

‘I suppose you are not a Baptist or a Roman Catholic?’: Nonconformity’s True Conformity

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‘MRS. THATCHER’S “Victorian Values” are chapel values . . .’ Thus Raphael Samuel, at least in abstract.¹ Mr. Samuel is not quite right. Hers would have been the values of many, perhaps very many, in chapel but they are not chapel values. My end, in which no doubt should have been my beginning, may make that distinction clear. My theme, however, which must link both that end and this beginning focuses upon the convergence, brief enough and fortuitous, yet intense and real, between Nonconformity and Mr. Gladstone. That convergence, most exemplary of Victorian moments, is the true celebration of Victorian values. It is Nonconformity’s true conformity.

To begin before the beginning, with my title:

11 July 1911: Lunched at 13 Upper Belgrave Street, and took Father up to Lord’s to see the Gentlemen v. Players; subsequently dined with him at Boodle’s, after his interview with George Lloyd. This seems to have passed off to the complete satisfaction of both parties, and Father likes him very much, I think. George told me last night that they sat for a while in stony silence, broken at last by Father asking him if he was fond of fishing! Which he followed up with: ‘I suppose you are not a Baptist or a Roman Catholic?’²

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¹ R. Samuel, ‘Victorian Values and the Lower Classes’, *Victorian Values: Abstracts*, p. 1.

² D. Hart-Davis (ed.), *The End of An Era: The Letters and Journals of Sir Alan Lascelles 1887–1920* (1988 edn), p. 105.

13 Upper Belgrave Street was the town house of the fifth Earl of Harewood. Father was the earl's younger brother and George was Father's prospective son-in-law. Needless to say, George was neither a Baptist nor a Roman Catholic and Boodle's, Lord's and Upper Belgravia could rest secure in their values; and since the diarist, his father and his future brother-in-law were born and formed in Victorian England, it follows that those values were expressed in a very strong Victorian accent. They were presumably Victorian values.

But 'Victorian values' are very much a triumph of rhetoric. The phrase suggests a complex of values which are known and immutable: thrift, industry, sobriety, respectability, responsibility, order. The word 'value' is a positive word. It has at once a moral and a commercial ring to it, as in that other Thatcherite value plucked from yester-year, 'value for money'. The word 'Victorian' sets limits of chronology and these, being coterminous with both a life and a reign, give the phrase a human face which is also an establishment face. And since the converse of thrift, industry, sobriety, respectability, responsibility and order is fecklessness, laziness, drunkenness, disreputableness, irresponsibility and disorder, these values are socially very conformist indeed.

Yet it is as hard to know of an age which has not placed a premium on these qualities as it is to think of one which has not seen them subverted in the highest places. Certainly the Victorians are no exception. Worse yet, their age is in fact indefinable. The lady herself was the least Victorian of Victorians and 'her' age saw social and religious flux and intellectual, economic, political, industrial and aesthetic turmoil. The Victorian age was stony ground for Victorian values. The ironies are splendid. This indefinable age, racked by fear that it had no distinguishing marks, had yet an intense consciousness of itself as an age. This can be read in its buildings. Victorians were haunted by the dilemma of style.³ Their buildings were Gothic, classical, Louis XV, Wrenaissance, often beyond perfection and always anything but Victorian. Yet, even to the half-formed eye, each and every one of them is distinctively Victorian.

All this is also caught by the age's Nonconformity. Victorian values are frequently thought in their religious aspect to be those of the Nonconformist Conscience as best expressed by Mr. Gladstone and Queen Victoria. That is a useful nonsense which underlines both the social conformity of religious Nonconformity and the fact that society at most levels was shot through with Nonconformity. Frederick Lascelles was quite right to bark that question at George Lloyd, his Old Etonian and tractarian son-in-law-to-be, since the Lloyds owed their position to the enterprising

³ See J. Mordaunt Crook, *The Dilemma of Style* (1987).

values of their Quaker ancestors.⁴ In a world where few people are entirely innocent of Dissenting kinsmen nothing can be quite what it seems; except, of course, that Frederick Lascelles need not have worried.

And that, perhaps, is the point. The coining of that phrase, 'The Nonconformist Conscience', is a classic case of shutting the stable door after the horse has bolted. It emerged at the tail end of 1890 as the carefully staged issue of a carefully planted campaign in and by a newspaper – *The Times* – not immediately or naturally associated with that side of things.⁵ It captured the essence of a great disintegrative force which, like classic horror stories, all knew for fact but none had really encountered. Just as we know a Victorian building or a Victorian value when we see one, though there is nothing Victorian about either, so we know a Victorian Nonconformist – until, that is, we meet one.

Where does this leave us? It leaves us with the new social fact of which Victorians were most self-conscious and with its most distinctive religious aspect: the middle classes and the Nonconformity nurtured by them. And it leaves us with that aspect's most characteristic myth: the affinity with Mr. Gladstone.

These can be explored in a reminiscence, a *roman-à-clef* and two sets of diaries. First the reminiscence:

My father, who was a hot Liberal, had a nephew the same age as himself, who was a hot Tory. During Disraeli's last administration – I think in 1889 [sic] – Gladstone came down to speak in Bedford, and the two Cootes went over to hear him. At the time, some by-elections had gone against the government, and Gladstone's theme was that the days of the ungodly were numbered if only the efforts to unseat them were maintained. He concluded an hour of heady and mesmeric stuff with a peroration somewhat as follows:

And now, gentlemen, now that the rising sun begins to tinge the hills with golden hope, shall we draw back?

Whereupon the Tory Coote leapt on to his chair, flung both his arms in the air in an ecstasy of approval, and shrieked, 'Never !!!'⁶

It is an identi-kit story, plucked from family lore. It may be *bien trouvé* but it sounds right. Here is the mesmeric Gladstone, the People's Homer straight from Olympus, just to hear whom say 'Ladies and Gentlemen!' is enough in all conscience. Here is the statesman on a state visit to the land of the Russells and the Whitbreads. For Gladstone it is a case of Bootle one day, Bedford the next. For Bedford it is the new Cromwell come to the Cromwell country which is also John Bunyan country which is also John

⁴ D.B. Windsor, *The Quaker Enterprise: Friends in Business* (1980), esp. ch.3 on 'The Lloyds of Birmingham', p. 28–41.

⁵ C. Binfield, 'A Conformist Conscience', *The Times*, 10 December 1990.

⁶ C.R. Coote, *Editorial* (1965), p. 243.

Howard country. So who was in that audience? The stalwarts of Bunyan Meeting, founded by Bunyan, ministered over by Bunyan's biographer (who was also Maynard Keynes's grandfather)? Or the stalwarts of Howard Congregational Church, founded by John Howard the prison reformer? Or even the in-laws of Hugh Price Hughes, Katherine Price Hughes's Wesleyan Methodist, manufacturing, Bedford Howard relations? Certainly there was the narrator's father, Howard Coote of Oaklands, The Rookery and Stukeley Hall, Hunts. Like countless other Nonconformist Howards, Coote was named after the prison reformer. The Coote family church was St. Ives Free Church, with a statue of Oliver Cromwell fronting it in the market place. The Cootes collected Cromwelliana. They had a chest of drawers carved with the initials 'O.C.', which Howard Coote would show off, though visitors liked to think that they stood for 'Oward Coote rather than Oliver Cromwell.⁷ And, to set the record straight, who is telling the story? Colin Coote, baptised at the Free Church, who became a Coalition Liberal M.P., and ended up as Editor of the *Daily Telegraph*.⁸

Bedford and its Bunyan Meeting were fictionalised by Mark Rutherford. Theirs was a rooted Congregationalism, like that of St. Ives, transplanted (or re-potted) by the Victorians.

For another fiction, this time of a Victorian Congregationalism seeking for roots, come north. Gordon Stowell was a journalist of Colin Coote's generation.⁹ His theme, explored in a sociological novel of considerable merit, is Button Hill, a suburb of Fleece:

Before it swam into the mainstream of history it was just a hill and nothing more. Dairy farms and market gardens upon its slopes helped to feed the populace in the busy valley below; and there were rhubarb-fields too – the world's most succulent rhubarb will ever be grown around Fleece.

Bisecting the hill like a precise centre parting was the main turnpike road between Fleece and Bathwater Spa . . .

In those days Button Hill, as the world came to know it . . . had not even begun to exist. Nor did it even begin to exist in 1885, when the name entered politics as the name given (somewhat fancifully) to one of the four divisions of the borough of Fleece in the new parliamentary register: for

⁷ Ibid., p. 75.

