

Book Review: The Great Rivalry: Gladstone and Disraeli: A Dual Biography

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*Benjamin Disraeli and William Ewart Gladstone are without doubt the two most iconic figures of Victorian politics, whose distinctly different personalities and policies led to 28 years of bitter political rivalry. In **The Great Rivalry**, Dick Leonard aims to provide the full story of their rivalry and its origins, comparing the upbringing, education and personalities of the two leaders, as well as their political careers. A thoughtful and rewarding read, finds **Richard Berry**.*

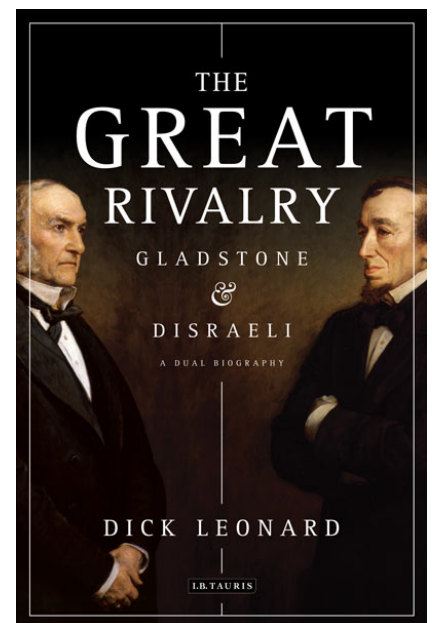


The Great Rivalry: Gladstone and Disraeli: A Dual Biography. Dick Leonard. IB Tauris. June 2013.

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[Dick Leonard](#) has made a niche out of writing the history of British Prime Ministers, having devoted [three previous volumes](#) to premiers from the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In his latest book, he focuses on two of the more celebrated of his former subjects, Victorian statesmen William Gladstone and Benjamin Disraeli. In doing so, Leonard acknowledges the wealth of biographical material already accumulated around the two men. His unique contribution to the genre, the author suggests, is to *compare* their parallel lives.

A book about conflict between great Liberal and Conservative politicians seems particularly relevant in a time of uneasy coalition between their modern incarnations. There are certainly contemporary echoes throughout this book, although not always in expected forms. Liberal Gladstone's lifelong emphases on balancing the country's finances and reducing the size of the state are perhaps the defining characteristics of today's Conservatives, not least [Chancellor George Osborne](#). Meanwhile, the 'one nation' concept attributed to Conservative Disraeli has been adopted enthusiastically by [Labour leader Ed Miliband](#).



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By comparing Gladstone and Disraeli, Leonard has found a useful way of elucidating the major themes of political struggle in Victorian Britain. Over issues like free trade, the status of Ireland and Britain's imperial expansion, the two men are consistently on opposite sides of political debate, if not entirely consistent in their individual stances. One recurring example is the slow movement toward enfranchisement of the working class, over which they clash several times in the book. In 1866 Gladstone proposes extending the vote to male householders with properties with an annual value of £7 or more; that figure is chosen because £6 would have created a working class majority among the electorate. Disraeli opposes and defeats Gladstone's bill, before himself passing the more radical Reform Act in 1867 – giving all male householders the vote – with Gladstone leading the opposition.

For all their political differences, Leonard makes plain that the most enduring division between Gladstone and Disraeli is one of personality. Gladstone is the man of high morality, driven by fervent religious beliefs. He resigns from office more than once over issues of principle that are obscure even to fellow MPs. Disraeli is the chancer, plotting his way up the 'greasy pole' – his own phrase – and cultivating politically useful relationships, including with Queen Victoria. One of his motivations for entering politics is to benefit from parliamentary immunity and therefore avoid debtors' prison. Their ambitions as writers demonstrate their contrasting outlooks: while Gladstone spends several years of his life on a three-volume study of Homer's work, Disraeli churns out a series of relatively low-grade novels, often thinly-disguised accounts of his personal and political tussles.

The



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book is presented as a story of the *rivalry* between Gladstone and Disraeli. In this regard, it disappoints. The two men were not rivals in the sense we would usually use this word in modern politics. Gladstone and Disraeli were clearly competitors for political power, and Leonard presents plenty of evidence to suggest they did not like each other. Disraeli refers to Gladstone in letters as an 'arch villain', while Gladstone tells a friend he believed Disraeli the 'worst and most immoral minister' of the past 50 years. But unlike, say, Gordon Brown and Tony Blair, they were not colleagues competing for control of a single political project. After an initial period when both were Tory MPs, Gladstone and Disraeli was each the leader of his own political domain.

Accordingly, encounters between the two men are few and far between. We are 66 pages into a 200-page book before it is confirmed Gladstone and Disraeli know of each other's existence. It is page 110 before there is direct contact – away from the floor of the House of Commons – when Disraeli writes to invite Gladstone to join Lord Derby's government in 1858. Mostly, we must rely on the disparaging comments the two men make to third parties, and sometimes these references feel a little forced: for instance, Leonard adds nothing of substance to his story when he records that Gladstone described one of Disraeli's novels in his diary as, 'The first quarter extremely clever, the rest trash'.

Disraeli emerges as comfortably the more heroic figure. While Gladstone's political career is handed to him by a wealthy father and influential friends, Disraeli deploys considerable ingenuity to rise from lesser means and in the face of state-sanctioned anti-Semitism, becoming an MP only after fighting four elections unsuccessfully. However, Disraeli's charm shines through only in spite of Leonard's sustained attempts to portray Gladstone as superior. Gladstone is praised at length throughout the book. For instance, Leonard is uncritical in his assessment of Gladstone as the country's greatest Chancellor:

"Few, however, would challenge his pre-eminence as Chancellor of the Exchequer... He effectively created the post as it exists in modern times, and none of his successors has rivalled the impact which he made."

The accolade might be deserved, but in awarding it Leonard neglects to mention Gladstone's promise to eventually abolish income tax, which went unfulfilled as he raised the tax repeatedly throughout his career. Leonard's final summing-up is comprehensively written in Gladstone's favour: while Disraeli is described as being wittier, more sociable and the better tactician, Gladstone is named the superior speaker, the more effective minister, and certainly the more principled. Leonard is scrupulously fair in pointing out the strengths and weaknesses of the two men throughout the book, but his conclusion feels one-sided.

This thoughtful book is likely to be very rewarding as an introduction to Victorian politics and the lives of two of its leading lights. For those already familiar with the topic, however, the lack of depth in the story of the Gladstone-Disraeli rivalry means it may not add very much to our understanding of their relationship.

Richard Berry is Managing Editor of [Democratic Audit](#). His background is in public policy and political research; in previous roles he has worked for the London Assembly, JMC Partners and Ann Coffey MP. He is the founder of the blog Modest Proposals and author of *Independent: The Rise of the Non-Aligned Politician* (Imprint Academic, 2008). He tweets at [@richard3berry](#). [Read more reviews by Richard](#).

