

**GLADSTONE
WILLIAM
EWART**

CHAPTER OF
AUTOBIOGRAPHY

William Gladstone

Chapter of Autobiography

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Содержание

INTRODUCTION	5
A CHAPTER OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY	6
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	12

W E Gladstone

Chapter of Autobiography

INTRODUCTION

At a time when the Established Church of Ireland is on her trial, it is not unfair that her assailants should be placed upon their trial too: most of all, if they have at one time been her sanguine defenders.

But if not the matter of the indictment against them, at any rate that of their defence, should be kept apart, as far as they are concerned, from the public controversy, that it may not darken or perplex the greater issue.

It is in the character of the author of a book called 'The State in its Relations with the Church,' that I offer these pages to those who may feel a disposition to examine them. They were written at the date attached to them; but their publication has been delayed until after the stress of the General Election.

A CHAPTER OF AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Autobiography is commonly interesting; but there can, I suppose, be little doubt that, as a general rule, it should be posthumous. The close of an active career supplies an obvious exception: for this resembles the gentle death which, according to ancient fable, was rather imparted than inflicted by the tender arrows of Apollo and of Artemis. I have asked myself many times, during the present year, whether peculiar combinations of circumstance might not also afford a warrant at times for departure from the general rule, so far as some special passage of life is concerned; and whether I was not myself now placed in one of those special combinations.

The motives, which incline me to answer these questions in the affirmative, are mainly two. First, that the great and glaring change in my course of action with respect to the Established Church of Ireland is not the mere eccentricity, or even perversion, of an individual mind, but connects itself with silent changes, which are advancing in the very bed and basis of modern society. Secondly, that the progress of a great cause, signal as it has been and is, appears liable nevertheless to suffer in point of credit, if not of energy and rapidity, from the real or supposed delinquencies of a person, with whose name for the moment it happens to be specially associated.

One thing is clear: that if I am warranted in treating my own case as an excepted case, I am bound so to treat it. It is only with a view to the promotion of some general interest, that the public can becomingly be invited to hear more, especially in personal history, about an individual, of whom they already hear too much. But if it be for the general interest to relieve 'an enterprise of pith and moment' from the odium of baseness, and from the lighter reproach of precipitancy, I must make the attempt; though the obtrusion of the first person, and of all that it carries in its train, must be irksome alike to the reader and the writer.

So far, indeed, as my observation has gone, the Liberal party of this country have stood fire unflinchingly under the heavy volleys which have been fired into its camp with ammunition that had been drawn from depositories full only with matter personal to myself. And, with the confidence they entertain in the justice and wisdom of the policy they recommend, it would have been weak and childish to act otherwise. Still, I should be glad to give them the means of knowing that the case may not after all be so scandalous as they are told. In the year 1827, if I remember right, when Mr. Canning had just become Prime Minister, an effort was made to support him in the town of Liverpool, where the light and music of his eloquence had not yet died away, by an Address to the Crown. The proposal was supported by an able and cultivated Unitarian Minister, Mr. Shepherd, who had been one of Mr. Canning's opponents at former periods in the Liverpool elections. Vindicating the consistency of his course, he said he was ready to support the devil himself, if it had been necessary, in doing good. This was a succinct and rough manner of disposing of the question in the last resort. I hope, however, that those who sustain the Liberal policy respecting the Established Church of Ireland, will not be driven to so dire an extremity. It can hardly be deemed on my part an unnatural desire, that political friends, and candid observers, should on grounds of reason and knowledge, and not merely from friendly prepossession, feel themselves warranted not to believe in the justice of language such as by way of example I subjoin. I must, however, suppose that the author of it is persuaded of its fairness and justice, since he bears Her Majesty's Commission; and his statement is adopted and published by a brother-officer, who is himself a candidate for Berwick in the ministerial interest, and therefore (I presume) not particularly squeamish on the subject of political consistency, although I entertain no doubt that both are gallant, upright, and estimable gentlemen.

"There is obviously no need, on the present occasion at least, to extend this catalogue of the political delinquencies of this would-be demagogue, whom we may accordingly leave gibbeted and swinging in the winds of the fools' paradise! an object

of derision and contempt to those at least who maintain that integrity of purpose and consistency ought not altogether to be discarded from public life."¹

It freezes the blood, in moments of retirement and reflexion, for a man to think that he can have presented a picture so hideous to the view of a fellow-creature!