⁸ For Howard Coote b.1864 see H. Coote, *While I Remember*, (privately, 1937); for Sir Colin Coote 1893–1979 see *The Times*, 23 November 1979, and D. Hart-Davis, *The House the Berrys Built*: if it in fact happened during Disraeli's last ministry it would have to be 21–26 October 1878 when Gladstone was staying at Woburn and Wrest. Then indeed 'Deputation came from Bedford: but I steadily declined to go. Conversation with Mr. Howard'. Tuesday 22 October 1878, H.C.G. Matthew (ed.), *The Gladstone Diaries*, Vol. 9 (Oxford, 1986), p. 355.

⁹ For Gordon Stowell 1898–1972 see *Who Was Who* 1972–1980. I am grateful to Mr. David Stowell for information about the Stowell family.

though the hill was geographically within the Button Hill division, the bulk of the voters lived in the slum districts of Lambswell and Tannersdale, lying like dirty puddles at the foot of the hill.

The seventh Lord Bentham (grandfather of the present earl) was the real founder of the modern Button Hill. He owned a great chunk of the hillside . . . And he chose to let it fall into the hands of the speculative builder . . .

By the census of 1891 there were more than three hundred thousand people penned within the city boundaries, and the housing problem was becoming troublesome. The prime difficulty was not the housing of the working-class population . . . For them only too many houses had been provided . . . The people who were hardest hit were the really nice people, the people with nice ideas and aspirations who . . . could afford to send their children to the Grammar School or to the new Modern School.¹⁰

To such as these the new suburb of Button Hill was in the nature of a godsend:

Builders were turned loose on the estate. It was split into gaping rectangles. Water, gas and drains were laid. And presently a dozen rows of desirable villa-residences shot up as if by magic, and all the contours of the hill were permanently changed. The old turnpike was cleared away, and the Fleece Tramways Company, extending its track, put on a new service of horse-trams out to the Bentham Arms. Removal vans became a familiar sight up Bathwater Road as the best people in Fleece moved themselves and their furniture to a more worthy setting.

Lord Bentham in his wisdom had decreed that the builders were to restrict themselves to villas of a superior type. Retail shops and licensed premises were barred. From the outset the new suburb could not help but feel itself exclusive and superior. Its modestly imposing houses were manifestly designed with some pretensions to that subtle quality known as 'class' . . .

With the coming of the terraces, Button Hill was no longer the name . . . of a hill. It had become a place-name . . .¹¹

Its *History* describes Button Hill's first three suburban generations from 1894 to 1929. It begins brick-new and hopeful, upper-lower-middle class aspiring to middle-middle class, clerkly, professional and piano-playing. It ends inner-suburban and immigrant, with its bricks spatched. The sequence is suggested by the chapter headings: 'Button Hill Acquires a Mind', 'Button Hill Acquires a Voice', 'Button Hill Drifts with the Tide', 'Button Hill is Knocked Sideways', 'Button Hill in Eclipse'.

The suburb's focal points are its churches, especially its Congregational church, gothic and clocktowered, and the novel's lens is a chapel lens. Consequently Button Hill's mind and voice are Congregational and Liberal.

¹⁰ G. Stowell, *The History of Button Hill* (1929), pp. 11-13.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.

The drifting with the tide is marked by the break up of the Bible Class. The knocking sideways is the decimation of the Fleece Pals, too many of them from the Bible Class, in France in 1916. The eclipse comes with the minister's farewell. The perceptions are from the pew rather than the pulpit, chiefly the pew of Alfred Ellersby. Ellersby is a leather merchant from Bootle. He is 'a teetotaller, a non-smoker, and a vegetarian, all on principle. He also believed in universal disarmament and Home Rule and women's rights and fresh air, and a host of other rebellious and unpopular things'.¹² He eventually dies from kidney failure brought on by pneumonia caught while zeppelin-watching from the tower of Fleece Town Hall. In a way necessary to novels but which real life can seldom afford, there is a sequence of high points. They are predictable: the Boer War, with mobs on Mafeking Night when Fleece's Pro-Boers have their backs to the wall; Passive Resistance and a heroic by-election; the Somme; the end. The underlying theme is the steady dilution of what began as the fresh distillation of Gladstonianism (or was it Congregationalism?) of purest essence. Here are five quotations to illustrate this:

- 1 The ubiquitous portrait of *Mr. Gladstone as he is Today* was in Mr. Mendip's hall [Mr. Mendip was in provisions. He rose as poor Ellersby sank], hanging in the place of honour between the hat-stand and the front-door, and it transpired that in support of Mr. Gladstone he had written several letters to the *Fleece Argus*.¹³
- 2 When Eric was born, his father wanted him to be called William Ewart Gladstone Ellersby. On the other hand his mother favoured the name of Edward . . . They fell back on 'Eric' as a compromise . . . 1893 and 1894 were vintage years for Erics.¹⁴
- 3 The general election of 1895 gave Button Hill its first opportunity for a general display of local patriotism. Always, the seat had been held by a Liberal. But in the year 1895, lifelong devotees of Mr. Gladstone found themselves hesitating [when faced by] Lord Rosebery . . . Mr. Ellersby was only one of many devout Liberals who could not bring themselves to trust a leader who had been busy winning the Derby when he ought to have been wooing votes, and who in so many other ways was emphatically *not* Mr. Gladstone. And in the Button Hill division the local Conservatives made an astute move when they persuaded Sir Matthew Phelps of Gledmere to contest the seat for them, the more so as the Liberal candidate was an importation from the south of England. Sir Matthew romped home. 'A Button Hill man for Button Hill', the blue

¹² Ibid., p. 23.

¹³ Ibid., p. 26.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 30.

placards had cried; and the appeal had been irresistible . . . And afterwards the sight of Sir Matthew's carriage in Bathwater Road gave the suburb new thrills of pride. He was Button Hill's very own M.P. A man who might even at that moment be on his way to the station to travel up to Westminster, there to rub shoulders with the greatest in the land. And yet here he was among them, returning the salutes of his neighbours and constituents with as genial a smile as he had worn on polling-day. And on Sunday he would be back at St. Michael's, going round with the collection bag and taking an unostentatious place with his fellow-sidesmen, just like an ordinary human being.

He cut a good figure in the House, too – he spoke on the Deceased Wife's Sister Bill when it came up, and was mentioned in the newspapers . . .¹⁵

- 4 [But Liberalism is not quite dead in Button Hill. In 1899 Alfred Ellersby for fifteen shillings places an advertisement in the *Fleece Argus*. It takes the form of an open letter to Campbell-Bannerman, 'the last hope of true Liberalism, who was still sitting on the fence in a state of beatific Liberal hesitation'].

1, Algernon Terrace,
Button Hill,
Fleece.

Sir, – The Tory Imperialists, who think this war right in principle and purpose, are mistaken, but at least their position is honourable. This cannot be said of those puny Liberals who go about saying, 'We don't agree with the war, but, having begun, we must go on with it.' That is like saying, 'It is wrong to murder, but, having murdered one man, we must murder many.' If that is the Liberal policy, it is a weak, wicked policy, and it spells immediate and final death to the party I have hitherto been proud to support.

Rosebery methods will end in ruin. True Liberals will not want to profit by the shedding of innocent blood. The only true Liberal policy is to stop the war, to refuse all supplies, and to appeal to the country on a traditional, sound, wise, economic, Christian, Gladstonian programme. You, sir, have the chance now, take it.

I am sir, your obedient, humble servant,

Alfred Ellersby.¹⁶

- 5 [It is 1929, give or take a year. Alfred's son (and Mendip's son-in-law) Eric, who teaches English at an L.C.C. secondary school, has briefly returned. He reflects on the suburb that he knew, and is now history]:

For the villas of Button Hill had been constitutionally solid. Like their occupants, they had made a bold bid for permanence. They thought they were not made to die. They had an air about them, those houses, an air of conscious moral weight. They were Gladstonian houses. Whereas the new houses assumed neither eternity nor finality, being frivolous, ephemeral affairs of stucco and pebble-dash. They seemed to know that they were

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 56–7.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 73–4.

built to enshrine a restless and shifting generation, the jazz generation. Incidentally they were smaller houses than of old – three or four bedrooms and a garage. Marie Stopes, and all that.¹⁷

They were Baldwin houses. There you have it. In broad, comfortably predictable brush strokes the Nonconformists' Mr. Gladstone is sketched in for the middle-brow, post-Gladstonian, post-chapel novel reader: Gladstone as icon, Gladstone as *man* – man for others and man for us, Gladstone as programme, Gladstone as moral value, Gladstone, in sum, as myth.

