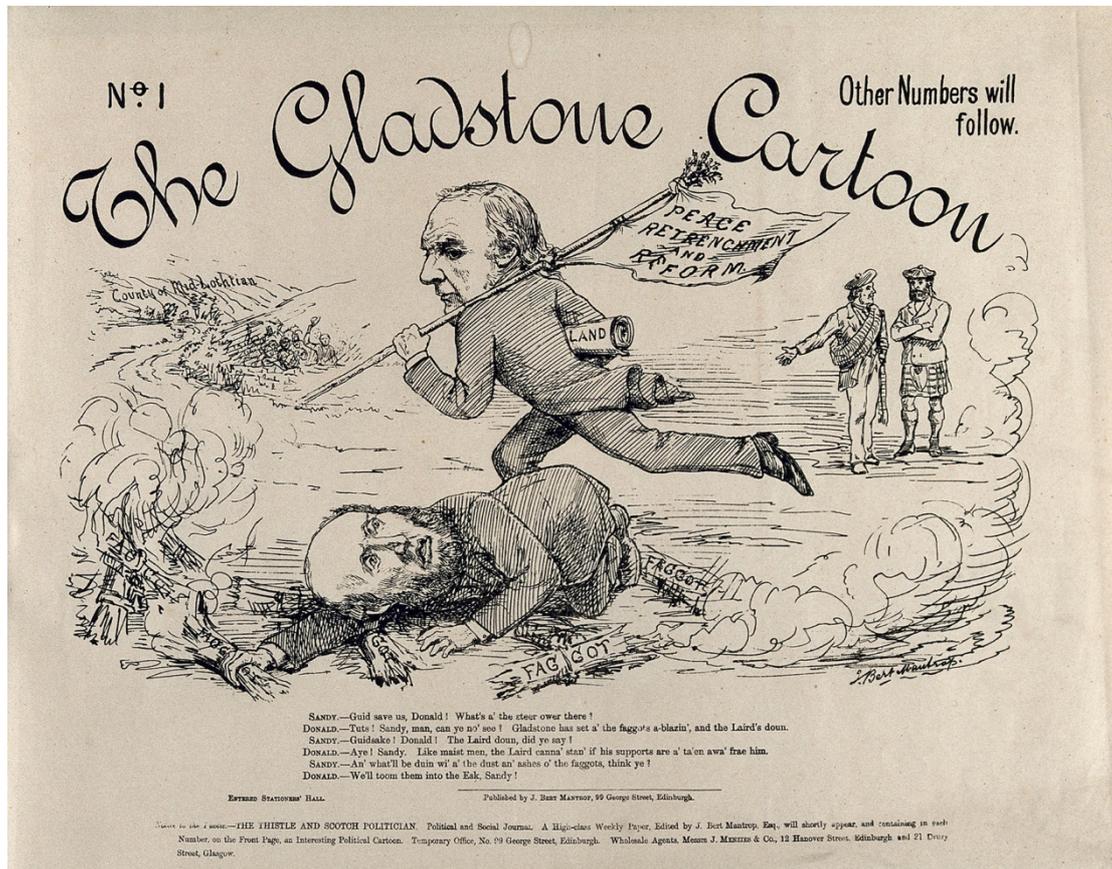


The People's William and the People's Poets: William Gladstone and the Midlothian Campaign.

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'Gladstone on the Midlothian campaign of 1879-80' by J. Bert. Mantrop. Credit: [Wellcome Collection](#). [CC BY](#)

William Ewart Gladstone was one of the most featured individuals in Scottish political poetry and song from the 1860s to the 1890s. Gladstone is prominent, on the side of Reform, in poems both from 1867 and from 1884. But our project's focus on Reform poetry means that a very significant cluster of Gladstone poems are absent from the database: poems that centre around the Midlothian Campaign of 1879, and the subsequent election of 1880, in which Gladstone and the Liberal party triumphantly returned to power. These poems have never been discussed. What will be argued here, however, is that they shed light on key issues in the electoral campaign from the perspective of the audiences Gladstone primarily addressed, but whose voices are not always recognized in the historiography of the

Midlothian Campaign – working men and women. They show us, moreover, the contribution that political poetry made in exalting Gladstone’s character and policies, and in conferring renewed heroic status on him; a status enormously important in the political affairs of the 1880s.