One thing I have not done, and shall not do. I shall not attempt to laugh off the question, or to attenuate its importance. In theory at least, and for others, I am myself a purist with respect to what touches the consistency of statesmen. Change of opinion, in those to whose judgment the public looks more or less to assist its own, is an evil to the country, although a much smaller evil than their persistence in a course which they know to be wrong. It is not always to be blamed. But it is always to be watched with vigilance; always to be challenged, and put upon its trial. The question is one of so much interest, that it may justify a few remarks.

It can hardly escape even cursory observation, that the present century has seen a great increase in the instances of what is called political inconsistency. It is needless, and it would be invidious, to refer to names. Among the living, however, who have occupied leading positions, and among the dead of the last twenty years, numerous instances will at once occur to the mind, of men who have been constrained to abandon in middle and mature, or even in advanced life, convictions which they had cherished through long years of conflict and vicissitude: and of men, too, who have not been so fortunate as to close or continue their career in the same political connexion as that in which they commenced it. If we go a little farther back, to the day of Mr. Pitt and Mr. Fox, or even to the day of Mr. Canning, Lord Londonderry, or Lord Liverpool, we must be struck with the difference. A great political and social convulsion, like the French Revolution, of necessity deranged the ranks of party; yet not even then did any man of great name, or of a high order of mind, permanently change his side.

If we have witnessed in the last forty years, beginning with the epoch of Roman Catholic Emancipation, a great increase in the changes of party, or of opinion, among prominent men, we are not at once to leap to the conclusion that public character, as a rule, has been either less upright, or even less vigorous. The explanation is rather to be found in this, that the movement of the public mind has been of a nature entirely transcending former experience; and that it has likewise been more promptly and more effectively represented, than at any earlier period, in the action of the Government and the Legislature.

If it is the office of law and of institutions to reflect the wants and wishes of the country, (and its wishes must ever be a considerable element in its wants), then, as the nation passes from a stationary into a progressive period, it will justly require that the changes in its own condition and views should be represented in the professions and actions of its leading men. For they exist for its sake, not it for theirs. It remains indeed their business, now and ever, to take honour and duty for their guides, and not the mere demand or purpose of the passing hour; but honour and duty themselves require their loyal servant to take account of the state of facts in which he is to work, and, while ever labouring to elevate the standard of opinion and action around him, to remember that his business is not to construct, with self-chosen materials, an Utopia or a Republic of Plato, but to conduct the affairs of a living and working community of men, who have self-government recognised as in the last resort the moving spring of their political life, and of the institutions which are its outward vesture.

The gradual transfer of political power from groups and limited classes to the community, and the constant seething of the public mind, in fermentation upon a vast mass of moral and social, as well as merely political, interests, offer conditions of action, in which it is evident that the statesman, in order to preserve the same amount of consistency as his antecessors in other times, must be gifted with a far larger range of foresight. But Nature has endowed him with no such superiority. It may be true that Sir Robert Peel shewed this relative deficiency in foresight, with reference to Roman Catholic Emancipation, to Reform, and to the Corn Law. It does not follow that many, who have escaped the

¹ From a placard just published at Berwick.

reproach, could have stood the trial. For them the barometer was less unsteady; the future less exacting in its demands. But let us suppose that we could secure this enlargement of onward view, this faculty of measuring and ascertaining to-day the wants of a remote hereafter, in our statesmen; we should not even then be at the end of our difficulties. For the public mind is to a great degree unconscious of its own progression; and it would resent and repudiate, if offered to its immature judgment, the very policy, which after a while it will gravely consider, and after another while enthusiastically embrace.

Yet, as it still remains true that the actual opinions and professions of men in office, and men in authority without office, are among the main landmarks on which the public has to rely, it may seem that, in vindicating an apparent liberty of change, we destroy the principal guarantees of integrity which are available for the nation at large, and with these all its confidence in the persons who are to manage its affairs. This would be a consequence so fatal, that it might even drive us back upon the hopeless attempt to stereotype the minds of men, and fasten on their manhood the swaddling clothes of their infancy. But such is not the alternative. We may regulate the changes which we cannot forbid, by subjecting them to the test of public scrutiny, and by directing that scrutiny to the enforcement of the laws of moral obligation. There are abundant signs, by which to distinguish between those changes, which prove nothing worse than the fallibility of the individual mind, and manœuvres which destroy confidence, and entail merited dishonour. Changes which are sudden and precipitate – changes accompanied with a light and contemptuous repudiation of the former self – changes which are systematically timed and tuned to the interest of personal advancement – changes which are hooded, slurred over, or denied – for these changes, and such as these, I have not one word to say; and if they can be justly charged upon me, I can no longer desire that any portion, however small, of the concerns or interests of my countrymen should be lodged in my hands.