The History of Button Hill is fiction, not history but, to mix metaphors, there is nothing wrong in broad brush strokes, nuanced more by literary contrivance than by real life complexity, if the architecture is right. The architecture of this novel is right.

Although its author's name is now best known through that of a family firm, Stowell's of Chelsea, the wine merchants (who lived in Ealing), it was better known in the last century through its parsons. Five generations of Stowells in two branches produced at least eleven clergymen. Four of them were Anglicans, one of them that portentous Evangelical, Hugh of Salford.¹⁸ Six of them were Congregationalists, one of them a college principal. The seventh was both, since he was a Congregational minister who became an Anglican priest. Gordon's father was one of the six.¹⁹ He ministered for forty-one years at the Newton Park Union Church (Congregational and Baptist), Chapeltown Road, Leeds, gothic and clocktowered on the way to Harrogate. It is now a Sikh temple.

Fleece is Leeds. Bathwater is Harrogate. Button Hill is Newton Park and its minister, Arthur Samuel Knight, is Arthur Knight Stowell, a man whose four children, says an obituary referring to the 'palmy days of the suburb', 'have attained distinction in either educational, literary or other artistic respects'.²⁰ The seventh Earl of Bentham, unless he is the Earl of Mexborough, must be the fifth Earl of Harewood, with luncheon in whose town house this paper began.²¹ Sir Matthew Phelps of Gledmere must be

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 430.

¹⁸ For Hugh Stowell 1799–1865 see *Dictionary of National Biography*.

¹⁹ For Arthur Knight Stowell, 1854–1932, first cousin twice removed of Hugh Stowell, see *Congregational Year Book* 1933, p. 246.

²⁰ *Yorkshire Congregational Year Book* 1932, p. 53.

²¹ This is more conjectural. The aristocratic ground landlords for the Headingley and Potternewton districts of Leeds were the Earl of Cardigan (his title subsumed in that of Marquess of Ailesbury by 1894) for Headingley and the Earl of Mexborough and Earl Cowper for Potternewton. The streetnames of Potternewton are Mexborough and Cowper family names and in 1894 the reigning Earl Cowper was the 7th Earl: but it is Harewood which is the consistent, resident, county presence – Mexborough and Cowper were antiquarian associations by the 1890s. See M. Beresford, 'The Face of Leeds 1780–1914', D. Fraser (ed.), *A History of Modern Leeds* (Manchester University Press, 1980), p. 100.

W.L. Jackson of Allerton Hall, later Lord Allerton;²² and, although the electoral geography and history of Button Hill are at significant variance with that of Newton Park, there can be no doubt as to the 1902 by-election when Rowland Barran (in the novel transmogrified into Everard Sympath from Ipswich, a sort of secular Charles Sylvester Horne), son of Sir John Barran of Chapel Allerton Hall, swept in on the shoulders of the righteous indignation of passive registers and voters who *knew* about education.²³

Now to push this *roman-à-clef* further towards its Leeds reality, first at its lynch point, Button Hill Congregational Church, in the shape of Newton Park Union Church.²⁴

Its building was a model of nonconforming conformity, standing not so much back to front as apse to front to the road, flying-buttressed and gabletted and clockfaced and gas lit ('supplied free by the Leeds Corporation' for the clock's illumination). It struck a Bradford newspaper as 'one of the most picturesque and pleasing erections in the borough . . . quite an ornament to the neighbourhood', 'charmingly picturesque', its promoters to be 'congratulated on their public spirit in the erection of this comparatively small but beautiful specimen of Gothic architecture.' It was in fourteenth-century decorated gothic, with features 'not seen in any other church in Leeds . . . convenient and comfortable to the worshippers'. These included a spacious narthex, 'as it is styled in church architecture', an octagonal nave, 'boldly conceived arcading', 'a handsome dome', carving 'sparingly but tastefully used', the whole making for 'a very fine effect', and 'the general appearance is refined and pleasing, the church having quite a cathedral aspect.' Its stone had been laid in a year of loyal jubilee, 1887, by two grandees, Edward Crossley, the Halifax Congregationalist and Liberal M.P., and John Barran, the Leeds Baptist and M.P. It had been opened in April 1889 to sermons by Guinness Rogers of Clapham.²⁵ Theirs was a suggestive convergence of names. They may serve to prepare us for the Leeds reality, diary-slanted and feminine this time, of the generation of Howard Coote, Alfred Ellersby, A.S. Knight and A.K. Stowell.

The diaries cover the years 1874–6 and 1880. They describe the doings of Katharine Roubiliac Conder, a thoroughly normal girl of the professional classes anywhere.²⁶

²² For W.L. Jackson 1840–1917 see M. Stenton and S. Lees, *Who's Who of British Members of Parliament* Vol. II 1886–1918, (Hassocks, 1978), pp. 189–90.

²³ For Sir Rowland Barran 1858–1949 and Sir John Barran 1821–1905 see *ibid.*, pp. 22–3; for C.S. Horne 1865–1914 see *ibid.*, p. 180.

²⁴ This account is from *Bradford Observer* quoted in *Congregational Year Book*, 1891, pp. 218–19.

²⁵ *Leeds Congregational Year Book* 1901 (Leeds, 1901), p. 70.

²⁶ Katharine Roubiliac Conder (Mrs. Rayner Batten) 1860–1948. I am indebted to Mr. R.J. Simpson for access to her ms. diary.

Katharine Conder was educated first at home by governesses and mama, then at Cheltenham Ladies College, with a finishing of sorts at Leeds High School. Mama was really step-mama and moving through her late thirties. Cheltenham was 'dear old College', with Miss Belcher who was 'a perfect darling' and, even nicer and dearer, 'Miss Kennedy, who teaches us Arithmetic'. It was a life of examinations and competitions and flirting with college boys at the Philharmonic Concert, its horizons enlarged by a much-loved older sister at Girton, a hugely extended family and a round of quietly prosperous doings. There is vicarious pleasure at the new Duchess of Edinburgh's entry to London, marking a general admiration for the whole of the royal family. There is dinner at Sudeley Castle, with its antique oak memories of Katherine Parr, Henry VIII's Protestant queen, and its chatelaine, their hostess, surely so like Queen Katherine. There are readings of Macaulay or Browning or Ruskin or Carlyle or Kingsley or Dickens. There is a dose of scarlet fever, which means hanging the carpets and bedcoverings out of the window. It is a life in which rail travel is normally first class and there is no Evangelical nonsense about *walking* to church. Church is reached by tramcar or the carriage of some family friend or connexion. And church, of course, is chapel, either in the town centre, on East Parade, or close at hand, in the dual-purpose school-chapel served by students which preceded the domed and narthexed fourteenth-century picturesqueness of Newton Park. For this suburban Leeds reality is in fact the fictional Button Hill's prehistory. Sometimes, it has to be said, church is Church, Leeds Parish Church: 'Had the pleasure of hearing the curate, Mr. Knaggs, a fearful specimen . . .'

This prosperous normalcy, a cut or three above the Ellersbys needs to be placed so representative is it. Here it must be placed politically. It is March 1880.

1880 : 11 March Thursday Had our final French class at the Barrans . . . We did nothing at French . . . but talk about the Dissolution. All immensely excited . . .

27th March Saturday Received from good Uncle Jem a packet of yellow leaflets with our song ['The Despot! Lord B!' to the tune of Bonnie Dundee] printed thereon. Took them down to the Mercury Office to be used for the Cause! Went to see Millais' portrait of 'Our chief of Men', which is truly grand.

31 March Wednesday Went down to town, and got some gorgeous yellow ribband for favours tomorrow . . . Came home, worked and made us each a rosette. Read a capital placard on my way home on the 'Strange Disappearance' of 'A Young Person named National Prosperity' . . .

1 April Thursday Ethel and I, largely decorated, started off for Headingley.

Our favours drew forth various remarks, chiefly of approval, such as 'That's the colour! Stick to it!' etc. . . . to Aunt Louie's to tea. Found the children all much excited, disporting themselves in yellow. Then went up to St. Ann's; . . . Had hoped Papa would take us to the Town Hall, to hear the Declaration of the Poll, but when we did not appear at Chapel, he imagined we must have gone with Mr. Willans. All we cld do was to 'tram it' home . . . A little before 11 [Laurie] came in with the grand news:

1. Gladstone 24,600
2. Barran 23,600
3. Jackson
4. Wheelhouse

We went to bed in a state of mighty exultation!

