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52. Diaries of William Ewart Gladstone (1809-1898)

Within 41 tiny notebooks, etched out in minute script, lie the skeletal remains of one eminent Victorian's intense and complex world (LP 1416-55). Described by former Lambeth librarian, Claude Jenkins, as 'one of the most remarkable "human documents" ever composed' (qtd Foot, 1968, xlix), Gladstone's journals were his diurnal companions for over seventy years. They were his 'account-book of the all-precious gift of time' (qtd Morley, 1903, I, 205) designed not for publication but for self-examination, improvement, and reference. The first surviving entry dates from Eton, 16 July 1825, and the last from 29 December 1896, his 87th birthday and a traditional retrospective moment. There are over 25,000 entries, mostly brief, factual, and unreflective: letters written, people seen, books read, church services and parliamentary debates attended. Nevertheless, the content is not prosaic: personal landmarks, like his marriage in 1839 and the births of his children, intermix with events of national significance such as Wellington's funeral in 1852 or the rejection of Irish 'Home Rule' of 1886. Gladstone's journal was also a site for inscribing secret thoughts and desires (often in foreign-language code). These included his guilt-ridden pornography-reading, and his morally ambiguous 'rescue work' with prostitutes. Gladstone counteracted such temptations by verbal and physical chastisement, recording both in his journal. Although rescue work was a widespread philanthropy, Gladstone's involvement provoked concern during his life (LP 2760) and threatened to escalate into scandal in the 1920s. Gladstone had anticipated posthumous attacks and had written a 'Declaration' in 1896 pledging 'that at no period of my life have I been guilty ... of infidelity to the marriage bed' (LP 2760 f. 204). Captain Peter Wright's assertion, that Gladstone's custom was 'to pursue and possess every sort of woman' (Wright, 1925, 152-3), culminated in a court battle in 1927 in which two of Gladstone's sons successfully defended his reputation. They had decided against offering the journal or 'Declaration' as evidence, but remained committed to the archive's preservation. In this they demonstrated both historical prescience – realizing the journal's indispensability for understanding their father - and a family trait: Gladstone had written in 1837: 'Let keeping be the general rule, only burn such scraps as cannot be subjects of interest or future reference' (qtd Olney, 1981, 121). Nevertheless, the question remained where the 'Arcana' (the family's collective name for Gladstone's journals, private memoranda, and rescue-work correspondence) could safely be preserved. In 1926, Cosmo Lang (1864–1945), then Archbishop of York, provided a solution. Trapped in Hawarden during the General Strike, he proposed entrusting successive Archbishops of Canterbury with guardianship. This resonated with Gladstone's lifelong Anglicanism and promised to safeguard

both the source (and Gladstone's reputation) from prurient selection and misrepresentation until the time when the entire journal could be published. The collection was duly deposited at Lambeth in July 1928, with a later donation arriving in 1938 (LP 2771-74). Here the journals have remained, save for two sojourns in Oxford: the first in Claude Jenkins' Christ Church wine cellar to evade the Blitz, and the second – following the acquiescence of Archbishops Fisher and Ramsey - to be painstakingly edited for publication by M.R.D. Foot and the late H.C.G. Matthew between 1968 and 1994.

L[ambeth] P[alace Library], Diaries of William Ewart Gladstone, 1416-55;
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