The Midlothian Campaign refers to a series of barnstorming speeches Gladstone made during an intense and brief tour of Scotland in late 1879. In January of that year, having given up his Greenwich constituency, he was persuaded to stand as the candidate for Midlothian, a constituency including Edinburgh and its environs. This was an old-fashioned seat, usually held by the Tory aristocrat Lord Dalkeith, with a relatively small number (3,260) of voters: only 15% of the population in the constituency at this time possessed a vote (Matthew: 46). Historians have discussed various reasons why Gladstone found Midlothian attractive. Having recently been elected Rector of the University of Glasgow, in 1877, and aware of Scotland’s strong support for liberalism, he saw Scotland as friendly to his principles and likely to greet him with enthusiasm. Though Midlothian was not a safe seat, it offered all the ‘political drama’ of a ‘difficult campaign’ within a region where the small number of electors meant that voting intentions at the individual level could be known. (Kelley: 120) Before accepting, Gladstone had conferred with his friend and one of the prime movers in the campaign, Lord Rosebery, that victory seemed likely. Rosebery also encouraged Gladstone in the belief – entirely justified, as later events would show – that his Scottish heritage would play well during the contest. Writing to Gladstone in January 1879 about the enthusiasm shown by the local Liberal party for his candidature, Rosebery noted, ‘Our convener, speaking of you, said “the greatest living Englishman,” on which there was a furious shout of “Scotchman, Scotchman.”’ (Cited Brooks: 47).

While such comments suggest the affection with which Gladstone was regarded by Scottish Liberals, it seems that no-one anticipated quite how triumphant his Scottish campaigning would prove. Greeted by cheering crowds at every train stop and speaking to audiences of tens of thousands, Gladstone’s brief visit to Scotland in late November and early December 1879 was not only wildly successful on a personal and party political level, setting the Liberals on course for election victory and ensuring that Gladstone would lead them, it was also a transformative event in British politics. This ‘spectacular, barnstorming’ campaign, ‘the most famous political crusade of modern times’, highlighted how politicians could use direct contact with an enthusiastic public, conveyed to thousands if not millions more through

the new mass media, to build unstoppable momentum towards victory (Matthew: 40; Brooks: 67). As H. C. G. Matthew notes, 'the real audience of the campaigns of 1879 and 1880 was the newspaper-reading public' (47). That Gladstone entirely recognized both the significance of the new popular press, and the importance of building a base of support among workers (including those who could not vote) was already evident in his 1865 speech to a working-class audience in the Scotia Music Hall in Glasgow, in which he argued that:

The emancipation and the cheapening of the periodical press have constituted, in themselves, a new era in the existence of the working men of this country...No change, I believe, of a more beneficial character has been recorded in our legislative annals, nothing that has on the one side done more to convey satisfaction, and to elevate and open the minds of those to whom this political information, together with all other information of general and public interest, is now constantly supposed at the lowest price. (Gladstone 1902: 55)

Walter Freer, a Glasgow power-loom tenter who later became a concert hall manager, was at this speech and described it as 'marked indelibly in my memory'; just as significantly, he recalled how Gladstone famously chose on this occasion to dine in a working-man's eating house on Mitchell Lane, turning down a specially made meal in favour of sitting with the workers and paying for his own lunch (Freer: 46). Though Gladstone's motives were unlikely to be cynical, such gestures were brilliant propaganda, and they ensured a basis of goodwill which the 1879 campaign would turn into outright hero-worship.

