The Unknown Gladstone: The Political Life of Herbert Gladstone, 1854-1930

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With the obvious exception of Pitt the Younger, the offspring of British prime ministers who have followed their fathers into politics have at best been pale shadows of their father. Admittedly, by my reckoning nine of them since the 1832 Great Reform Act have achieved cabinet rank, but none have seemed like potential prime ministers. Among this relatively undistinguished group, the career of Herbert Gladstone, fourth son of William Gladstone, stands out as one of the more significant. He served as a Liberal MP for nearly 30 years. As chief whip, he played a crucial role in the party's electoral recovery leading to the landslide victory at the 1906 general election. He served as home secretary between 1905 and 1910 before becoming the first Governor-General of the Union of South Africa between 1910 and 1915. In the 1920s he returned to party headquarters to oversee the fleeting Liberal revival at the 1923 general election and in old age became a vigorous defender of his father's reputation, fighting a notorious libel action in this cause.

For all this, his career has not generally been regarded as successful. Lloyd George, with whom he was bitterly at odds during the Liberal splits of the 1920s, described him as 'the finest living embodiment of the Liberal principle that talent is not hereditary'. He has been called 'accident prone', for example for his premature revelation of his father's conversion to Home Rule and his 1903 pact with Ramsay MacDonald, which by enabling the creation of a Labour parliamentary party arguably paved the way for the replacement of the Liberals by Labour as the main anti-Conservative party in British politics. In the great reforming post-1905 Liberal government, which was full of brilliant and charismatic figures, Herbert Gladstone is often considered a conspicuous failure. A poor public speaker, his name is not associated with important political causes or major legislative reforms. Modest and self-effacing, he made little effort to secure his own reputation for posterity. Unlike many of his contemporaries he did not publish any memoirs to defend his own reputation – his autobiography languishes among his papers at the British Library. His one full-length book, *After Thirty Years*, published towards the end of his life, was a defence of his father's reputation rather than of his own.

So it is unsurprising that although he was the only one of William Gladstone's sons to have a sustained political career, there has not been a full-length biography since Charles Mallet's unsatisfactory official

‘memoir’, published in 1932, although there have been occasional journal articles and book chapters, particularly focusing on aspects of his work as chief whip. His attractiveness as a biographical subject is further diminished by his not being a colourful personality nor having any whiff of scandal surrounding his private life. Lesser but more charismatic figures such as Sir Charles Dilke or Charles Masterman have received more attention.

Yet his career was far from inconsequential, and is all the more interesting because he was the politician son of a great statesman. A modern and scholarly biography was overdue, and the appearance of Professor Brown’s volume is welcome. He makes extensive use of Herbert Gladstone’s papers at the British Library, as well as a range of other archive sources, to produce an informative account of his life and career. It follows a strict chronology, which makes sense as the story fits into neat episodes: early career, chief whip, home secretary, Governor General of South Africa, wartime work with refugees and so forth. The book includes revelations that were not discussed in Mallet’s previous eulogistic volume. For example, there is an account of Herbert Gladstone’s early courtship of, and rejection by Margot Tennant (later Margot Asquith), something that I am not aware has been discussed in any of the numerous books on the Gladstones or the Asquiths. He also reveals the extent to which Herbert’s own career was subsidised by his older brother Henry. As such it will be a useful resource for future scholars of the Gladstone family, the Liberal party and British politics in the late-19th and early-20th centuries.

Yet for all the book’s undoubted merits, this reviewer reached the final page with a sense of disappointment. This is not because of any shortcomings in the research or glaring omissions in the narrative. There may be a few factual errors, but nothing of great significance. The problem is that Professor Brown offers little in the way of analysis or judgements either on the key elements of Herbert Gladstone’s career or on the wider issues that he confronted in his political life. His lack of personal charisma and relatively modest political achievements make him an unexciting subject for a biographer. But he was at or near the centre of Liberal politics for the most part of nearly 50 years, spanning a period of great Liberal triumphs, disappointments and decline. So there was an opportunity here to shed light on some of the issues, controversies and debates surrounding a turbulent period in Liberal (and British politics). What contribution did Gladstone make to those vastly varying fortunes? What light does his career shed on them? Unfortunately, while Professor Brown offers occasional comments about particular incidents or episodes, we get little in the way of overall verdicts.

For me the clearest example concerns the most obviously successful part of his career – his time as Liberal chief whip between 1899 and 1905. While historians have acknowledged Gladstone’s contribution to the Liberal landslide of 1906 in terms of rebuilding the party organisation, in my view this understates his achievement. When he took over as chief whip in 1899 he faced problems that went beyond the atrophying of the party machine over the previous decade and the well-known disagreements on the party’s front bench. The Liberal party had developed an oppositionist mindset with very little clear idea of what it wanted to achieve in government. Weak party leadership had led to activists wielding too much influence, for example through the 1891 Newcastle Programme, which amounted to an unmanageable legislative programme and included many policies which were strongly favoured by Liberal activists but were either of little interest to, or actively unpopular with, the wider electorate.

