

Mary Gladstone and the Victorian Salon: Music, Literature, Liberalism

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How do you take your liberalism? Passionately? Rationally? Passionate moral energy had been the hallmark of the Liberal Prime Minister William Gladstone's public oratory and parliamentary addresses. Likewise, as Phyllis Weliver argues in *Mary Gladstone and the Victorian Salon*, Gladstone's favourite daughter, Mary – who acted as both her father's devoted *salonnière* and his private secretary – displayed her liberal beliefs as clearly when she played the musical hostess in the Gladstones' weekly 'Breakfast' salons as when she stood by her father's side when he took the platform.

If Mary can be seen a favourite of her father, then she returned that devotion in kind. Born 1847, the fifth of eight siblings, Mary was incredibly close to both her family and her close relations. Together, they lived a very comfortable life, though Mary, unlike her brothers, did not receive much in the way of formal education. The Gladstones were notoriously loyal when it came to supporting the Grand Old Man's political career: the Gladstone brand was a family product and – as Weliver demonstrates – Mary was at the heart of a political-familial 'world' in which domestic ties could be put to political usage.

Despite the Gladstones' Liberal pedigree, Gladstone himself was no ordinary Liberal raised on a diet of Cobden and Mill, but a Tractarian high churchman, whose fiery imagination had been caught by the Oxford Movement of the 1830s with its mission to recover the older 'catholic' traditions of the church. Mary's belief system, too, was structured by a deeply felt Anglo-Catholicism, and her connections to (second generation) Oxford Tractarianism were equally strong: she developed close and lasting connections to Keble College, Oxford, and Mary was equally committed to the settlement mission of Oxford Hall, which sought to alleviate social problems by bridging class division in London's East End. For both Gladstones, the Tractarian recovery of 'catholic' heritage was therefore not merely theological but social.⁽¹⁾

Like her father, too, Mary was studious, kept a regular diary, and her regimental organisational skills earned her the nickname Moltke. Unsuccessful in her romantic pursuits, she devoted even more time to her father – becoming his private secretary when the Liberals were in opposition in the 1870s, and then maintaining her position after the Liberal victory in the 1880 General Election. As hostess Mary transformed the Gladstone

salon into a more musically focused event (she was ‘music-mad’ and recognized as a talented pianist and singer); in the latter role of private secretary, she navigated the complex civil and spiritual world of ecclesiastical appointments – advising and directing her father, as well as capturing the attention of those who would seek to influence him.

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At the heart of Weliver’s book are the Gladstones’ ‘Thursday Breakfasts’, which Mary increasingly took charge of from her mother in the 1870s. Salon hostessing was just one part of the broader political-cultural world of clubs, societies, salons, and dinners that were both separate from and yet merged with the world of party politics – and absolutely critical for elite families such as the Gladstones. It therefore provided a more domestic setting for party political moving and shaking in which women such as Mary were able to exercise ‘soft’ political power through conversation and conveniently arranged seating plans. But it was also an essential part of the bipartisan world of high society which demarcated rather different rules of inclusion and exclusion based on social status rather than purely political loyalties. Whether the Gladstone salons were held in Downing Street or elsewhere when out of office, between mid-February through July – the London season – the Gladstones curated a male-dominated guest list of statesman, prominent Anglican clergy, Oxbridge intellectuals, artists, scientists, explorers, publishers, and musicians who were not necessarily affiliated with the Liberal Party proper. The future Conservative Prime Minister Arthur Balfour, for instance, was equally ‘music-mad’ and the Gladstones had a very amiable social relationship with the Balfours.

How would it have felt to step inside the Gladstone salon? It was an early start: proceedings commenced at 10 o’clock over meat and wine, and conversation would be followed by musical performances or, less frequently, literary readings, including one memorable visit from Tennyson. Guests were therefore invited to enjoy conversation, the finest music, literature, and visual art, as well as the company of the Grand Old Man himself. The lists were kept short so that the group would be small enough to converse all as one (thus reducing the chances of being stuck with a bore). Topics for discussion were to be of high intellectual, cultural and political interest: the Gladstone salon was no place for games and personal anecdotes. Gladstone himself was of course the main attraction, yet the role of the hostess gave Mary control over the guest list, décor, and the overall atmosphere – including the music – and her role as private secretary gave this position a political edge.