Let me now endeavour to state the offence of which I am held guilty. *Ille ego qui quondam*: I, the person who have now accepted a foremost share of the responsibility of endeavouring to put an end to the existence of the Irish Church as an Establishment, am also the person who, of all men in official, perhaps in public life, did, until the year 1841, recommend, upon the highest and most imperious grounds, its resolute maintenance.

The book entitled 'The State in its Relations with the Church' was printed during the autumn of 1838, while I was making a tour in the South of Europe, which the state of my eyesight had rendered it prudent to undertake. Three editions of it were published without textual change; and in the year 1841 a fourth, greatly enlarged, though in other respects little altered, issued from the press. All interest in it had, however, even at that time, long gone by, and it lived for nearly thirty years only in the vigorous and brilliant, though not (in my opinion) entirely faithful picture, drawn by the accomplished hand of Lord Macaulay. During the present year, as I understand from good authority, it has again been in demand, and in my hearing it has received the emphatic suffrages of many, of whose approval I was never made aware during the earlier and less noisy stages of its existence.

The distinctive principle of the book was supposed to be, that the State had a conscience. But the controversy really lies not in the existence of a conscience in the State, so much as in the extent of its range. Few would deny the obligation of a State to follow the moral law. Every Treaty, for example, proceeds upon it. The true issue was this: whether the State, in its best condition, has such a conscience as can take cognizance of religious truth and error, and in particular whether the State of the United Kingdom, at a period somewhat exceeding thirty years ago, was or was not so far in that condition as to be under an obligation to give an active and an exclusive support to the established religion of the country.

The work attempted to survey the actual state of the relations between the State and the Church; to show from History the ground which had been defined for the National Church at the Reformation; and to inquire and determine whether the existing state of things was worth preserving, and defending against encroachment from whatever quarter. This question it decided emphatically in the affirmative.

An early copy of the Review containing the powerful essay of Lord Macaulay was sent to me; and I found that to the main proposition, sufficiently startling, of the work itself, the reviewer had added this assumption, that it contemplated not indeed persecution, but yet the retrogressive process of disabling and disqualifying from civil office all those who did not adhere to the religion of the State. Before (I think) the number of the 'Edinburgh Review' for April, 1839, could have been in the hands of the public, I had addressed to Lord (then Mr.) Macaulay the following letter, which I shall make no apology for inserting, inasmuch as it will introduce one more morsel of his writing, for which the public justly shows a keen and insatiable appetite.

6, Carlton Gardens, April 10th, 1839.

Dear Sir,

I have been favoured with a copy of the forthcoming number of the 'Edinburgh Review,' and I perhaps too much presume upon the bare acquaintance with you of which alone I can boast, in thus unceremoniously assuming you to be the author of the article entitled 'Church and State,' and in offering you my very warm and cordial thanks for the manner in which you have treated both the work, and the author, on whom you deigned to bestow your attention. In whatever you write, you can hardly hope for the privilege of most anonymous productions, a real concealment; but if it had been possible not to recognize you, I should have questioned your authorship in this particular case, because the candour and single-mindedness which it exhibits are, in one who has long been connected in the most distinguished manner with political party, so rare as to be almost incredible.

I hope to derive material benefit, at some more tranquil season, from a consideration of your argument throughout. I am painfully sensible, whenever I have occasion to re-open the book, of its shortcomings, not only of the subject but even of my own conceptions: and I am led to suspect that, under the influence of most kindly feelings, you have omitted to criticize many things besides the argument, which might fairly have come within your animadversion.

In the mean time I hope you will allow me to apprise you that on one material point especially I am not so far removed from you as you suppose. I am not conscious that I have said either that the *Test Act* should be repealed, or that it should not have been passed: and though on such subjects language has many bearings which escape the view of the writer at the moment when the pen is in his hand, yet I think that I can hardly have put forth either of these propositions, because I have never entertained the corresponding sentiments. Undoubtedly I should speak of the pure abstract idea of Church and State as implying that they are co-extensive: and I should regard the present composition of the State of the United Kingdom as a deviation from that pure idea, but only in the same sense as all differences of religious opinion in the Church are a deviation from its pure idea, while I not only allow that they are permitted, but believe that (within limits) they were intended to be permitted. There are some of these deflections from abstract theory which appear to me allowable; and that of the admission of persons not holding the national creed into civil office is one which, in my view, must be determined by times and circumstances. At the same time I do not recede from any protest which I have made against the principle, that religious differences are irrelevant to the question of competency for civil office: but I would take my stand between the opposite extremes, the one that no such differences are to be taken into view, the other that all such differences are to constitute disqualifications.

