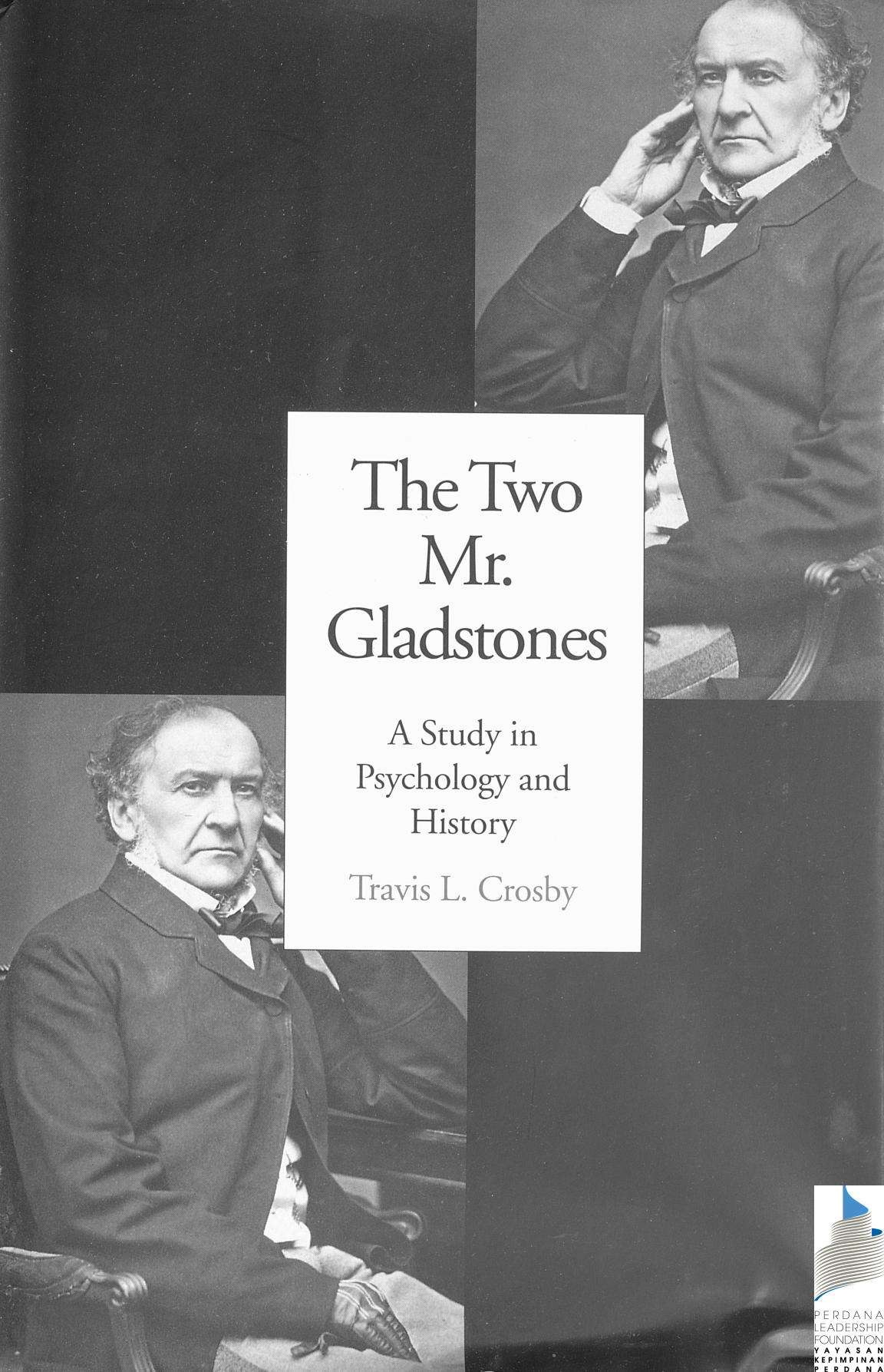

The Two Mr. Gladstones

A Study in Psychology and History

Travis L. Crosby

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William Gladstone—four times prime minister of Great Britain, the premier moral spokesman of the Victorian era, a prodigious author, and an unparalleled orator—was among the most revered figures of his age. But there was another side to Gladstone. His sudden bursts of anger in Parliament, aggressive campaigns against opponents, resignations and threats of resignations from political life, and secretive formulations of high policy reveal him as a man of disquieting moods. In his private life, too, there were incongruities. Admired as a loving husband and father, he maintained a long-standing intimacy with a former courtesan. Equally disturbing were his nocturnal rambles among London's prostitutes, ostensibly for philanthropic purposes.

