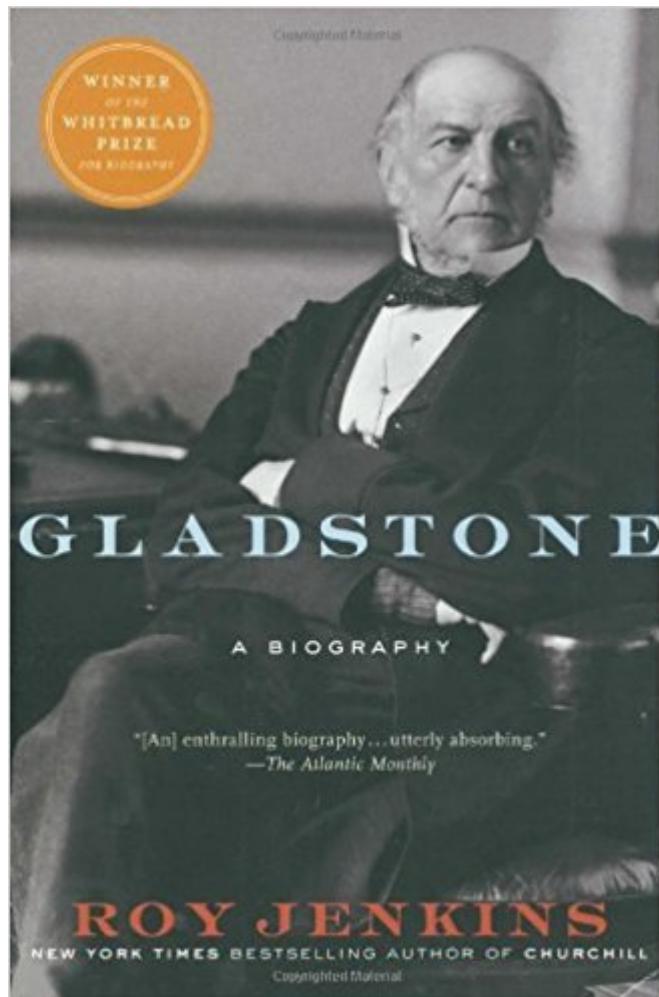


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Gladstone: A Biography



Synopsis

From the New York Times bestselling author of Churchill, a towering historical biography, available for the first time in paperback. William Gladstone was, with Tennyson, Newman, Dickens, Carlyle, and Darwin, one of the stars of nineteenth-century British life. He spent sixty-three of his eighty-nine years in the House of Commons and was prime minister four times, a unique accomplishment. From his critical role in the formation of the Liberal Party to his preoccupation with the cause of Irish Home Rule, he was a commanding politician and statesman nonpareil. But Gladstone the man was much more: a classical scholar, a wide-ranging author, a vociferous participant in all the great theological debates of the day, a voracious reader, and an avid walker who chopped down trees for recreation. He was also a man obsessed with the idea of his own sinfulness, prone to self-flagellation and persistent in the practice of accosting prostitutes on the street and attempting to persuade them of the errors of their ways. This full and deep portrait of a complicated man offers a sweeping picture of a tumultuous century in British history, and is also a brilliant example of the biographer's art.

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Customer Reviews

Given the somewhat mixed reviews on of Roy Jenkins's biography of William Gladstone, the towering giant of Victorian politics, I thought I would throw in my two cents on the matter. Jenkins is an interesting biographer, and even though he is not a professional, academic historian (so he does not always follow the standards of the historical craft), much of his work has received celebratory responses, including his earlier biography of Asquith and his more recent one of Churchill. As a

long-serving Labour MP and a member of the House of Lords, Jenkins understand British politics from the inside out, and, as a result, he brings a unique perspective to his subjects. Jenkins also has a lovely, fluid writing style and a penchant for the telling quotation; his biographies read extremely well, and this biography of Gladstone is no exception. Jenkins also offers a point of view, although he does not do so explicitly. His interpretations of his historic subjects tend to be subtly placed within the rolling prose of his books. But he does not interpret the way a typical historian would, and so his biographies have a different effect upon the reader. William Gladstone certainly requires a lengthy biography, and Jenkins gives him one. Gladstone was one of the premier figures of nineteenth-century British politics, four times prime minister, leading light of the Liberal party, defender of Christianity, and champion of the Irish. He transformed Victorian politics by taking issues to the masses and by bending policy and his party to his will. No prime minister during his long lifetime cut quite a historic and controversial figure, not even those who, in some ways, were better politicians, including Peel, Palmerston, and, above all, Russell (who truly deserves a great biography).

Gladstone was a remarkable, complicated, even enigmatic man and Jenkins does not waste our time with the sort of pop-psychology projection and junk theories that ruin so much contemporary biography. Instead, Jenkins lets the facts speak for themselves, weighting them based on their demonstrable impact on Gladstone's own life and on British society viewed from the vantage point of 100 years or more of subsequent history. Gladstone emerges through records of his actions, the memoirs of his contemporaries, and his own diary. Jenkins resists the too-common modern conceit of pretending intimate knowledge of Gladstone as if through some astral mind-meld. Although he admits his own affection for the man, Jenkins lets readers decide for themselves what they think of this stubborn, courageous, long-winded, sanctimonious, and usually dead right -- even prophetic -- dynamo. Along the way there are delightful, balanced, spot-on portraits of some of Gladstone's contemporaries. The often-deified Disraeli comes out as a man of great talent, imagination, and political genius who was a self-absorbed, underhanded lightweight. (A portrayal such as that some modern critics have applied to Bill Clinton.) The slow intellectual and emotional curdling of Queen Victoria after the death of Prince Albert is as eloquent a meditation on the corruptions of isolation and power as I've read in some time. Spencer, Parnell, Hartington, Rosebery, Balfour, Joseph Chamberlain, Manning, Wilberforce, Palmerston -- all are here drawn with flavor and economy and no trace of bitterness or partisanship. One of the great strengths of this biography is that it never talks down to the reader.

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