Part of the problem was that in his later years William Gladstone had neglected party management as he pursued his own great cause of Irish Home Rule, pandering to the foibles of the party’s grassroots activists. As the future Liberal Lord Chancellor, R. B. Haldane, put it ‘Mr. G. thoroughly demoralised the Liberal party by the policy of sop-throwing’. While Herbert would not have seen himself as anything other than a loyal defender of his father, in many ways his job as chief whip involved tackling the problematic legacy of the Grand Old Man’s leadership. Indeed, even before becoming chief whip, he risked the wrath of the party faithful by speaking out against arguably the most unpopular element of the Newcastle Programme, the quasi-prohibitionist temperance policy known as local veto. This had been one of the most important factors in the Liberals’ landslide defeat of 1895, and Herbert made the case that it should be dropped in favour lesser but more practical temperance measures. (Curiously, Professor Brown makes only passing reference

to the temperance issue and even then purely in the context of party fundraising.) At the same time he began the process of extricating the party from its commitment to making Irish home rule the primary legislative goal of a Liberal government, arguing that it accept that the opposition of the House of Lords made it unachievable even though it should still be supported in principle. As chief whip, Gladstone was able to effect a change of policy on both these questions, so that they were no longer such obvious electoral liabilities for the party. In doing so he pursued similar objectives to those of Liberal Imperialists such as Rosebery and Haldane, but without their noisy and tactless approach that seemed designed to alienate the Liberal rank and file. More generally, Herbert's stealthy reassertion of central control over policy and tactics meant that it entered the 1906 general election campaign unencumbered by any Newcastle-style programme and with ministers retaining freedom of action about legislative priorities.

In addition, his quest to maintain some semblance of unity during the bitter Liberal divisions over the 1899–1902 South African war helped to prevent a formal split in the party. While the Liberal leader, Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, allowed himself to become *parti pris* in the internal faction-fighting, particularly after his 'Methods of barbarism' speech in June 1901, Gladstone was the only leading figure prioritising unity over internecine warfare. This required sacrificing his own opinions to the cause and at times being what he described as 'a sort of telephone exchange' for members of the front bench as Campbell-Bannerman was barely on speaking terms with the Liberal Imperialists. As the head of party organisation Herbert also helped to put together an electoral coalition that united all forces hostile to the increasingly divided and unpopular Unionist government. This included not only negotiating the famous Gladstone-MacDonald pact with the Labour Representation Committee, but also maintaining friendly relations with the Irish parliamentary party, and encouraging nonconformists angry at the government's Education Act to bring forward candidates, often in seats that the Liberals had not previously contested seriously. He encouraged cross-party campaigning in defence of free trade and sought to co-operate with those Unionist Free Fooders who were alienated from their party by Chamberlain's tariff reform campaign.

Taken together, these achievements go way beyond simply being a successful organiser. The 1906 general election is often seen as one that the Unionists lost through their own public divisions rather than as a positive victory for the Liberals. Yet Herbert Gladstone did more than any Liberal to ensure that the party was in a fit state to fight the election campaign, form an administration that included all the leading talents, represent all shades of Liberal opinion and present itself to the electorate as a sound party of government. The Liberals had never lacked for charismatic figures and powerful orators. But for a brief time, during this period, what it needed was someone like Herbert Gladstone: modest enough to put party before personal advancement, a centripetal force in a party of centrifugal ones, and with enough authority to ensure that it made the tactical adjustments needed to win an election. In many ways he was the architect of victory, even if his own modesty and the traditional lack of credit afforded to political organisers mean that he did not get the recognition he deserves. At least that is the view I reached when researching the period. I would have been interested in Professor Brown's assessment. Should we conclude that Gladstone restored the party to rude health, enabling it to expect a bright long-term future, or that he simply put together an unstable coalition without any real reforming agenda and which was vulnerable to the rise of a Labour party that he had helped usher into existence? Unfortunately the author leaves us with little more than J. A. Spender's later comment that Gladstone 'rendered a signal service to his fellow-Liberals'.

The same is true of Gladstone's career as home secretary between 1905 and 1910. His tenure of the office has had a bad press from historians, one of whom has described his departure to become Governor-General of South Africa as 'no great loss' to the government. The achievements he presided over, such as the 1908 Children's Act, are often attributed to his more dynamic junior ministers, in particular Herbert Samuel. Professor Brown gives a good account of the strong legislative record of the Home Office during Gladstone's period in charge, the pressures his department was under and his lacklustre parliamentary performances. But at the end I was left wondering: so should we revise our view of Gladstone and see him as a successful reforming home secretary, whose reputation has been unfairly undermined by bad luck and lack of oratorical power, or is his poor reputation largely deserved? The same frustrations apply to the discussion of later parts of his career, such as his period in South Africa or his role in Liberal politics after the First

World War. For example, in his second stint at party headquarters should he be given credit for the Liberals' revival at the 1923 general election or was he, in his hatred of Lloyd George and failure to embrace new political ideas, part of the problem?

Part of me feels a bit mean-spirited in levelling these criticisms. Herbert Gladstone is not the easiest subject to bring to life on the page and Professor Brown deserves credit for taking on the challenge. There is much in this book to be commended and I would certainly not discourage anyone from reading it. Yet in the end I could not escape the feeling as I finished reading that there was more to be said here. The pricing of the book suggests that it is going to be read by specialist scholars and researchers rather than general readers, and as such an opportunity has been missed to make a greater contribution to the historiography of Liberal politics.

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