Mary became her father’s secretary in 1876 and, after 1880, one of the five prime ministerial secretaries of Gladstone’s second administration. It was highly unusual for a woman to have such a role – Weliver describes Mary as ‘probably the first female private secretary’ – though this perceived oddity is tempered by the fact that Gladstone consistently employed his relations as private secretaries in this period, partly – as the ever-frugal Chancellor – as a money-saving exercise. Mary’s specific duties lay in ecclesiastic appointments, and her key task as private secretary brought her own religio-social interests together: she was to identify high churchmen who avoided the controversies surrounding ritualism and who accepted the need for the Church to engage in social reform and reach the working classes. People came to Mary with recommendations, which she assessed with friends before feeding them through to her father. As such, she was an attractive correspondent for Liberal politicians who saw her as having the ‘ear’ of her father. Despite this, there were tensions in the Cabinet Office: Mary’s achievements were quite literally written out of history, as she was omitted from the autobiographies of the principal private secretaries who resented her position and influence.

Her appeal as a correspondent to Liberal intellectuals such as the Regius Professor of History Lord Acton lay elsewhere, as Weliver notes: 'What he needed was ... a conversationalist who could listen, comprehend and respond'. This was a relationship that had developed, not out of the blue, but thanks to Mary's own interest in ideas – she was well-read and formed what Susan Harris has called 'reading communities', or book groups through correspondence – as well as the Thursday Breakfasts: Acton's friendship with Gladstone blossomed from the 1870s through the exchange of letters and his attendance at the Thursday Breakfasts, during which time he would have become increasingly acquainted with Mary herself.[\(2\)](#)

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Weliver brings all of this out with aplomb. But this book is no biography – Mary has several to her name already – nor does Weliver wish to portray Mary solely through the lens of her father. The question that holds her attention is this: how do we live liberalism? And, more importantly, how did the Victorians – Mary Gladstone in particular – live liberalism? That this question arises is unsurprising: the 19th century, but especially 19th-century Britain, has long been characterised as an era in which liberal values of individualism, free trade, and laissez faire government ruled the roost. This characterisation began, most notably, with A. V. Dicey's division of the period between the 'old Liberalism' of 1830–1880, and the 'new collectivism' that he saw as characterising the Britain of his old age. Since Dicey, the idea of 'liberalism' as the defining ideology of Victorian Britain has been canonised, reinvented, and rejected. One important interpretation has asked: was the liberal ideal of a free subject merely a mask for power? In this reading, liberal 'freedom' became a subtle means of control through pervasive discourses which led to self- and social regulation.

Weliver's task is in some ways analogous to other attempts to rehabilitate liberalism as a richer and more aesthetic ideology that these critics allow, such as Amanda Anderson's *Bleak Liberalism*.[\(3\)](#) Her argument here is that liberalism should be identified with aesthetic qualities – whether in music, novels, or poetry – and should not merely be reduced to ideas of critical, rational, individual, self-reflexive thought. Mary's salon – and the music and literature heard within it – serve as a gateway to understanding liberalism in this broader sense, as well as evidence for Mary's own 'contributions to the liberal cause'. But to do this properly we need Weliver's own definition of what it meant to be a liberal in 19th-century Britain.

Liberalism, Weliver notes, is a slippery term. To Weliver, liberalism is not only political – as in the Liberal party – but also personal. It is associated with 'humanist, unselfish, optimistic' behaviour. It is self-actualization; thoughtfulness expressed among kin; disinterestedness; helpfulness; honesty. Weliver's Victorian liberal is moral and sincere, with a passionate dedication to the liberal cause and to being earnest. This involved, Weliver states, taking part in a conscientious search for meaning in the world, and this took place in a broader range of settings than parliament, the political platform, and the private study. It was a 'creed' or a governing way of life. We are told that virtuous energy and concern for human welfare were the catalyst of Gladstonian liberalism and that even Conservatives practised liberal values: Balfour, for example, was able to retain private affection for (W. E.) Gladstone while disagreeing with his policies. Liberalism is also identified with 'a focus on constitutionalism', just laws, and minimal government, and it is inspired by and expressed in the music and literature featured in the Gladstone Breakfasts: 'rational and inspirational, verbal and extra-linguistic'. From this we are invited to rethink our definition of liberal.