For nineteenth-century newspaper readers, 'political information' was conveyed through poetry as well as prose. In the many accounts of the Midlothian Campaign, the attention of historians and biographers has usually been on its significance for Gladstone's career, for the Liberal party, and for British politics more generally. Little attention has been paid to the ways in which Scottish workers (and, indeed, the provincial newspapers they primarily read) represented the campaign from their perspective. Yet it was their perspective which Gladstone relied upon and appealed to in his famous Midlothian addresses. His daughter Mary Gladstone, in a letter to her cousin, wrote that the experience of encountering masses of working-class men and women on their arrival in Edinburgh, on 24 November 1879, was 'much more stirring than in England, because the faces are so intelligent. There it is a common mob of idlers very likely, here they are strong, thinking, busy men in hundreds and thousands.' (cited Feuchtwanger: 191) This is a private letter, but in his speeches over the succeeding two weeks Gladstone made striking appeals to these 'strong, thinking, busy men'

(and specifically to women, too) on the same grounds of a uniquely Scottish intelligence and political acuteness, an acuteness that, he implied, was connected to rational support for Liberalism and distaste for Tory policy. 'I feel convinced that Scotland will do its duty, and will set a brilliant example', he told the crowds in Killin, Perthshire, continuing, 'I find the name of Scotland proclaiming itself by signs that cannot be mistaken...by signs that are truly national signs...what we have most to desire is to make our countrymen think.' (Gladstone 1971: 182) His use of the third person here is particularly notable: 'we' are the Scottish people, among whom Gladstone includes himself; 'our countrymen' are not the already enlightened Scots, but the rest of the British people.

At Motherwell railway station, on his return from the campaign, Gladstone declared to the assembled crowds:

This, gentlemen, is not the first time in our history when the first effort for liberty – the first illuminating ray that has spread over the land – has come from Scotland...You will have a forward place in the work to be done, in the triumph to be achieved; and it is because I believed that none were better qualified to take that forward place than the people of Scotland, that on this occasion I came among you with the firm determination not to fall short in any effort that my humble energies could afford to be a sharer in your labours, and to assist you towards gaining their triumphant end. (Gladstone 1971: 213)

This is stirring stuff. It is not surprising that Scotland's many newspaper poets, already highly invested in a sense of Scotland's cultural and educational distinctiveness and superiority, were happy to take up Gladstone's call to become 'fellow-soldiers' with him 'in a common warfare' (Gladstone 1971, 20), and to return the respect he had shown for them in his Midlothian speeches with a torrent of sympathy and admiration and a series of calls to arms. As Alexander Murdoch, a Glasgow engineer and well-known working-class poet, had written in a sonnet on Gladstone's emergence from retirement in 1877, cited in full by the *Ardrossan and Saltcoats Herald* on 6 December 1879, he was the 'Achilles of the people! And their shield!', a 'high-hearted champion' (Murdoch 26) and Christ-like figure, who, for Scots, recalled Robert the Bruce, and the 'efforts for liberty' of their past.¹

It is certain that hundreds, possibly thousands, of newspaper poems exist in praise of Gladstone in the late 1870s, and not exclusively in Scotland. Here the focus is on a small sample, largely drawn from selected Scottish newspapers in December 1879 and January

¹ The image of Achilles returning to battle in the *Iliad* was common in discussions of Gladstone's return to politics.

1880, during and immediately after the Midlothian Campaign. Though most of the authors are unidentified and use pseudonyms, they tend to present themselves as working-class men: given the usual profile of contributors to newspaper poetry columns, it is likely that this is accurate. What is striking about these poems is the extent to which they mirror Gladstone's own rhetoric of common, cross-class sympathy and feeling, and highlight, often quite subtly, the same policy issues that he raised repeatedly in his speeches and pamphlets prior to and during the campaign. John Black's 'Sonnet – To the Electors of Midlothian, - W. E. Gladstone', was an early piece, published on 26 April 1879 in the *West Lothian Courier*. In full, it runs:

A high soul'd hero who has nobly fought
The stern, tho' bloodless, battles of our land –
And other lands, where barb'rous despots sought
To rule with lawless and tyrannic hand.
Faithful champion of the just and right,
And fearless leader of the wise and brave;
Dauntless, tho' brief defeat his party smite –
His honour'd name unsullied he doth save!
The nation's friend when peaceful, prosperous rays
Beamed calmly, brightly over all the realm;
Still more her friend when adverse, evil days
Of needless war and want well-nigh o'erwhelm.
Let all who love their country and her weal
A grateful, timely unison of aim reveal!