2 April Friday Drenching with rain. Heard from Louie Barran, regretfully giving up the work-house. Wrote to her, sending our heartiest congratulations . . .

3 April Saturday . . . meeting the Scattergoods . . . Gloated over the victory.

Papa and Mamma called at the Barrans to congratulate them.

5 April Monday Drenched with rain and hail, also saw thunder and lightning . . . had to shelter for about half an-hour in a little grocer's shop, had some very amusing political discussions with the owner . . . Grand victories of Midlothian and our West Riding!

17 April Saturday . . . down to see Mr. Gladstone's portrait . . . it rained.

30 April Friday Lucky Laurie has got his ticket for the meeting at the Mechanics, and is gone to hear Mr. Herbert Gladstone . . .

May Day Saturday Laurie was delighted with Mr. Herbert Gladstone last night. The meeting was most enthusiastic. Maggie has been reading the account of it aloud this morning. *Mrs.* Gladstone spoke a few words! Papa has promised to take us to the 'Mass Meeting' at the Coloured Cloth Hall Yard this afternoon! They say that over 30,000 tickets have been issued for it. I do hope we shall be able to get in . . .

We went to the meeting and enjoyed it immensely, all agreeing it was one of the greatest treats we have ever had . . . Papa got some extra tickets from Mr. Willans . . . The huge yard was already crowded near the stairs, though we got there one and a quarter hours before the time. Mr. W. most kindly got us tickets for the barricaded area round the stairs, where we could see and hear splendidly. A small balcony had been erected in front of the steps, with chairs for Mrs. Gladstone, Mr. Herbert Gladstone and Mr. Kitson. The Barrans had chairs just behind these: of course every one else stood. Great Liberal processions soon came pouring in, with bands and banners, and long before 4 o'clock the whole vast hall was densely crowded, except just in one furthest corner. We were in a tremendous jam, but are not the least the worse for it . . . Papa . . . got a 'platform ticket'. At 10 minutes

to 4 they arrived, being greeted with tremendous enthusiasm. The cheers then, and at every mention of the name of Gladstone were something to remember all one's life. Mr. Herbert Gladstone is very good looking, and very clever-looking, with a most intelligent, wide-awake expression, and a very lively pleasant smile. He made a capital speech, without the slightest hesitation for one moment, and it seemed wonderfully little exertion to him. He has a very nice voice and capital delivery, and forms all his words with beautiful distinction. There were about 30,000 people there, and he seemed to be heard perfectly all over. It was most amusing to hear the remarks of the people round us: 'Good lad!' 'Eh, he's a nice lad!' 'Stick to it, my lad!' etc. and the enthusiastic cries of 'No! No!' when he said anything about his 'own unworthiness'. Once he spoke of the 'far greater men who had stood upon that platform', and was interrupted with loud shouts of 'No! No!' whereupon he seemed much amused, shook his head, and said laughing 'No, No. You won't quite make *that* go down with me'. After his speech, a good many questions were sent up in writing, which Mr. Kitson read, and the tact and readiness with which Mr. Herbert Gladstone answered them delighted everyone. In fact, he really has taken everyone by storm, and has completely stolen our hearts!

Then Mr. Kitson asked whether any one wished to propose any other candidate, whereupon, amidst tremendous hooting and howling and roars of laughter, a dirty, toothless, disreputable-looking workman mounted the platform, and (after daring to drink out of Herbert's glass of water!) proposed John de Morgan! The hooting and howling made it often quite impossible for him to speak, though the horn was blown two or three times for silence, and Mr. Kitson besought the people to 'give this gentleman two little minutes'. The man declared 'he was a good Liberal and '(waving his hand in Mr. Gladstone's face) 'I've noothing to say against this'ere yoong mon. I daresay he's a very good yoong mon!' upon which Mr. Gladstone raised his hat, and made him a most polite bow! No one was forthcoming to second the amendment, which of course fell through and the resolution adopting Mr. Herbert Gladstone was carried with immense enthusiasm, only 3 out of the 30,000 hands being held up against it. Then 'Archie Sear' started 'For he's a jolly good fellow!' which was roared out by the whole crowd, all of us doing our little best to swell the chorus. Mr. E. Wilson, Mr. L. Gain, Mr. McCheane, Mr. Barran and Mr. Kitson also spoke. Mr. Carter made the one bad-taste speech, raking up the disestablishment question, and receiving very little sympathy. Mrs. Gladstone authorised Mr. Kitson to say that 'Mr. Gladstone was the youngest member of his family and Herbert was the youngest of hers', and also 'that young gentleman had taken upon himself to select Downing St. as the place of his birth!' – remarks which were received with much laughter and applause, and considered as arguing that we are now electing our future Premier. When the meeting was over they made their way along a raised passage which had been erected all along the side of the yard, and as they did so, hundreds of not-over-clean hands were stretched up for a shake! Mrs. Gladstone bore it for some time and then she had to leave off; but we thought Mr. Herbert's hand would be pretty nearly

wrung off, as it was grasped by about 8 or 10 hands at a time the whole way along, while he gave them all hearty shakes, laughing the whole time. All the road was thronged with an enthusiastic crowd, and every available window crammed with spectators.

We got home at about 7, perfectly wild with admiration of our new hero. I wrote a four-sheet description of it all to Grandmamma. The weather yesterday and today has been all that could be desired – 'Gladstone weather', we call it.

May 3 Monday into town . . . and bought a capital cabinet of Mr. Herbert Gladstone, Lilly doing the same.

May 4 Tuesday Finished 'Waverley' . . . read 'Modern Painters'.

May 5 Wednesday Alice and Marian Butler came to tea, and we took them there in the evening and finding them enthusiastic Gladstonians, raved about 'Herbert' (whom they had not yet seen) the whole time!

May 6 Thursday Read aloud Mr. Reid's lecture on Mr. Gladstone. Mamma went to the lunch at S. Ann's, taking Eddie to Aunt Louie's, in hopes of his seeing the young hero . . . Mamma came home almost as enthusiastic as we are about Herbert. Says, 'she fell in love with him at once', 'he's a dear boy', 'perfectly charming and fascinating', 'one of the sweetest faces she ever saw', etc! Three cheers for the worthy son of a noble sire! . . .

May 7 Friday We talked, and read a pamphlet on Lord Beaconsfield aloud by turns. What a contrast to our Heroes!

May 8 Saturday A most lovely day. Armed ourselves with Tennyson, and went to Mr. Jowitt's where we read 'Maud' . . . At 2 o'clock, Mrs. S[cattergood], Lilly, Nelly, Louie and I, presented ourselves at Rice's, where we had been promised seats opposite the plat-form from which Mr. Gladstone was to address the crowd. He was nominated, and returned unopposed, to everyone's great joy. A huge crowd filled the square, and we were dreadfully afraid we should not be able to hear a word, but Mr. Gladstone's splendid clear voice was heard all over without any difficulty. He looked as charming as ever, and spoke so nicely. The show of hands was a sight to remember. Mr. Barran disgusted us with a horribly conceited, patronising speech, talking of himself and Herbert as 'one man'!!

Afterwards we went round to the back of the Town Hall in hopes of seeing Herbert drive away; but the crush was so great that we could only see the top of his hat waving, and the carriage . . .

9 May Sunday Cold and dull. Walked down to E.[ast] P.[arade] C.[hapel] with Miss Shaw, who told me that she was in the Great Northern hotel on the night of Mr. Herbert Gladstone's first arrival, and that he shook hands with her, all of his own accord! She was in one of the windows near

the Cloth Hall Yard that Saturday, and took an active share in showering down primroses on the carriage after the meeting. She also threw down a handful of hot-house flowers, which he caught, and drove away holding them in his hand. Everyone seems to have shaken hands with him except our unhappy selves! A poor woman in the crowd yesterday told us that *she* had – wretch! . . .

Pyp preached a very original and striking sermon (I thought) this morning, from Job II.10: ‘Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?’

10 May Monday . . . met Rose Henderson and Emily Pollock, who said they sat opposite Mr. Herbert Gladstone in Church yesterday. Being prejudiced and ignorant Tories, they did not admire him! . . . Read ‘Alton Locke’, darned, and read aloud a ‘Spectator’ article on the Indian appointments. (Lords Ripon and Hartington).

