew presents a picture of Gladstone as having been sexually frustrated and sexually repressed, despite the fact that he had nine children (see pages 89,90). Since Gladstone's religious principles inhibited him from acting on his sexual urges through violation of his marriage vows, he had to obtain sexual excitement in some other way, which in Gladstone's case took the form of rescuing prostitutes. Matthew writes "that for Gladstone rescue work became not merely a duty but a craving; it was an exposure to sexual stimulation which Gladstone felt he must both undergo and overcome. As he admitted to himself, he deliberately 'courted evil'" (page 91). In view of Matthew's explanation for why Gladstone engaged in such activity, it is possible to make a case that if Gladstone had not been so sexually repressed he may have never become a liberal. Perhaps the sexual thrill that Gladstone derived from rescuing prostitutes gave him motivation to be of service to the nation. If helping prostitutes "turned on" Gladstone, then acting to help the entire nation may have been the ultimate sexual experience for him. In view of what Matthew has revealed about Gladstone's sexual proclivities, the sexual component of Gladstone's personality cannot be ignored and this explanation for why Gladstone became a liberal cannot be summarily discounted.

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