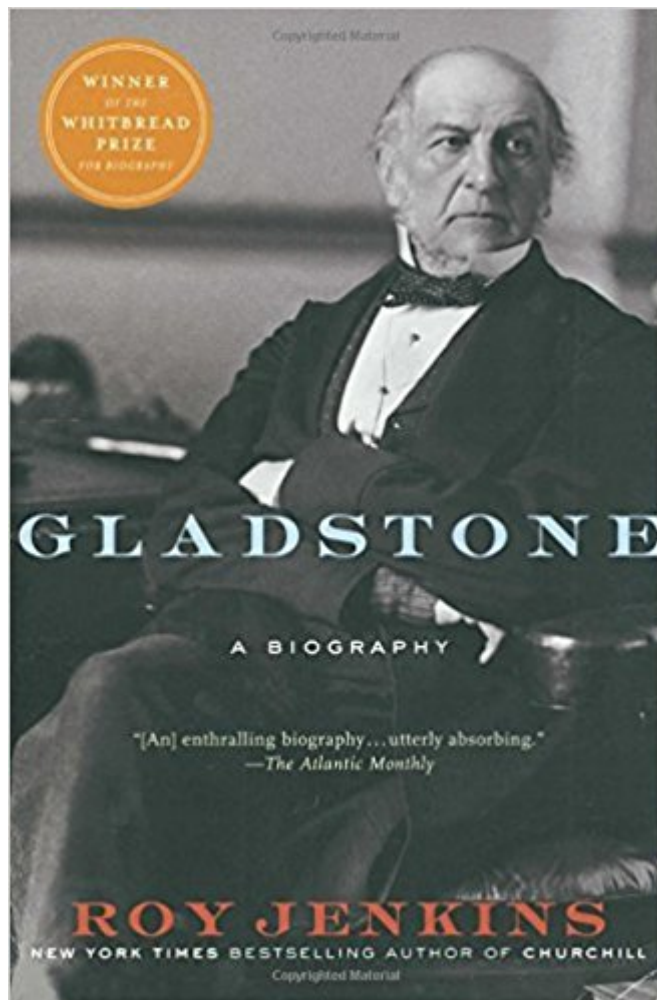


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Gladstone: A Biography



Synopsis

From the New York Times bestselling author of Churchill, a towering historical biography, available for the first time in paperback. William Gladstone was, with Tennyson, Newman, Dickens, Carlyle, and Darwin, one of the stars of nineteenth-century British life. He spent sixty-three of his eighty-nine years in the House of Commons and was prime minister four times, a unique accomplishment. From his critical role in the formation of the Liberal Party to his preoccupation with the cause of Irish Home Rule, he was a commanding politician and statesman nonpareil. But Gladstone the man was much more: a classical scholar, a wide-ranging author, a vociferous participant in all the great theological debates of the day, a voracious reader, and an avid walker who chopped down trees for recreation. He was also a man obsessed with the idea of his own sinfulness, prone to self-flagellation and persistent in the practice of accosting prostitutes on the street and attempting to persuade them of the errors of their ways. This full and deep portrait of a complicated man offers a sweeping picture of a tumultuous century in British history, and is also a brilliant example of the biographer's art.

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Customer Reviews

Lord Jenkins (Asquith) has held cabinet office and is chancellor of Oxford. His Gladstone has already earned the Whitbread Award in England. Yet for American readers, his biography will often be impenetrable. W.E. Gladstone (1809-1898) was prime minister four times. The extravagances of his quintessentially Victorian genius, which included religiosity, morbidity, hypocrisy, earnestness,

priggishness and oratorical excesses that make Fidel Castro seem a paragon of reticence, kept him in politics for 63 years. Jenkins's idiosyncratic account of his life lingers over parliamentary minutiae, hardly mentions the Crimean War and ignores the Indian Mutiny. Jenkins wanders off into flippancies and Anglicisms that will exasperate a transatlantic audience. We learn of "tramlines logic," of a government that was a "holed hull," of statesmen who "went of a fever." Given to pompous language when simple words would do, he refers to "eleemosynary" (charitable) motives and "fissiparous issues" (divisive would have done nicely) and compares an elongated Gladstone peroration to the close of Mahler's Sixth Symphony. Still, there are redeeming descriptive and narrative gems, as in Gladstone's famed speechifying (in which subordinate clauses "hung like candelabra"), and in the energy of the old man, who at 81, knocked down by a cab, "pursued the errant driver and held him until the police came." No prime minister was more sophisticated or sanctimonious, and none dominated Parliament more ruthlessly. Jenkins's biography, while sweepingly admiring, deals with his hero blemishes and all. Copyright 2002 Reed Business Information, Inc.