12 May Wednesday Received by post this morning our Hero’s autograph! I started the idea of asking him for it, in fun: Nellie took it up in earnest [sic], and insisted on writing, enclosing stamped and addressed envelope. Then we concocted a note, signed with all our initials, saying that ‘Four enthusiastic young Liberals’ (we were afraid to say ‘admirers’) ‘would consider it the greatest possible favour if Mr. Herbert Gladstone would send them his autograph’. So now behold the reward of cheek – one for each of us! . . .

It is important to be reminded that life is seriously to be enjoyed, that responsibility can be assumed, matter of course, and not be burdensome; that politics is part of life, its froth and passion too; and that women are part of politics, as life. This is of course the world of Midlothian’s Leeds side. In 1880 Gladstone ran for Leeds as well as Midlothian, as was then not unusual and entirely prudent. On assuming office he surrendered both seats without the embarrassment, as he charmingly put it, of having to opt for either just yet, and Herbert, in his late twenties and a history don at Keble who had made a brave but quite unavailing showing in Middlesex, stepped in at Leeds where he remained for thirty years. Button Hill, that is to say, had an oblique but real family investment in Gladstonianism. It was more than flavour of the month or spirit of the age. And as for Lilly, Nellie, Maggie, Laurie, Eddie, Ethel, Papa, Mamma, Aunt Janie, Aunt Louie, Uncle J. Willans, Cousin Manwaring, and deaf grandpapa isolated at St. Ann’s, it was heart-beat, or at least heart-throb. There is nothing special in Katharine Conder’s election account. Nothing, that is to say, that may not be more acutely or immediately found, for example, about Yorkshire elections in Lady Frederick Cavendish’s diaries, or Lady Amberley’s journals – the one from the angle of an intelligent Anglican, the other more intelligentsia than intelligent, noblewomen both, daily

in political circles.²⁷ But that there is nothing special makes it entirely special.

Note the names in that diary. Most, as in most diaries, are related, or at least connected: not indeed Grosvenor, Lyttelton, Leveson-Gower, Cavendish, but Lupton, Rücker, Conder, Baines, Barran, Crossley, Willans, Scattergood, Jowitt, Crewdson, Reed, Batten, Winterbotham, Heaton, Marchetti, Whitley. Translate them religiously. They are Congregational, Baptist, Quaker, Unitarian. Translate them socially and economically. They are carpets, textiles, newsprint, rag trade, medicine, law, banking. Translate them geographically. They are Leeds, Manchester, Cheltenham, Halifax, Huddersfield, and beyond for Sheffield, Bradford, Liverpool, London, Norwich, Edinburgh, swim easily in. Translate them politically. They are shades of Liberal with a strong municipal accent – but of these names Rücker and Willans had produced or would produce parliamentary candidates, and Baines, Barran, Reed, Crossley, Whitley, Winterbotham had produced, would produce or were producing candidates who became M.P.'s. These are the election-platform, aldermanic-bench, back-bench classes. Translate not so much into another language as into a dialect. This is the *Leeds Mercury* world of the Bainesocracy in its late Indian Summer. Its grand old man is poor, deaf, soon-to-be-Sir Edward Baines up at St. Anne's, who had been ousted in 1874 by the Barranage, whose big new man was rich soon-to-be-Sir John up at Chapel Allerton.²⁸ But the Baineses and the Barrans are the same sort, East Parade Chapel to South Parade Chapel: and Edward Baines's step-granddaughter's greatest friend, Lily Scattergood, daughter of Leeds's leading physician and East Parade's senior deacon, is shortly to marry Alfred Barran of South Parade, brother of the Rowland Barran whose by-election victory in the new century will be the last victory of Bainesocracy, Barranage, and Button Hill alike.

The diary's pivot is Papa. Inasmuch as the cousinhood's religious accent was Congregational, papa was their pivot too. He is Eustace Rogers Conder, minister of East Parade Chapel and old Edward Baines's son-in-law.²⁹ The *gravitas* of such a man, whether concentrated on one local congregation or mediated through a national network into several such congregations each represented by a string of such men, is not now easily apprehended. But an understanding of men like Conder is the key to this chapel garden walled around in the pleasure grounds of the Victorian

²⁷ J. Bailey (ed.), *The Diary of Lady Frederick Cavendish*, 2 vols (1927): B. and Patricia Russell (eds) *The Amberley Papers*, 2 vols (1937).

²⁸ For the context of the Baines family see C. Binfield, *So Down to Prayers* (1977), pp. 54–100.

²⁹ For Eustace Rogers Conder 1820–92 see *Congregational Year Book* 1893, pp. 214–16.

political nation. It is a key which Gladstone had his finger on, and which he came closest to turning in the late 1870s.

So from the Gladstone of reminiscence, a novel and a girl's diary to the Gladstone of his own *Diaries*, out of power, out of office, out of official connection with his party, but not out of mind for he was still a British senator and therefore a public man.

A feature of Gladstone's earlier *Diaries* is the extent to which, in his male-menopausal 1850s, he built up an exceptionally wide potential, perhaps actual, power base, simply because he got about. He became known. In large part of course this was the consequence of his personality – his charm, indeed his allure, his stamina, and his incorrigible noseyness. To a degree it was consequent upon the life of any major and serious politician in a society which was still a federation of country houses and Gladstone's own family connexions (and of course his wife's) helped that on famously: Wales, England, Scotland; Hawarden, Fasque, Hagley; an infinite Saturday-to-Monday elasticity, springing to and from that hearth and home of all true country households, London. The Gladstonian dimension to this, however, is less such elasticity (which any Cavendish, Grosvenor, Russell or Leveson-Gower could have worked on, given the temperament) than an interaction with more areas, that is to say more networks, of the British political nation than any other prime politician, certainly any other prime minister, had cared to make. Such interaction was not in itself novel but the Gladstonian intensity of it and the thoroughness were entirely novel. So, to London, Country and Celtic Fringe add Church, 'Oxford' and 'Manchester'; add do-goodery too. Such intersecting is severely constrained if you head an administration. It is the stuff of life if you are in opposition and especially so in a railway age. The federation of country houses worked because each was a carriage drive away from the next. Now the carriage drive away was a railway carriage drive. Gladstone's was the first generation to work this to a fine art. Midlothian is the symbol of this.

In the Midlothian decade, moreover, this Gladstonian intersection was signally enhanced by the Nonconformist network, and if that were still more Bainesocracy and Barranage than Button Hill, the Bainesocracy operated nonetheless in Button Hill. This enhancement was neither new nor uniform but now it came of age. In these years Nonconformists were politically and socially blooded as members of a network integral to the political nation. They were also bloodied. That is not our present concern. Our real concern is that they were more obviously around, socially, professionally, educationally and therefore politically. It would have been unnatural for any Liberal politician with a feel for the political nation to avoid them. Their convergence with Gladstone was as sensibly inevitable as Gladstone's reconvergence with the Liberal leadership.

This is where Gladstone's diaries must be called as evidence. It is not that references to Nonconformists are disproportionate, although their proportion has grown, neither is it that the links thus demonstrated were carefully engineered, though of course they were (Gladstone was too canny not to know what they were after, and who can resist rubbing shoulders, or at least correspondences, with a former Prime Minister and a present statesman?). It is that they were natural. Each party had interests which converged.

Colin Matthew encapsulates Gladstone's style in these years as 'High Church in conception, Evangelical in conviction, and Broad Church in presentation.'³⁰ No wonder he is so ready a reader of *The Catholic Presbyterian*. It is marvellously encompassed by that famous reflection on the Sunday after Christmas, 1879, as he writes 'in the last minutes of the seventh decade' of his life:-

28 December 1879: . . . For the last 3½ years I have been passing through a political experience which is I believe without example in our Parliamentary history. I profess it to believe it has been an occasion, when the battle to be fought was a battle of justice, humanity, freedom, law, all in their first elements from the very root, and all on a gigantic scale. The word spoken was a word for millions, and for millions who themselves cannot speak. If I really believe this then I should regard my having been morally forced into this work as a great and high election of God . . . But alas the poor little garden of my soul remains uncultivated, unweeded, and defaced. So then while I am bound to accept this election for the time, may I not be permitted to pray that the term shall be short? Three things I would ask of God over and above all the bounty which surrounds me. This first that I may escape into retirement. This second that I may speedily be enabled to divest myself of everything resembling wealth. And the third – if I may – that when God calls me He may call me speedily. To die in Church appears to be a great *euthanasia* but not a time to disturb worshippers. Such are some of the old man's thoughts, in whom there is still something that consents not to be old . . .

