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Gladstonian Liberalism, Home Rule, and American Politics and Society, 1886–1892

A memorable period in our history now followed, extending over seven years. The theater was small in its proportions, but keen audiences watched it all over the English-speaking world. Scenes were constantly shifted; the main course of action was diversified by exciting underplots. The sanctity of law was violently strained, so was the fundamental machinery of government.¹

Introduction

Thus wrote John Morley about the turbulent period in British politics from June 1886 to April 1892. The Liberal party lay split asunder; its members earnestly searched for Irish solutions, new programs, or any plan that would draw back the Liberal Unionists into the party fold. The answers were neither easy nor apparent. Meanwhile, the Conservative government under Salisbury clearly directed the country’s progress. It tackled a whole range of domestic, foreign, and imperial problems with considerable success. The Chief Secretary of Ireland, A. J. Balfour, held the Irish in check with a dual policy of strong coercion and remedial land purchase legislation. Conservatives also were responsible for a stream of domestic measures: the Local Government Act, the Technical Instruction Act, the Housing of the Working Classes Act, and a Factory Act, among others. Moreover, Salisbury demonstrated an expertise in foreign affairs. Britain consolidated a number of alliances with European nations and established closer imperial connections in Africa, the Far East, and elsewhere. The period of Salisbury’s second ministry was particularly active in the area of foreign affairs. Relations
with the United States were no exception. American–Canadian–British fishery disputes, the Sackville incident, the Bering Sea seal controversy, and questions of Canadian autonomy all exasperated Anglo-American relations. For the most part, Salisbury handled these all with consummate skill. When, following the election of 1892, the Liberals turned to form the last Gladstonian ministry, there were no outstanding Anglo-American difficulties of any magnitude.

Liberal leaders pursued a wide variety of intellectual interests in the United States from 1886 to 1892. They seldom concerned themselves with opposition to Salisbury's American policies; instead they studied a variety of American themes and developments. In contradistinction to their last period of opposition, the Liberals’ American analyses were detailed, superior, and often historic events in themselves. James Bryce’s *American Commonwealth* and Gladstone’s periodical articles captured the audiences on both sides of the Atlantic and symbolized Liberal attention directed ‘across the sea.’ These were also the years when a transatlantic liberal community was formed, when Rosebery, Morley, Gladstone, and Bryce, in particular, had extensive contacts and associations with Americans and American issues within the context of associations in both the British Isles and the United States. Andrew Carnegie too emerged as a central Anglo-American personality and force.

The range of American themes that captivated the Liberals’ attention had broadened significantly since the 1870s. This trend is most clearly evident in the pages of British periodicals. Table 4.1 indicates that there were two-and-a-half times more American related articles printed in the *Nineteenth Century* between 1888 and 1898 than between 1877 and 1887. From about 1885, articles covered such various issues as American labor, women, history, blacks, and copyright.

The temper and forms of attention constituted a distinct break with the past. Previously, American articles had usually consisted of traveler’s impressions or casual discussions of politics, with periodic articles on literature and history. Moreover, the authors of these articles in the 1880s and 1890s were now the leading political figures. American articles were no longer the domain of Englishmen, but also of American authorities. Gladstone, Chamberlain, Morley, Goldwin Smith, Bryce, Henry Cabot Lodge, George Smalley, Matthew Arnold, Edwin Godkin, E. J. Phelps, Playfair, and Chauncey Depew all wrote for the review. The events which drew the most attention in Britain were the presidential elections, especially those of 1888, 1892 and 1896. While the figures in Table 4.1 are not conclusive regarding the number of American articles published by the *Nineteenth Century* because many articles lacking