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Ruth Clayton Windscheffel
St Hilda's College
Cowley Place
Oxford OX4 1DY
Tel: 0118 962 4206 (H) 01865 276835 (W)
Email: ruth.windscheffel@st-hildas.ox.ac.uk

Gladstone and Dante. Victorian Statesman, Medieval Poet, by Anne Isba (Woodbridge: The Royal History Society/The Boydell P., 2006; pp. xi + 155. £45.00/\$80.00).

When criticizing Lord John Russell's translations from Dante in 1844, William Gladstone was seeking not only to establish his own credentials as a Dante scholar and make useful political capital, but also to signal his belief that insufficient time and thought had been devoted to the project. 'Unless his intellectual being be in great part absorbed in that of his original', Gladstone opined, the translator 'must ... fail in his task, whatever be his native powers'.¹ In researching and writing this book, Anne Isba set herself the challenge of explicating one of Gladstone's most significant intellectual and spiritual influences, the life and writings of Dante Alighieri. Where she focuses on this question and privileges its Victorian context, she succeeds in her endeavour, offering numerous useful insights into Gladstone's rhythms of reading, his attitudes to both British and Italian political life, and his emotional and spiritual attachment to Italy. Yet, it would have been better had Isba paid more heed to the terms of Gladstone's criticisms, or to those penned by Agatha Ramm describing Gladstone's own 'tendacious deductions from [Dante's] poetry'.² For the project has been, at least in part, mistakenly conceived as a double biography, unfortunately characterized by a long series of direct but largely anachronistic comparisons between the characters, careers, and attitudes of the two protagonists. Whilst these contrasts are at heart of great interest, they remain limited in their analytical potential, a position aggravated by frequently being unsubstantiated and speculative. Isba's short study consists of an introduction, seven chapters, and an appendix (reproducing Gladstone's annotations to his working copy of Dante's *Commedia*). Her brief introduction places *Gladstone and Dante* in historiographical context and introduces some appealing artistic and literary themes. There is an admirable level of attention paid to visual and material sources throughout the book, which is extremely well illustrated. Whilst serious attempts are made to take account of important recent scholarship, the book's historiographical underpinning is not comprehensive, and its referencing inconsistent. For instance, on p. 4 Isba suggests that reading Dante served as a 'coping mechanism' for Gladstone, a concept central to Travis Crosby's 1997 book *The Two Mr Gladstones*. However, reference to Crosby's work is not made until p. 82; even then his clear influence does not receive full acknowledgement until the book's closing pages. Chapter One constructs an overarching chronological framework, from 'first encounter to serious scholarship'. Here Isba demonstrates convincingly the genesis of Gladstone's love of Dante in his friendship with schoolboy prodigy Arthur Hallam, and sketches out

¹ W. E. Gladstone, 'Lord John Russell's translation of Dante's Francesca da Rimini', *English Review* (April 1844), 1-16, at p. 3.

² Agatha Ramm, 'Gladstone as man of letters', *Nineteenth-Century Prose* 17 (1989-90), 1-29, at p. 10.

the statesman's lifelong engagement with Dante's writings. Chapter Two sets Gladstone's affection for and work on the Italian politician-poet in its broader nineteenth-century context, providing an extensive and well-narrated survey of the Victorian Dantean revival. A thematic Chapter Three surveys Gladstone's connection with Italy, charting his nine Italian visits. Chapter Four, 'Images of Womanhood', centrally discusses Dante's Beatrice and Gladstone's sister Anne, and investigates Gladstone's other close relationships with women, including those with certain 'fallen women'. Chapter Five, on religion and faith, is limited to coverage of the two men's attitudes to church-state relations, the papacy, and their understanding of life as a spiritual journey. Isba begins good work here by comparing Gladstone's estimations of Dante, Bunyan and Milton. Chapter Six, undoubtedly one of the strongest sections, provides detailed analysis of Gladstone's dedicated Dante scholarship, presenting attractive discussions of Gladstone's knowledge and use of language, and of his collaborative translation project with his brother-in-law George Lyttelton. The succeeding section, on Gladstone's critique of Russell, is suggestive of Gladstone's conceptualization of the role of scholarship in public life, and of his ideas about the contemporary relevance of Dante. The final part – discussing Gladstone's theories concerning Dante and Oxford – provides useful references to contemporary opinion on Gladstone as a Dante scholar, and clearly contextualizes Gladstone's ideas. 'Understanding the Inner Man' serves as both final chapter and conclusion. It shares many strengths with Chapter Six but one feels, by finally giving the reader some of the material and analysis which have long been craved, Isba offers too little too late. We are given a closer look at Gladstone's important annotation of Scartazzini's work on Dante, as well as revealing references to frequently overlooked pre-Morley biographies. Travis Crosby at long last receives his deserved acknowledgement, but, most importantly, we are given five, key pages directly tackling the question of the nature and extent of Dante's influence on Gladstone's private life and public rhetoric, the issue which should have animated the project from the outset. Although Isba must take substantial responsibility for the shortcomings of her book, one cannot help feeling that she has been let down quite seriously by her editors. The text remains, in places, erratically organised, retaining a significant number of typographical errors, textual repetitions and inconsistencies, as well as striking factual errors. In the latter category, the reinvention of a published note as an unpublished lecture (p. 23 n.50); the incorrect titling of Gladstone's first book (in both text and index); and above all the reference (twice) to a fictional Gladstone brother 'Herbert' (pp. 50-1) are simply inexplicable. In addition, several examples of stylistic ungainliness (see, in particular, p. 10) in an otherwise well-written manuscript, speak of insufficient time, thought, and editorial attention having been devoted to this project.

St Hilda's College, Oxford

Ruth Clayton Windscheffel