. . . All this I ought to have written on my knees: from which were I *never* to rise.

Last among the last

Least among the least

Can there be a place for me

At the marriage feast?³¹

There is the High Churchman whose true home is The Church. There is the Broad Churchman determined not to be a nuisance and a distraction.

³⁰ H.C.G. Matthew (ed.), *The Gladstone Diaries*, Volume IX January 1875–December 1880 (Oxford, 1986), p. XXXVII.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 470–1.

There is the Evangelical redeemed, yet in his own true estimation irredeemable. But there is more. All this is the very essence of that particular Nonconformist temper whose dominant accent is Congregational. Here is true extempore prayer, not the artless spontaneity of unthinking innocence, but the natural issue of spiritual, disciplined, wrestling. Here is election, great and high. Here is the Puritan's garden walled around. Here is the Word – Word as words in the world.

This is the temper in concentrate which informs these diaries. And this is the temper of those Nonconformists – who are also in all other respects the weightiest representatives of their churches – most frequently mentioned in the diaries. Here is a temper shared. Here are men grown aware of a spiritual, indeed churchly, inheritance held in common.

Like the Nonconformist cousinhood – or the Whig Great-Grandmotherhood – Gladstone's encounters of the Nonconforming kind are geographically and denominationally pervasive. There is Principal Rainy for example. Presbyterianism has to be a fascination for any intelligent Scotchman at however many removes. No M.P. for a Lowland constituency could ignore Free Church Presbyterianism, since, were he a Liberal, his committees increasingly depended on Free Church networks. Gladstone's Midlothian constituency chairman, John Cowan, the Penicuik papermaker, was such a man. No representative of Edinburghshire could be blind to the Free Church's dominating New College, or to the stringpulling power of its manse-placing Principal; and when its Principal also professes Church History, could a mere Gladstone hold out?³²

Dr. Rigg, the Wesleyan, might be viewed in an equally strategic light.³³ Wesleyanism must be a fascination and a bafflement for an intelligently nosey passionate English churchman. Hence the Gladstone who ruins a dinner party by asking 'Imperial' Perks to explain to him the Wesleyan Methodist 'Body', and smiles politely when Perks corrects 'Body' to 'Church'.³⁴ Hence too the Gladstone who carefully notes the views of the Wesleyan barrister and manse son, briefly a Sheffield MP, Samuel Danks Waddy: 'Found Mr. Waddy under a tenacious conviction that I am the coming man' (28 October 1879); and has then to write six months later to explain to Waddy why no Wesleyans figure in the coming man's now come administration: (21 May 1880).

If among them there is no member of the Wesleyans I sincerely regret it. I

³² For Robert Rainy 1826–1906 see P. Carnegie Simpson, *The Life of Principal Rainy*, 2 vols (1909); for Sir John Cowan Bt., 1814–1900 see F. Boase, *Modern English Biography* (1897, reprint 1965), Vol. iv.

³³ For J.H. Rigg 1821–1909 see *Dictionary of National Biography*.

³⁴ D. Crane, *The Life-Story of Sir Robert W. Perks Baronet, M.P.* n.d. [1909] pp. 111–14.

need not assure you that the circumstance is not due to any prejudice against them in any quarter. Appointments to civil office cannot be substantively governed by religious profession, yet I should be glad, for better knowledge, if you could confidentially supply me with a list of the Wesleyans now in the House of Commons.³⁵

But the core of this convergence is Congregational: Henry Allon, J. Guinness Rogers, Newman Hall, Baldwin Brown, all of London; R. W. Dale of Birmingham; A. M. Fairbairn of Bradford, soon to be of Oxford; and Eustace Rogers Conder.³⁶

John Parry has amply analysed a complex of reasons for their convergence with Gladstone (and their occasional divergence from him) in the earlier 1870s.³⁷ I would here for the later 1870s suggest three further dimensions to this: its context of the Word; its aesthetic context; its structural context.

Each of these weighty, intelligent men was a wire puller and an accomplished communicator on a regular basis to sizeable audiences drawn largely from the political nation. That dimension of words needs urgently to be recaptured. 'The word spoken was a word for millions, and for millions who themselves cannot speak', Gladstone mused at the end of the Midlothian year, a fortnight after calculating that in twelve days he had spoken on thirty occasions to 86,930 men and women, for fifteen and a half hours.³⁸ No wonder the Midlothian years were also years of watching Henry Irving (whose knighthood was a Gladstonian one), of reading, sampling, comparing like any provincial sermon taster:

20 July 1879: the Rector [of St. Marylebone] perfectly complacent delivered a sermon which I can only call pious chatter, perfectly effete, on a grand text . . . which he did nothing to open. In the evening I read Spurgeon's vivid and noble Sermon of last Sunday on the Crisis and the Wars: what a contrast!³⁹

The pervasive power of such words uttered and published is not to be ignored. This is a culture in which Spurgeon merged into Dickens and Dale into Browning for countless Sunday congregations and weekday

³⁵ Poor Waddy was not now one of them: he had lost his seat. *Gladstone Diaries*, op.cit., pp. 454, 512. For Waddy 1830–1902 see Stenton and Lees, op.cit., p. 360.

³⁶ For Henry Allon 1818–92, J. Guinness Rogers 1822–1911, C. Newman Hall 1816–1902, J. Baldwin Brown 1820–84, R. W. Dale 1829–95, A. M. Fairbairn 1838–1912, E. R. Conder 1820–92 see A. Peel, *The Congregational Two Hundred 1530–1948* (1948), pp. 188, 200, 185, 192, 205, 221, 135.

³⁷ J. P. Parry, *Democracy and Religion: Gladstone and the Liberal Party 1867–1875* (C.U.P., 1986), esp. pp. 200–29.

³⁸ *Gladstone Diaries*, op.cit., pp. 471, 466.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 430. For C. H. Spurgeon 1834–92 see *Autobiography*, 2 vols (rev. ed., Banner of Truth Trust, 1973).

reading circles. It is the culture in which 'the best type of Methodist sermon met their desire for knowledge as well as for grace, and if the minister had the sense not to omit the long words but to explain them, so much the better' and in which, when Robert Perks stood for Louth in 1892, he found a large party organisation to all intents and purposes ready made in the eight hundred or so local preachers of his constituency's Wesleyan and Primitive circuits.⁴⁰

The twin contexts for this culture of the Word celebrated in such torrents of words were aesthetic and churchly.

The Nonconformity which Gladstone encountered was culturally in the Victorian mainstream. It was Ruskinian or Pre-Raphaelite and it was very Cook's Tour:

5 December 1877; Went to the opening service of Dr. Allon's Independent Chapel. A notable Sermon from Dr. Dale; and striking music.⁴¹

Union Chapel, Islington, is one of Victorian Protestant architecture's most catholic triumphs. It is a Gladstone among chapels, at once High, Broad and Evangelical. Its architect, the son of a tutor at Spurgeon's Pastors' College, submitted his design under the name 'Torcello', for here in Islington must be one of the finest Stones of Venice, Santa Fosca rediviva.⁴²

When Gladstone visited the real Torcello for himself two years later, he found it all 'tending to modify the received views.' [7 October 1879].⁴³

Between 'Torcello' and Torcello there was a visit to another grand chapel, Newman Hall's Christ Church, Westminster Bridge Road. It too announced old values in a new and audacious way, with its combination of octagonal meeting house and Ely Cathedral and its spire in commemoration of Abraham Lincoln. Christ Church was equidistant from Lambeth Palace, Waterloo Station and Bedlam:

2 June 1878: I attended Mr. Newman Hall's remarkable service. He preached a Sermon some part of which would at Oxford 35 years back have brought him into the clutches of Chancellor Winter. It was very brave.⁴⁴

The Gladstonian infrastructure for such visits was usually a barrage of letters, notes and cards. These were more than preparatory courtesies for they were the getting within the skin of the experience which must

⁴⁰ [Grace Hunter] *Maud Mary McAulay: A Memoir* (1939), p. 57; Crane, op.cit., pp. 172 *et seq.*

⁴¹ *Gladstone Diaries*, op.cit., p. 273.