This book applies an eclectic and sophisticated psychological framework to Gladstone's life that explains the duality of his character. Drawing on such original sources as Gladstone's political correspondence, diary, and family papers, Travis Crosby describes his childhood and adolescence, his marriage, his rise to prominence as a young Conservative member of Parliament, the temporary languishing of his political career at midcentury, his leadership

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The Two Mr. Gladstones

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The Two Mr. Gladstones

More than any other historical figure in modern British history, William Gladstone has been prey to myth and mystery. In his own time, the great Liberal statesman was most often seen, especially in the last decades of his long life, as a titan—a moral colossus striding across the political stage. Newspapers and popular periodicals filled their pages with reports of his public utterances and his parliamentary exploits. His speeches were read not merely for their political content; they were viewed as oracular. Gladstone was—according to the well-known English journalist W. T. Stead—a "kind of secular pope."[1] Trainloads of sightseers made their way to Hawarden, Gladstone's estate in north Wales, to catch a glimpse of the great man. A special treat was to see him at work chopping down the majestic trees that grew in abundance on his land. His favorite exercise became symbolic of his ability to hack and hew his way through the knottiest of problems. Slivers of fallen Hawarden oaks were sold as souvenirs to the most enthusiastic among the crowds of admirers. By the end of his life, Gladstone had become the center of a cult that extended far beyond his political reputation. All the world, wrote Albert H. Broadwell in the *Strand Magazine,* admired him "as a man, as a great English statesman, as a kind husband and loving father."[2]

Contemporary biographies were equally laudatory of Glad-

stone's life and work. Justin McCarthy's first sentence sets the tone for the biography to follow: Gladstone was, he wrote, the "greatest English statesman" during Queen Victoria's reign. Herbert Paul believed him to be incapable of making an uncharitable judgment. G. W. E. Russell thought that Gladstone's "love of power" had nothing to do with the "vulgar eagerness for place and pay and social standing which governs the lesser luminaries of the political heaven" but could be attributed to "his deliberate theory of the public good." John Morley's admirable *Life of William Ewart Gladstone* is also filled with adulatory comments. "He was not only a political force," Morley wrote of Gladstone, "but a moral force" as well. Most later biographers have followed this complimentary line. Sir Philip Magnus reaffirmed Gladstone's stature as a "moral giant" in an author's note to the ninth printing of his popular biography. J. L. Hammond and M. R. D. Foot contrast the liberalism of Gladstone's moral order to Bismarck's espousal of "perpetual struggle . . . and perpetual fear." Even the more detached E. J. Feuchtwanger saw Gladstone as a man who could "move mountains."[3]

But recent biographies have begun to portray a different Gladstone. The first volume of Richard Shannon's life of Gladstone, based substantially on the *Gladstone Diaries,* offers an interpretation distinctly at odds with those of Morley, Magnus, and others. Not denying Gladstone's substantial achievements, Shannon also speaks of Gladstone's "anxieties," moods of "near despair," "emotional distemper," "repressed aggression," and "pent-up aggressive energy."[4] Colin Matthew, editor of the *Diaries,* also finds evidence in Gladstone of "despair," "high nervous excitement," "private torments," "underlying restlessness," and "guilt." He was a man, as Matthew notes, "prone to tension," who during the 1840s and 1850s had evidently suffered a "severe psychological crisis."[5]

This side of Gladstone, the tense and moody part of him, if unnoticed by his earlier biographers, was not surprising to his contemporaries. The jarring impression he made at social events and political meetings and, most remarkably, his angry outbursts in the House of Commons were matters of frequent comment. The journalist Henry Lucy, who spent his career observing the House of Commons, once described Gladstone during a parliamentary debate as "fuming and fretting in a white heat of passion, . . . throwing oil on the flames by interjecting remarks, or making undignified gestures."[6] He would leap up from his seat "with catapultic celerity" to answer an opponent, his face "darkened into a scowl of passionate anger."[7] Even in apparent repose, Gladstone hummed with a kind of restrained violence. Lu once followed him through the hours of a particularly important parliame tary sitting toward the end of his second administration, taking notes of h "manifold gyrations." Entering the House, Gladstone strode to the fro bench, sat down quickly, and abruptly took up the Orders of the day. Turni "with a sudden bound of his whole body," he began a conversation with

colleague, his face "working with excitement." At the same time, he beat the open palm of his left hand with his right "as if he were literally pulverising an adversary." His conversation finished, he flung himself back into his seat for a moment. Then, as swiftly as before, he turned to another colleague, thrust his hand into his breast pocket "as if he had suddenly become conscious of a live coal secreted there," pulled out a folded letter, opened it with a "violent flick of extended forefingers," and began to discourse upon it to his neighboring listener.