This shows how poets helped to lay the ground for an enthusiastic reception well before Gladstone's visit to Scotland. Sonnets were an established form for the celebration of heroic political figures, following, for instance, Milton's sonnet on Oliver Cromwell. Though Black's identity is not known, it is unlikely that he was one of the Midlothian voters. The sonnet presents itself as an attempt to influence this audience by a non-elect. Using the advantage that all newspaper poets possess – that readers can be assumed to know which current affairs a poem refers to – Black emphasizes Gladstone's famous defence of Bulgaria in the face of Turkish aggression (lines 3-4); his persistence even in the face of Tory rule (lines 7-8); his past record during a time of economic growth (lines 9-10) and the ongoing depression of the late 1870s. The unpopular foreign campaigns in Afghanistan and South Africa supported by Tory foreign policy are also addressed (lines 11-12). Though the rhetoric seems very general, it is actually specific. In twelve economical lines, and without any names, dates or facts, Black reminds his readers of the policies Gladstone stands for and calls for a united effort in supporting them.

By the time Gladstone arrived in Scotland, the *West Lothian Courier* was experiencing a wave of pro-Gladstone poetry, including 'Welcome to William Gladstone' by 'Mid-Lothian' on 22 November 1879; two political songs, 'Cawther's in a Steer' and 'Change' on 29 November, by 'Evergreen' and James McGregor Russell; 'Welcome to the Hon W. E. Gladstone' by Thomas Osbock on 6 December and 'Beaconsfield' and 'Gladstone', again by Russell, on 20 December. The same was true of other newspapers. The *Greenock Telegraph*, for instance, included not one but two poems in its 5 December edition, alongside accounts of Gladstone's speeches and actions and a note about his imminent arrival in Glasgow. These contemporaneous poems, written while Gladstone was in Scotland, tend to address him more directly and serve as exhortations to him in his contest. D. L., from Greenock, in 'Gladstone', opened with the common trope of a welcome to Scotland:

God bless ye, Willie Gladstone, we mak' ye welcome here;
God bless ye, Willie Gladstone, our hearts are in each cheer;
God bless ye, Willie Gladstone, the best in Britain's Isle;
God speed ye, Willie Gladstone, true peace again will smile.
**

The nation comes to bless thee, for oh we've missed ye sair;
The starving thousands bless thee, and mind ye in each prayer;
No mockery of golden wreath we'd place upon thy head;
Our hearts entwined around thee, our blood for thee we'd shed.

(*Greenock Telegraph*, 5 December 1879)

This poem was reprinted in the *Lanarkshire Upper Ward Examiner*, on 3 January 1880, which suggests that it had probably been circulating more widely through the Scottish press during the preceding month. Echoing Gladstone's own rhetoric, he is represented as a champion of the people against the Tory aristocracy, able to save the 'toiling' and 'famished' thousands from the economic woes of the period. The unknown D. L., presenting himself or herself as one of the crowd cheering Gladstone on, emphasizes the genuine, heartfelt nature of their support. Later in the same issue of the *Greenock Telegraph*, 'Wellwisher' from Inverkip, in 'W. E. Gladstone', also takes up the theme of Gladstone's affinity with the working class:

Hail to the great old chieftain!
What can the man not do?
At home with Queen or peasant;
Searching all nature through.

He's good at writing letters,
He's good at felling trees;
He's good at breaking fetters,

And making slavery cease.

He's good to wake the welkin
With ring of axe or "mell"
He's good at smashing tyrants
With speech that's sure to tell.

Gladstone's hobby of tree-felling on his Hawarden estate had assumed almost legendary proportions, by this point, as a sign of his manliness and willingness to work with his hands. Later Reform processions in 1884 often represented or punned on Gladstone's tree-felling habits. Here, Gladstone wielding the axe on his estate is symbolic of his wider 'breaking' and 'smashing' of injustice, but the poet also indicates that the pen is mightier than the axe, in highlighting that it is Gladstone's skills in speech and writing which achieve these goals.