⁴² C. Binfield, 'A Chapel and its Architect: James Cubitt and Union Chapel, Islington, 1879-1899', Diana Wood ed. *The Church and its Arts*, Studies in Church History, 28, Oxford: Blackwell, 1992, pp. 417-448

⁴³ *Gladstone Diaries*, op.cit., p. 448.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 319.

be a vital part of any orator's armoury and which was Gladstone's forte. At Union Islington no hearer is out of sight, one to one, eye to eye, soul to soul, of the man in the pulpit. Each hearer is at once individualised and welded into the worshipping community. Union is an ideal arena for any orator or preacher or actor, for whom there can be no communication without rapport. Gladstone spent that June day at Union from 11.30 in the morning to 3.30 in the afternoon. On another June day two years later he was at Mill Hill School, this time from 4 p.m. to 8.15 p.m. Mill Hill was a Free Church boarding school. Its recent past had been bumpy and its great days (a knighted headmaster and membership of the Headmasters' Conference) were not yet, but there were few prominent Dissenting families without Mill-Hillian links. Dr. Weymouth, the headmaster, was a Baptist. Gladstone's preparatory letters to him began on 28 May. On 10 June he noted: 'Dr. Weymouth's Address: read.' Next day:

To Mill Hill. Went over the buildings and delivered an Address of perhaps three-quarters of an hour after distributing the prizes. An institution strikingly *alive*. Read Mill Mill Magazine and worked on papers about the School.⁴⁵

Such an address at such a time to such an audience, with its promise of bright futurity, could not fail politically; and here too it was mind speaking to mind, Gladstone expressed something of this when he wrote to F.H.C. Doyle in May 1880:

My fears are excited by the manner in which a large proportion of the educated community is wheedling itself out of the greatest and brightest of all its possessions, the 'jewel of great price'. That great divide between the actual Christian religion and the trained human reason, which has long marked most countries of the continent, has during the past twenty-five years been too perceptible in this country, and is producing its natural fruit in the declining morality of the upper portion of society . . . [and he added] my life has certainly been remarkable for the mass of continuous and searching experience it has brought me.⁴⁶

Value to value; mind to mind, culture to culture; voice to voice. And structure to structure.

The word which best describes the Nonconformist structure – its 'churchmanship' to use a concept which would have teased Gladstone – is 'representative'. The Nonconformist denominations, none of them democratic, each of them representative, were models of what the British political system might become. Each chapel housed not so much Sunday

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 420. For R.F. Weymouth 1822–1902 see E. Hampden-Cook, *The Register of Mill Hill School 1807–1926* (priv., 1926), p. 455.

⁴⁶ *Gladstone Diaries*, op.cit., pp. 519–20.

sermon-tasters who might on weekdays vote Liberal, as a daily community of interests (almost in the old political sense of the word), each distinct within the one community, their totality fuelling the activities of dozens, perhaps hundreds, of men and women, offering each one a 'continuous and searching experience', rippling out into the wider community. All of them – Sunday school, Mission auxiliary, choir, Bible class – were within the pale of the congregational constitution, as a chapel Gladstone might have put it.

Well within that pale is the political nation proper, the Christian electorate, the Methodist Society or the Baptist or Congregational Church, men and women whose mere adherence has turned into membership. Their membership was a commitment consciously taken in obedience to a religious experience duly recognised by others of like experience. Only they constitute the church. They alone attend the meetings which legislate for the church's well-being. They alone elect their officers, call their minister. Those officers, the deacons of a Baptist or a Congregational Church form a House of Lords to church meeting's Commons. Or rather they form a cabinet, with a prime minister, who is the minister. The two fused easily. 'We want theological Mr. Gladstones', cried Thomas Coote, Howard Coote's father, up in Rotherham for the opening of its rebuilt Congregational theological college in 1876.⁴⁷ Their call, like Gladstone's, was to serve. It was also to lead. It was to liberate the dynamic which is the motor of that collective known as chapel.

That dynamic explains what made Button Hill for Gordon Stowell. It makes sense of Katharine Conder's otherwise pleasingly unexceptionable family circle. It charges a network which a Gladstone might mentally and politically intersect. That intersection is at once a conscious strategy and quite natural.

Take, for example, the closing months of 1878 and the opening months of 1879. They saw the round of Hawarden, Harley Street and the country houses: Betteshanger in East Kent, Mentmore in Rothschildia and Clumber in the Dukeries. They saw the socialisings of a serious public man: dinner with the Bishop of Winchester followed by the Duchess of Edinburgh's reception. And woven into these higher normalities are the reading of John Stoughton on Religion in the Reigns of Anne and the Georges,⁴⁸ or writing on the Evangelical Movement for Henry Allon's *British Quarterly Review* and corresponding with him accordingly. Stoughton and Allon were ecclesiastics in cousinhood and the *Review* was an organ of cousinhood. Herbert Asquith, a nephew of Katharine Conder's uncle Willans, cut his literary teeth on Allon's *Review*, and in his London days uncle

⁴⁷ *Rotherham and Masbro' Advertiser* 23 September 1876.

⁴⁸ For John Stoughton 1807–97 see Peel, op.cit., p. 167.

Willans had been one of Allon's deacons. And Allon's co-editor, H.R. Reynolds,⁴⁹ was grandpapa Baines's brother-in-law and had been E.R. Conder's predecessor at East Parade Chapel (he was also the successor of Gordon Stowell's great grandfather as President of Cheshunt College). At the turn of the year Leeds was in Gladstone's mind in the shape of the life of Dean Hook. ('What a man – what a husband!')⁵⁰ whose Leeds Parish Church was increasingly tugging at the loyalties of the younger Baineses.

There were further consequences. When Gladstone read about 'The Water Supply of London' in *Fraser's*, he was reading a piece by F.R. Conder, Eustace's civil engineer brother.⁵¹ When he wrote on 30 December 1878 to the Episcopalian incumbent of Fraserburgh to acknowledge his *The Real Character of the Early Records of Genesis* (which he dutifully looked at before turning to Dean Hook and chopping down a beech tree) he was writing to an apostate cousin of Eustace Conder's first wife.⁵² When, on 8 January 1879, he was formally invited to stand for Midlothian, the invitation came from an association whose chairman, as we have seen, was (Sir) John Cowan.⁵³ Cowan's niece, Charlotte Cowan (herself an M.P.'s daughter), was married to H.J. Wilson, the precious metal smelter and future M.P. whose family increasingly ran Sheffield Liberalism.⁵⁴ The Wilsons and their kinsmen, the Leaders and Pye-Smiths, were the very pattern of Sheffield Congregationalism and Sheffield's Leadership was a faint yet distinct reflection of the Leeds Bainesocracy, to which of course the Leaders, Pye-Smiths and Wilsons were closely connected by marriage.

Sheffield furnishes the ultimate naturalness in the Gladstonian-Non-conformist convergence of these years. When the Gladstones grudgingly gave up 11 Carlton House Terrace for 73 Harley Street, their neighbour was Mrs. Birks. Gladstone enjoyed her hospitality and frequently dined there. Colin Matthew has discovered that Mrs. Birks was locketed, ringleted and Pre-Raphaelite and suspects that her money came from brewing since Gladstone wrote to her about the malt tax.⁵⁵ It did. No Laura Thistlethwayte or Mme Novikov she, Judith Ann Birks was the widow of Thomas Birks, a Sheffield brewer and former mayor. Samuel Plimsoll had been one of his clerks.⁵⁶

⁴⁹ For H.R. Reynolds 1825–96 see *ibid.*, p. 203.

⁵⁰ *Gladstone Diaries*, op.cit., p. 380.

⁵¹ Francis Roubiliac Conder 1815–89. *Ibid.*, p. 489.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 374.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 381.

⁵⁴ For H.J. Wilson 1837–1914 see Stenton and Lees, op.cit., p. 377.

⁵⁵ *Gladstone Diaries*, op.cit., p. LXXX.

⁵⁶ Judith Anne Elam was the second wife of Thomas Birks, d.1861, brewer and mayor of Sheffield in 1849. For the Plimsoll link see G.H. Peters *The Plimsoll Line* (1975), pp. 11, 14.