Gladstone's excitable nature was made much of by erstwhile friends and political enemies. The earl of Selborne, Lord Chancellor in two of Gladstone's administrations before breaking with him over the Irish question, characterized Gladstone as a man with "something volcanic in the underground currents of his mind."[8] Lord Stanley went further. He harbored suspicions about Gladstone's sanity, as he filled his diary with observations of Gladstone's "peculiar vehemence," "excessive irritability," and loss of temper.[9] Tories generally thought Gladstone quite unlike other politicians: his apparent lack of control, they believed, lay behind his fervent and too frequent espousal of political causes.[10] They even claimed that his "impetuosity" could doom legislation that he himself had supported, as happened when the Liberal franchise reform plan failed in 1866.[11]

That most acute of Victorian observers, Walter Bagehot, summed up best the general reservations about Gladstone's behavior. "Mr. Gladstone," he wrote in 1860, "is a problem: . . . we are all of us in doubt about him." Gladstone's talents were obvious: his industry, his seriousness of purpose, his mastery of detail, his oratorical skill. Perhaps these would raise him to the pinnacle of success. But he was also "impressible, impetuous, and unfixed." And he had a "vehement temperament." Would he in later life be found in isolated opposition, uttering "unintelligible discourses," pouring forth "during many hopeless years a bitter, a splendid, and a vituperative eloquence?"[12] Only time would tell.

Bagehot need not have worried. In December 1868, Gladstone formed the first of his four ministries. One of the most significant reforming governments of the century, it disestablished the Church of Ireland, legislated an Irish land bill, passed a comprehensive education bill, and enacted the secret ballot. His later administrations, if with less success and with fewer constructive monuments to the future, struggled actively with the important issues of the time: the movement for Irish independence, global imperialism, and further extensions of the right to vote. In all his governments Gladstone played a central legislative role, and in all of them he added to his reputation as a master of governmental finance. Yet these achievements were not without controversy. On such substantial issues as franchise reform, free trade, and Home Rule for Ireland, he changed his original views. These shifts of opinion, sometimes precipitately announced, alarmed even his political allies.

Gladstone's leaps ahead—into the dark, his opponents would say—reinforced the notion that he could be irresponsibly impulsive.

Gladstone's reversals were striking enough to suggest to some observers a divided soul. An anonymous article written early during his first administration noted that any character study of Gladstone was a "social puzzle, an ethical problem," because there was no man "against whom greater contradictions and inconsistencies are alleged." So profound were these divisions that he appeared to have a "dual character."[13] Toward the end of Gladstone's life, John Robertson voiced a similar theme: "It is this perceived combination, as it were, of rectitude and crookedness in Mr. Gladstone's mental processes, the consistence in him of admitted moral elevation with a curious moral versatility, which looks like levity of principle and conviction—it is this that makes his character such a theme of dispute. If we can explain that duality, we shall understand and explain Mr. Gladstone."[14]

Gladstone's duality was seen variously. An old Whig once remarked after one of Gladstone's budget speeches, "Ah, Oxford on the surface, but Liverpool below." As Bagehot explained this cryptic remark, beneath Gladstone's scholastic polish lay the industry and robustness of the Lancashire merchant.[15] A twentieth-century biography expanded this theme: although the Liverpudlian Gladstone was dominant in his ambition and shrewdness in politics or business, occasionally the Oxford Gladstone would burst through with its searchings of conscience and quixotic political or moral campaigns.[16] Or, as another of Gladstone's contemporaries put it, Gladstone was a highlander in the custody of a lowlander: the highlander might brood and dream, but the lowlander was a man of calculation and practicality.[17] Gladstone's duality of disposition was recognized in his own family. His wife, Catherine, once remarked to John Morley that a key to understanding her husband was to remember that he had two sides: "one impetuous, impatient, irrestrainable, the other all self-control, able to dismiss all but the great central aim, able to put aside what is weakening or disturbing."[18]

The theme of duality in Gladstone's private and public life is a primary focus of this book. My first object is to see Gladstone as his contemporaries saw him and to penetrate the mysteries of his personality insofar as they affected his life and work. There is little doubt that in his own time, Gladstone's behavior, both public and private, was a matter of wide speculation. His fits of temper and aggressive verbal attacks were well known.

Yet Gladstone also manifested discipline of an unusual order. Many events in his life—coming to terms with the death of his baby daughter, coping with the loss of office, preparing his famous budgets, negotiating the terms of Irish legislation—demonstrated a high degree of self-control. It would seem that Gladstone, fearing a loss of control and knowing its potential for harm in his political life, sought to gain a strict mastery over the circumstances in his life.