William E. Gladstone lived to be 89, spanning the 19th century almost as much as his queen, Victoria. As prime minister of Britain four times, he was involved in all the major political travails of the time, including the Crimean War, Irish Home Rule, and the expansion of British imperialism. He was energetic, a prodigious reader, a classicist who also read popular Victorian fiction, and a devoutly religious man who tortured himself with guilt over his taste for pornography. This work was first published in 1995 in England, where it was a best seller and an award-winning biography. Lord Jenkins (Life at the Center, LJ 3/1/93), a leader in the House of Lords and chancellor of Oxford University, has done a fine job of compiling a one-volume biography of a man he obviously admires. For libraries without H.C.G. Matthews's two-volume Gladstone (Oxford Univ., 1995), Jenkins's work will make a nice substitute. Katherine E. Gillen, Luke AFB Lib., Goodyear, Ariz. Copyright 1997 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Roy Jenkins, author of Gladstone, does an artful skill to the task of weaving the threads of Gladstone's birth and pedigree into a tapestry of his life as a scholar, author, and vigorous participant in the religious arguments of the period. One of the interesting portions of Gladstone's life is the story emerging from his diaries showing his periodic obsessions with his own sinfulness and self doubt. If anyone knows anything about Gladstone it is the tales of his going into the London streets at night to persuade prostitutes to change their ways. Roy Jenkins does an admirable job in

explaining this, often misunderstood, aspect of Gladstone's life. His time in government, he served sixty three years in the House of Commons and was Prime Minister four times. Gladstone's political life and his social life are one and the same in that his religious views (he always claimed religion was more important to him than politics) affected his political views. Anyone interested in English political history will find this book a valuable addition to one's library. The book is also an informative look at the social and political mores of the Victorian Era; the author writes that Gladstone, as much as Queen Victoria, defined the Victorian Era. A bit of trivia: It was Gladstone to whom the Queen was referring when she said, "He always speaks to me as if I were a public meeting."

Jenkins's book is certainly a comprehensive biography of the late WE Gladstone. I give the author credit for the research and comprehensive nature of the work and I certainly stepped away from it feeling that I have a much stronger understanding of the man and his era. My one reservation is that the book is notably dense, especially in recounting the minutia of his time in office. Given the distant remove, I would have been interested in more about his character and less accounts of divisions in the House.

William Gladstone is probably the most recognized name in British life and politics during the period known as the Victorian era. His public life ran nearly concurrently with Queen Victoria's reign, usually not to his comfort or benefit, but his influence in government and public life was both an embodiment of the Victorian Age and at times a check upon its excesses. I spent a fair amount of time wondering if the United States had ever produced someone even remotely similar to Gladstone, and I have still come up empty. Gladstone entered Parliament in 1833 and gave his last address in 1894. Despite youthful political indiscretions, an early tendency toward controversial outspokenness in matters theological, religious eccentricities, a tendency toward micromanagement, a temperamental sovereign, and a mixed record as four-time prime minister, Gladstone navigated sixty-some years of public service in a fashion that earned him the universal title Grand Old Man. The Gladstone portrayed by Jenkins becomes a character greater than the sum of his parts, certainly at least as responsible for the Pax Victoria as Victoria herself, whose vanities of empire were stoked, unwisely as it proved, by Gladstone's lifelong rival, Disraeli. The young Gladstone fancied himself a theologian, and as a young MP produced a lengthy and polemical defense of the Anglican Church that fortuitously came to be forgotten in succeeding years. He never lost interest in theology, however, nor in the health of the established Anglican Church. The conversion of his friends Newman and Manning to Roman Catholicism troubled him,