Birks's family, the brewery notwithstanding, were active at two, perhaps three, Sheffield Congregational churches. Katharine Conder's great uncle, Thomas Smith, had ministered at one of them. Thomas Rawson Birks, Old Mill Hillian and Knightsbridge Professor at Cambridge, was Thomas Birks's first cousin.⁵⁷ There were other connexions. Mrs. Birks's daughter was Mrs. Louis Crossley of Moorside, Halifax, whom Katharine Conder visited in 1880 and with whom Lady Frederick Cavendish, Mrs. Gladstone's niece, stayed for the 1880 election.⁵⁸ Louis Crossley was the brother of Mrs. Marchetti and the first cousin of Edward Crossley also mentioned in Katharine Conder's diaries. He was the uncle of the future Mrs. Speaker Whitley. This was the very purple of Congregationalism. As for Mrs. Birks, her own Congregationalism had survived Sheffield at least to February 1876, since she was until then a member of Westminster Chapel.⁵⁹ There she had sat under Samuel Martin, which might explain her Pre-Raphaelite air since Westminster Chapel was where the art-collecting Glasgow M.P., William Graham, had worshipped when in Town.⁶⁰

Whatever the state of Mrs. Birks's churchmanship at the time of her dinners for Mr. Gladstone its *context* – whether expressed as something to be reacted against or developed from or not mentioned at all (being taken for granted) – cannot have been wholly unknown to him. (22 March 1878 'Spent the forenoon at a breakfast of Nonconformists around Mrs. Birks's table: much interesting conversation').⁶¹ It completes my case for the naturalness of such links between Dissent's thinking classes, even if at their chattering edge, and the Westminster classes as concentrated so memorably on this one man, representative because outsize. He was the first Prime Minister whom they could easily see and quite likely meet and come to feel that they knew, without ever having to dethrone him from his necessary pedestal. Hence the importance of such myths as the thirtyfold chewing of each mouthful: outsize, grand, yet down-to-earth – and given the state of the nation's bowels, not least Gladstone's own (at the turn of 1879 he was a martyr to 'internal insecurity'),⁶² those myths were not entirely implausible.

The convergence between Gladstone and Dissent was unique. No other politician could have retained that response once elicited, or been so

⁵⁷ For T.R. Birks 1810–83 see *Dictionary of National Biography*.

⁵⁸ J. Bailey (ed.), *op.cit.*, vol. II, p. 247.

⁵⁹ Judith Birks was a member of Westminster Chapel 1870–6. Her daughter Hannah was a member 1862–6, transferring her membership from the chapel at the time of her marriage to Louis Crossley. Members List, Westminster Chapel 1849–66, 1866–1908.

⁶⁰ For Samuel Martin 1817–78 see Peel, *op.cit.*, p. 187; for William Graham 1817–85 see Stenton, *op.cit.*, vol. I (1832–85), p. 163.

⁶¹ *Gladstone Diaries*, *op.cit.*, p. 300.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 386.

interested in it, or indeed would have wished to or needed to. Of Gladstone's prime ministerial predecessors, Russell could have been the only serious candidate and he is easily ruled out. Gladstone's successors in theory furnish several candidates but it is only theory. Asquith is the one who belongs most securely to the Nonconformist cousinhood. His was Katharine Conder's world.⁶³ But Asquith made little active and no consistent use of them after 1890, although they did not let him slip away quite as easily as the biographers make out. Though for a while a church member, Asquith was not in the old sense a serious person. The form never ceased to interest him, and it marked him. The reality was irrelevant to him.

There is of course a generational dimension to this. After 1918, increasingly no doubt after 1885, that Congregational representativeness which was so consonant with how things seemed to be going constitutionally ceased to march with the van of progress. Regardless of any spiritual affinity, the intellectual allure was vanishing and the political attraction was visibly diminishing. Votes are not easily deployed to best advantage in a system of universal suffrage, especially if it has in fact never really been possible to take their uniformity for granted. As for that artefact of the years after 1885, the 'Nonconformist Conscience', it was more of a smokescreen than anything else, real (since smoke is real enough) but misleading. Behind it lay Nonconformist influences in almost bewildering diversity and among them was the Gladstonian *rapport*, but they were influences only, increasingly more memory than reality.

Yet influences have their power. For was not Gladstonianism after the mid-1870s one person's prejudices elevated to a system, like Thatcherism? And like Thatcherism it caught hold because it seized on the prejudices (though for Gladstone 'sympathies' is a fairer word) of all men of push and go; and since people of push and go end often in the Establishment so they became assimilated.

The theme of *The History of Button Hill* is less its dissolution, even its dilution, than its diffusion. That is also the theme of the Conder cousinhood. Ethel Mary, Katharine's admired elder sister, transmitted its values as headmistress of a school for ministers' daughters, proud of its links with the women at Cambridge.⁶⁴ Katharine married an ophthalmic surgeon in Kensington. Her brother Laurie became an architect in Buenos Aires. Little Eddie became an Anglican parson.⁶⁵ Cousin Talbot, not mentioned in these extracts but frequently mentioned nonetheless in the diaries, married

⁶³ See C. Binfield 'Asquith: The Formation of a Prime Minister', *The Journal of the United Reformed Church History Society*, vol. 2, No. 7, April 1981, pp. 204–42.

⁶⁴ Ethel Mary Conder 1859–1942 second headmistress of Milton Mount College 1889–1906.

⁶⁵ For Canon Edward Baines Conder 1872–1936 see *Who Was Who* 1929–1940, p. 279.

en second noces a niece of Lady Frederick Cavendish, and a great-niece by marriage, therefore, of Mrs. Gladstone: more to the point she was at once a Tory M.P.'s daughter and a niece of one of Dean Hook's successors as Vicar of Leeds.⁶⁶

This suggests less the failure of Nonconformity's politics, theology or nerve than their success. It suggests values as much assimilated as overturned or jettisoned, the values of a representative 'churchmanship', broad but freely elected, which is to say *élite*; the values of order as opposed to anarchy; of trust rather than democracy. These are the natural values of sound establishments, and they have been open to much question by the grocer's daughter who would herself have been nowhere without their formative powers.

I began with an identikit story, Colin Coote's family lore of the mesmeric Gladstone. Here, to end, is another. The scene is Scotch baronial, Glen Tana. The action is a late Victorian conversation between the old laird and his landscape architect, whose story it is:

I remember . . . telling . . . a story about Gladstone . . . describing how the veteran statesman, with his personal charm, won the Midlothian election. 'I believe every word of that story', said Sir William, 'for I have experienced the fascination of his evil eye. One night' he continued, 'when a very important discussion was on, Gladstone fixed me with his eye and literally dragged me into the Government lobby; but just then he transfixed another victim, and the spell being broken, I bolted!'⁶⁷

Sir William was a banker, Tory, Anglican, house in Grosvenor Square, patron of two livings, father-in-law of a Marquess and of a Marquess's younger son, such a father-in-law indeed as a Lascelles might approve. He was, nonetheless, the son-in-law of a Stockport Wesleyan and the son of a Manchester Congregationalist whose money had made possible the theological college whose first principal was the founder editor of Henry Allon's and H.R. Reynolds's *British Quarterly Review*. And the landscape architect embellishing Sir William's traditionary carapace was Thomas Mawson, an admirable choice for a landowner who wished to shape his countryside as if it had ever been thus.⁶⁸ Mawson, who had a Gladstone for a client, was a lifelong Congregationalist. That is to say, he was not just an individual who happened to be a Congregationalist rather than a New Connexion Methodist or a Baptist, so much as a member of a church, or

⁶⁶ For Talbot Baines 1852–1927 see C. Binfield, *So Down to Prayers* (1977), pp. 99–100.

⁶⁷ T.H. Mawson, *The Life and Work of an English Landscape Architect* n.d. (c.1927) p. 51; for Sir William Cunliffe-Brooks 1819–1900 see Stenton and Lees, op.cit., vol. II, pp. 46–7; for the family background see L.H. Grindon, *Manchester Banks and Bankers* (Manchester, 1878), pp. 202–18. I am indebted to Dr. Douglas Farnie for this reference.

⁶⁸ Thomas H. Mawson 1861–1933 see Mawson, op.cit.

society, such as that described in the *Manual* of Purley's Congregational Church, newer than Button Hill's, Southern and more select, but just as set on making its way with some integrity:

A society has a soul of its own which far exceeds the sum total of the individual souls who compose it. Thought, emotion, enthusiasm and strength come to an individual from an inspired community which he could not realise without it. The soul-life of each is enhanced by the general soul . . . the power of the corporate life acts upon the individual . . . A church whose atmosphere is charged with spirituality of a healthy and practical, as well as richly spiritual kind, will draw men irresistibly into the sweep of its power . . .⁶⁹

That is the crucible for chapel values. However 'Victorian' they cannot be Mrs. Thatcher's 'Victorian values' since for all her Wesleyan childhood and her husband's Free Church schooling,⁷⁰ she has no room for such society, but they are the values of the Cromwell country and Button Hill and Mr. Gladstone respected them.

⁶⁹ Purley Congregational Church, *Manual 1914*, p. 1.

⁷⁰ Sir Denis Thatcher was educated at Mill Hill School.