Indeed, Weliver's definition of both liberalism and the Gladstone salon is both non-political and political: quite rightly the music itself is given nonpartisan qualities, but we are told it could also lead to the listener developing a politicised musicological position. The salon and the music played were a means to a general sociability that was to be enjoyed by all, but also, Weliver argues, an enacted liberalism on the Gladstones' behalf.

The question of how one might live liberalism is an interesting one. But if we want to answer this question historically – what did it mean to be, and to live as, a liberal (or Liberal) in 19th-century Britain, and how

does Mary Gladstone fit into this – then Weliver’s descriptors of ‘aesthetic liberalism’ are not so earth-shattering. We have known for some time now that Victorian Britain was, in reality, not just a utilitarian haven full of mechanical Mr Gradgrinds, but permeated with religious, political, cultural and social concerns – and these anxieties (as well as hopes) stretched across the political spectrum. There was not one single ‘Victorian Mind’ to be recovered and explained – nefarious, liberal, or otherwise. Decades of scholarship on women’s and gender history has likewise expanded our definition of the political, and of types of political activity that included the domestic, social arena: from elite hostessing to the influence wielded by having control over the household purse, women are now seen as having had access to a kind of political power and influence that transcends older notions of the public political sphere. Weliver’s definition of liberalism encompasses this complexity, yet in doing so it is made to do too much work to serve as a useful analytic category.

Firstly, it’s not clear what lies outside of its reach, and who or what we should associate with this. Are these the liars and bores? Is this Conservatism (or conservatism)? At some point the parameters have to sharpen. Except in taking Acton’s definition of ‘Liberalism’ as ‘liberty and morality’ and ‘Toryism’ as ‘entangled in interests, traditions, necessities, difficulties, expedients’, Weliver doesn’t spend much time addressing this point. It is this definition which is used to categorise Gladstone’s famous Midlothian campaign, which saw him decry the vested interests and immorality that he saw in ‘Beaconsfieldism’: that is, in Disraeli’s handling of the Eastern Question, as well as in his support of the ‘vested interests of crown, the Church of England and empire’. Such passionate political outcry is then translated by Weliver into a non-political aesthetic liberalism as in the following example: Wagner, who was much admired by Mary, becomes ‘one of liberalism’s heroes’ because his *l’énergie passionnée* is like that of Gladstone’s forceful denunciations of the Bulgarian atrocities.

But linking Wagner to Gladstone (and from there to liberalism) in this way relies on convincing the reader that, firstly, passionate, morally-infused energy was the sole reserve of liberals (or Liberals, or Gladstone) and, secondly, that Liberals did not have their own ‘interests, traditions, necessities, difficulties, expedients’.

It is clear, however, that earnest belief in the national (that is, not factional, or – to Tory eyes – classless) institutions of the crown and the established church is as evident in the Tory and Regius Professor William Stubbs, whom Gladstone (no doubt with Mary’s advice) appointed Bishop of Chester in 1884, as in the Conservative working men and women described in Jörg Neuheiser’s *Crown, Church and Constitution: Popular Conservatism in England: 1815-1867*.⁽⁴⁾ Not only, therefore, can we ascribe Weliver’s liberal trait of ‘respecting others of different political persuasions’ to Conservatives (as in Balfour’s case above), but also those of ‘passion’, ‘constitutionalism’, and ‘opposition to interests’.

Secondly, Weliver’s ‘liberal traits’ of unselfishness, being a good neighbour, and social work are, in reality, expressions of a broad Christian belief system. This is so much bigger than ‘liberalism’ as a concept, though it was indeed a vital component of her father’s distinctive, morally charged brand of political Liberalism. Mary’s thought, as Weliver brings out so vividly, was also distinctly high church: her love of music and its connection to her social and political work was rooted to a belief in the divine, whether through her connections with Keble or as private secretary. It would be a disservice to the richness of religious and ethical thought in nineteenth-century Britain, however, to reduce this to a modern definition of ‘liberalism’.