but the experience perhaps ameliorated a residual dogmatism to the point where he could converse with such as Charles Darwin in the latter's home. Religion would always be a major drive in Gladstone's life, but one of his religious practices has drawn particular interest over the years. Gladstone, during the first half of his life, believed he was called to rescue prostitutes from a life of sin. Jenkins is careful here to walk a thin line in his assessment of Gladstone's "ministry." He [Jenkins] concludes that while Gladstone probably did believe his work was religious, he did find erotic stimulation in visiting such women in their places of residence, but apparently without technical marital infidelity. Gladstone himself would admit later that he succeeded in converting perhaps one of the ninety or so women he frequented; his diary indicates that such activity caused him enough moral discomfort that he engaged in frequent self-flagellation. Fortunately for Gladstone, it was his legislative, oratorical, and administrative competence that shaped his public image. Somewhat like Churchill, he served in a number of government capacities, but clearly he was best suited as Chancellor of the Exchequer. American government does not have an equivalent officer who in effect draws up the nation's budget and establishes spending and taxing priorities for Parliament to vote up or down. Gladstone was a Conservative of a curious sort by today's standards: he eschewed deficit spending but did not shrink from raising taxes for what Henry Clay would have called "internal improvements." His policies over the years were generally good for the economy, and as Prime Minister for four separate tenures he enjoyed popularity among the laboring classes. In his later years Gladstone took to campaigning for elections and causes, attracting large and generally friendly crowds. This was an innovation in British politics, and Victoria thought it pedestrian. Four times during his career Gladstone was summoned by the Queen to form new governments. Relations between the two were never warm, particularly after the death of Prince Albert. Gladstone, unlike many in government, became more liberal in old age. He was never entirely at peace with jingoistic rhetoric of empire [which Disraeli, according to Jenkins, spoon-fed the Queen to saturation], and his major political crucible was a morally equitable settlement of the Irish dilemma, a dream which regrettably escaped him and crippled his governments. Victoria, with a near neurotic fear of anarchy, found Gladstone's popularity unsettling and his politics too radical. Gladstone, on the other hand, took advantage of the rapidly expanding railroad systems to observe first hand economic and political developments both in England and on the Continent. In some ways he shared Victoria's concern over nineteenth century upheavals and threats to legitimate and long established structures of authority, but his political instincts guided him toward moderate governance and a steady improvement in the standard of living. One may argue that Gladstone was also voted out of office four times, which is true; in his defense, his "social agenda"

on such matters as Ireland and suffrage, modest as it was, ran against the tide of a reactionary monarch and the still well entrenched aristocracy of the House of Lords. Gladstone's foreign policy was generally benign, a case of his being lucky and good. He was a Confederate sympathizer during the Civil War, but he did not object to American damage claims involving the Confederate warship Alabama, outfitted in England. His one major adventure was an incursion into Egypt in 1882 to stem nationalist unrest. Gladstone, then old and distracted, was not enthused by the cause but won pundits when the uprising was quelled with minimal loss of life. Gladstone died in 1898 at the age of 89. Queen Victoria outlived him by about three years. Although a devotee of long walks, chopping trees, and frigid swimming outings, Gladstone's life was marred with illnesses and perhaps a tendency toward hypochondria. Certainly his very location in history is remarkable--a living bridge between Napoleon and Winston Churchill. Jenkins makes the most of this tenure in a very satisfying way for the reader. I would note here that an excellent sequel to this work is A.N. Wilson's "After the Victorians."

Gladstone was a giant of a man both figuratively and intellectually. A statesman who could speak in public for 3 hours in parliament. Or who relaxed by chopping down trees. They don't make them like that anymore. Great book.

I read this while on vacation in London and found it the perfect opportunity to explore some relatively recent history to contrast with the Shakespeare plays I was attending at the New Globe. Perhaps a bit more detail than all would like but an interesting glimpse into how difficult it was to unravel the rights of peasants and landlords, whether in England proper or in Ireland.

This is a great biography, very readable and very thorough-going in letting us know all the most significant details of Gladstone's life, politics, and moral eccentricities. He served longer than any other modern prime minister, as I recall. Highly recommended

I love Jenkin's biographies, but really author's who expect every reader to translate Roman and Greek quotations on the fly are just a tad pompous. Still his zest for all things political always makes for a good read and this is a wonderful piece of work.

Pecfect

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