Most December 1879 poems follow similar lines. The *Scotsman*, on 3 December, followed an account of Gladstone's visit to Taymouth Castle (including a full account of his Killin address, cited above) and of the excited preparations for his visits to Glasgow and Motherwell, with an anonymous poem, 'Scotland to Gladstone'. Opening with a comparison of Gladstone to a chivalrous crusader, a 'nation's chosen knight' with 'A blood red heart upon thy banner white', the final two verses run:

Go forth, go forth, and right shall be thy might,
Good faith thy shield, truth thy triumphant lance;
And one shall blunt the darts of envious spite,
One clear a pathway for a world's advance.
Go forth, go forth, and God exalt the right!

Ride on, ride on, for with thee to the fight
A nation follows, a strong people comes:
Remember how we welcomed thee that night,
With sound more solemn than the roll of drums.
Ride on, ride on, God *will* exalt the right!

The religious rhetoric here, and language and imagery recalling missionary and imperialistic hymns of the period, recurs throughout poems and songs on Gladstone. As Eugenio Biagini notes, Gladstone's relationship to the working classes was 'like the relationship between a revivalist preacher and his church...the elect came forward, full of enthusiasm and devotion.' (58) What is particularly interesting, however, is the relationship between this poem and the language of Gladstone's speech featured in the column immediately adjacent. Though 'clear a pathway for a world's advance' sounds like a call to imperial progress, for instance,

Gladstone's Killin speech was famously negative about expansionist aims, charging that the Tories had entangled Britain in overseas responsibilities that were beyond her means and that her 'interference' in the affairs of other nations needed to halt. According to Gladstone in this particular speech, 'the world's advance' required a better understanding and respect for relationships between nations. Tory foreign policy was impeding, not assisting, this progress. Given Gladstone's emphasis on the *Scottish* nation in the Killin speech, moreover, the 'nation' and 'strong people' that will assist him, in this poem, are specifically the Scots who have demonstrated their loyalty. With the Scottish people firmly behind him, Gladstone can march into battle confidently. The poem operates in the *Scotsman* both as approval and as confirmation of the sentiments expressed in the speech.

Most of the Gladstone poems by known working-class writers are by male poets, and the anonymous and pseudonymous poems tend to be written from the position of a man or men. The 'spirited political song' extracted in the *People's Journal* on 27 December 1879, for instance, 'Gladstone leads us on', uses the broadside mode of address to 'boys': 'Like trumpet's call to arms, boys,/ Our leader's accent fell.' ('To Correspondents', 5) An interesting exception is factory worker Effie Williamson's 'The Right Hon. W. E. Gladstone', probably first published in her local paper, the *Border Advertiser*, but reprinted in her later poetry collection, *The Tangled Web* (1883). Though undated, it is another 'welcome to Gladstone' poem, almost certainly referencing his Midlothian visit:

You ask me why my voice is mute
When all their songs of homage bring?
Not mine in lofty strains to sing

Of noble deeds, a statesman's fame,
Achievements in life's busy mart,
That stir a grateful nation's heart.

He comes, brave Gladstone, tried and true
And forth from mountain, vale, and dell
The loving tones of welcome swell.

Then ask me not with stammering tongue
"The old man eloquent" to sing,
Who stands 'mid mighty men a king.

Williamson emphasizes how many verses have already been written in praise of Gladstone ('all their songs of homage bring'), to the extent that a local poet might feel an obligation to

write in the genre. Using the tropes of modesty and muteness that recur throughout Victorian women's poetry of the period, she contrasts her own humble voice and 'stammering tongue' both with that of other singers, and with Gladstone's eloquence, thus emphasizing how important eloquence was to his campaigning. In her focus on unworthiness and perhaps shyness, in 'stammering', Williamson implicitly exalts Gladstone's awe-inspiring stature. She is, of course, less 'mute' than she presents herself, since she has written and published this poem. Though it might be a stretch to read the trope of muteness in relation to the exclusion of women from the franchise, it certainly does serve to highlight the relative absence of working-class women's voices in the swelling tide of pro-Gladstone political verse.