I need hardly say the question I raise is not whether you have misrepresented me, for, were I disposed to anything so weak, the whole internal evidence and clear

intention of your article would confute me: indeed I feel I ought to apologize for even supposing that you may have been mistaken in the apprehension of my meaning, and I freely admit on the other hand the possibility that, totally without my own knowledge, my language may have led to such an interpretation.

In these lacerating times one clings to everything of personal kindness in the past, to husband it for the future, and if you will allow me I shall earnestly desire to carry with me such a recollection of your mode of dealing with the subject; upon which, the attainment of truth, we shall agree, so materially depends upon the temper in which the search for it is instituted and conducted.

I did not mean to have troubled you at so much length, and I have only to add that I am, with much respect,

Dear Sir,

Very truly yours,

W. E. Gladstone.

T. B. Macaulay, Esq.

3, Clarges Street, April 11th, 1839.

My dear Sir,

I have very seldom been more gratified than by the very kind note which I have just received from you. Your book itself, and everything that I heard about you, though almost all my information came – to the honour, I must say, of our troubled times – from people very strongly opposed to you in politics, led me to regard you with respect and good will, and I am truly glad that I have succeeded in marking those feelings. I was half afraid when I read myself over again in print, that the button, as is too common in controversial fencing even between friends, had once or twice come off the foil.

I am very glad to find that we do not differ so widely as I had apprehended about the Test Act. I can easily explain the way in which I was misled. Your general principle is that religious non-conformity ought to be a disqualification for civil office. In page 238 you say that the true and authentic mode of ascertaining conformity is the Act of Communion. I thought, therefore, that your theory pointed directly to a renewal of the Test Act. And I do not recollect that you have ever used any expression importing that your theory ought in practice to be modified by any considerations of civil prudence. All the exceptions that you mention are, as far as I remember, founded on positive contract – not one on expediency, even in cases where the expediency is so strong and so obvious that most statesmen would call it necessity. If I had understood that you meant your rules to be followed out in practice only so far as might be consistent with the peace and good government of society, I should certainly have expressed myself very differently in several parts of my article.

Accept my warm thanks for your kindness, and believe me, with every good wish,

My dear Sir,

Very truly yours,

T. B. Macaulay.

W. E. Gladstone, Esq., M.P.

Faithful to logic, and to its theory, my work did not shrink from applying them to the crucial case of the Irish Church. It did not disguise the difficulties of the case, for I was alive to the paradox it involved. But the one master idea of the system, that the State as it then stood was capable in this

age, as it had been in ages long gone by, of assuming beneficially a responsibility for the inculcation of a particular religion, carried me through all. My doctrine was, that the Church, as established by law, was to be maintained for its truth; that this was the only principle on which it could be properly and permanently upheld; that this principle, if good in England, was good also for Ireland; that truth is of all possessions the most precious to the soul of man; and that to remove, as I then erroneously thought we should remove, this priceless treasure from the view and the reach of the Irish people, would be meanly to purchase their momentary favour at the expense of their permanent interests, and would be a high offence against our own sacred obligations.

These, I think, were the leading propositions of the work. In one important point, however, it was inconsistent with itself; it contained a full admission that a State might, by its nature and circumstances, be incapacitated from upholding and propagating a definite form of religion.²

"There may be a state of things in the United States of America, perhaps in some British colonies, there does actually exist a state of things, in which religious communions are so equally divided, or so variously subdivided, that the Government is itself similarly chequered in its religious complexion, and thus internally incapacitated by disunion from acting in matters of religion; or, again, there may be a State in which the members of Government may be of one faith or persuasion, the mass of the subjects of another, and hence there may be an external incapacity to act in matters of religion."

The book goes on to describe that incapacity, however produced, as a social defect and calamity. But the latter part of the work, instead of acknowledging such incapacity as a sufficient and indeed commanding plea for abstention, went beyond the bounds of moderation, and treated it as if it must in all cases be a sin; as though any association of men, in civil government or otherwise, could be responsible for acting beyond the line of the capabilities determined for it by its constitution and composition. My meaning I believe was, to describe only cases in which there might be a deliberate renunciation of such duties as there was the power to fulfil. But the line is left too obscurely drawn between this wilful and wanton rejection of opportunities for good, and the cases in which the state of religious convictions, together with the recognised principles of government, disable the civil power from including within its work the business of either directly or indirectly inculcating religion, and mark out for it a different line of action.

² 'The State in its Relations with the Church,' ch. ii., sect. 71, p. 73. Editions 1-3.

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