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The back cover tells us that this is an ‘intellectual history’ connecting the role of music with Victorian liberalism. But as an intellectual history it is missing a step. In the context of 19th-century Britain, ‘liberal traits’ such as honesty, morality, and sincerity were no more liberal than, say, conservative: admiring another person with wildly different political or religious sympathies may be ‘liberal’ in comparison to absolutist or totalitarian states, but as an analytical category for Victorian Britain it doesn’t get us very far.

If the history of ideas has stood for anything over the last 50 years, it is for understanding past thought on its

own terms as opposed to ours. What held the Liberals together – and what distinguished them from (and united them against) Conservatives – was (unsurprisingly) their politics, rather than music, morals and conversation. At their core was the Liberal commitment to ‘civil and religious liberty’ through constitutional reform. But living as a Liberal, especially at the Gladstones’ elite cultural level, also meant living as a member of a cross-party cultural milieu that encompassed school, university, clubs, philanthropy, and other forms of institutional and social life – so ‘lived liberalism’, in this context, was no different to ‘lived conservatism’. We saw above, for example, how the young Balfour admired Gladstone and was a regular visitor at the Thursday Breakfasts. But, as Weliver notes, it was from 1878, during moments of political tension, that Balfour’s attendance at Mary’s salon significantly waned.

The missing link here is that, rather than Mary and other Victorian Liberals acting as distillers of an ahistorical liberalism in the sky, they *saw themselves* as having a unique claim to, and relationship with, concepts or virtues which were in fact universally accessible by actors from across the political spectrum. Yes, Gladstone claimed the moral high ground over Disraeli and Mary connected musical expression with her religious and political opinions, but – as much as we might like to claim all the virtues for our friends – I think it’s more helpful to recognise that we can’t take these claims at face value. What is especially exciting, then, is when historical actors like Mary personally and publicly identify their actions as broader expressions of political, religious and social beliefs; enacted in their daily lives as much as in grand speeches or higher scholarship. From here, and by taking these subjective opinions seriously, we gain a much fuller understanding of both the relationship of higher thought to everyday life, and what Mary thought it meant to be a Liberal, as well as a Christian, a daughter, and a civil servant.

Because, in a sense, Mary did live Liberalism through her father – and this is the sticking-point. At the age of 38, Mary married the Hawarden curate, Harry Drew, and she lived on to see the first quarter of the 20th-century – surviving until 1927, she gained a long-desired parliamentary vote (something her father opposed). But any other semblance of political influence waned after the retirement of her father in 1894. The soft political power wielded by women was in its essence indirect and mediatory – that is, between men – rather than direct and participatory. These limitations were evidenced throughout the (long) 19th-century by elite women who overstepped the mark: from the Duchess of Devonshire canvassing for Charles James Fox in 1784, to Lady Mary Stanley, the wife of the Conservative Foreign Secretary and 15th Earl of Derby, who, during the same Eastern Crisis which Gladstone was decrying from the platform, was ostracised by Queen Victoria for engaging directly with the Russian ambassador against the wishes of Disraeli. In doing so, these women suffered the consequences of breaching the appropriate boundaries of female political participation. Though Mary stayed within acceptable limits, her life similarly demonstrates how, in gaining political independence through the vote and direct access to public office, women were not revolting from silence to noise; nor were the effects of these gains immediate or revolutionary – but at least the ‘ears’ were becoming our own.

Notes

1. Simon Skinner, *Tractarians and the 'Condition of England': The Social and Political Thought of the Oxford Movement* (Oxford, 2005).[Back to \(1\)](#)
 2. Susan Harris, *The Cultural Work of the Late-Nineteenth Century Hostess: Annie Adams Fields and Mary Gladstone Drew* (Basingstoke, 2002).[Back to \(2\)](#)
 3. Amanda Anderson, *Bleak Liberalism* (Chicago, IL, 2016).[Back to \(3\)](#)
 4. James Kirby, *Historians and the Church of England: Religion and Historical Scholarship, 1870–1920* (Oxford, 2016); Jörg Neuheiser, *Crown, Church and Constitution: Popular Conservatism in England: 1815–1867* (Oxford, 2016).[Back to \(4\)](#)
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[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/298257>