In the aftermath of the campaign, poets bolstered their sense of its importance. In January 1880, in a *Scotsman* epistle-poem (traced here as a reprint in the *Greenock Telegraph*, 2 January 1880), taking the fairly common form of a report to emigrant friends or relations, 'Hutchie's Letter to His Friends in America', the author rehearses the economic and social woes of 1879, squarely blamed on the Tories, before recalling the drama of Gladstone's visit:

We had a visit last back end
O' Gladstone, truth and freedom's friend.
The folk went fairly frantic.
Patriot, Statesman, Scholar, Bard,
They hailed wi' cheers ye might hae heard
Across the wide Atlantic.

He seems the noo the people's pet,
Which shows they're no corrupted yet,
But can appreciate
A patriotic honest man,
Wha tries to do the best he can
To benefit the State.

These verses highlight the range of language and form used in Midlothian poems, from homely Scots in direct epistolary address between 'friends', to the exalted language and stirring rhythms of 'Scotland to Gladstone.' Though 'Hutchie' may seem initially humorous about how 'frantic' the people were in their acclamations and about their adoption of Gladstone as their 'pet', it is clear that he agrees with them. Five stanzas later, after expressing his rage at the alleged Tory plans to use fake 'faggot' voters, an issue Gladstone repeatedly raised, the author's vision of Gladstone is increasingly heroic and couched in legendary terms: 'Gladstone, like a warrior true,/Approached the stronghold of Buccleuch/An' thundered at his

gates'. By the final stanza, the 'they' of the lines cited above has changed to 'We' – 'We hope he'll sune be here again' – as the author increasingly identifies with Gladstone's aims and with 'the people'. He leaves his imagined overseas audience in suspense, promising to update them on the election results and suggesting that it is Gladstone alone who offers hope that 1880 will be better for the working classes than 1879.

Poetry (and indeed song) about Gladstone was, of course, not unique to Scotland. But the Scottish political poetry of this campaign is important in its use of language and imagery to create a sense of a collective, the 'people', who were behind Gladstone and entirely in tune with him. These poems also imagine a specifically *Scottish* national collective, identified by its liberal principles and the unity of working class and middle-class interests, and hence that, along with Gladstone's speeches, they are significant in the developing late century interests in Scottish home rule or self-government. As the *Scotsman* noted during the Midlothian Campaign, on 29 November, one of its unforeseen effects was that the London and English press began taking an unprecedented interest in Scotland's people and politics:

While we watch Mr Gladstone there are a multitude of marvellously discerning people who are watching us. From the distance of London they have turned upon us their powerful telescopes; they note carefully the national demeanour under the influence of strong political feeling; they examine minutely the curiosities of Scotch character and manners; and they convey the result of their investigations in choice language to the uninformed thousands who depend on them for daily intellectual nourishment.

Unfortunately, the *Scotsman* writer argued, English reports served to demonstrate a widespread ignorance: 'Listening to them, one might fancy that the country had been discovered the other day in the heart of Africa'. In fact, the astonished reports in the English press about Scotland's reception of Gladstone, and the attempts to explain it, simply served to demonstrate that in Scotland, 'the voice of the London press has wholly lost its influence as a guide of public opinion, and is listened to with contempt and incredulity'. Though the *Scotsman* editors obviously had a vested interest here, such articles suggest that the campaign made Scotland's political distinctiveness within Britain far more apparent than it had previously been, and that the reporting of the campaign also signalled major differences between the attitudes of the English and Scottish press. Newspaper poetry serves to emphasize this distinctiveness and difference. The people of Scotland were more likely to read, remember, or even recite or sing, a Gladstone poem in a Scottish paper than a London

Times editorial. Gladstone's stated high opinion of the intelligence of Scotland's working classes was also reciprocated through, and indeed demonstrated by, their own compositions on his – and their – politics. Though the small number of registered Midlothian voters meant that such poems – unlike some other election poems examined in the 'People's Voice' project – were unlikely to influence the outcome of the election, their broader influence in shaping as well as voicing public opinion was more important than it might seem for the political developments of the period.

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