

Gale Primary Sources

Start at the source.

Representations of Gladstone in the *Punch* Historical Archive

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Gladstone's Library

Various source media, *Punch* Historical Archive 1841-1992



Introduction

William Ewart Gladstone (29 December 1809 - 19 May 1898) is one of most significant figures in British political history. He was a member of Parliament for 62 years, first as a Tory before founding the Liberal party in 1859; Prime Minister four times; Chancellor of the Exchequer four times, delivering thirteen budgets in total. Outside of politics he was a prolific author, publishing particularly on Classical civilization, Anglican theology and - as a reviewer - the literature of his period. Privately, he was a prolific letter-writer and diary-keeper [https://www.gov.uk/government/history/past-prime-ministers/william-ewart-gladstone]. Indeed, Gladstone's personal correspondence, held at Gladstone's Library [www.gladstoneslibrary.org], contains well over fifty thousand documents; his political archive at the British Library contains many thousands more.

This study concerns itself with visual representations of Gladstone from the start of his first Premiership in 1868 until his death in 1898. This thirty-year period serves to delimit the scope of what would otherwise be a lengthy project; Gladstone is mentioned by name alone 750 times between September 1842 and November 1868, with many hundreds more mentions appearing after his death in 1898. Considering pictorial representation allows us to consider the functions of the *Punch Historical Archive*. What follows is not a full scale investigation of his presence in the magazine but rather a suggested model for investigating representations of any significant political figure from the nineteenth century to the 1990s. The *Punch Historical Archive* makes available simple ways of

assembling the detailed response of the magazine to individual politicians for further discussion and analysis.

Using the *Punch Historical Archive*

Simply entering 'Gladstone' into the *Punch Historical Archive* results in a daunting 3,841 entries, including 111 cartoons, 12 advertisements, 3,612 feature articles, 71 mentions in the Index, and 35 mentions in the 'Prelims' section. Using advanced search to limit the search to between 1 January 1868 and 31 December 1898 reduces results to 2,072 mentions, 81 of which are cartoons. By using the advanced search mechanism, Gladstone's presence is thus even more prominent than might have been suggested by a simple search.

Delving into the 2,072 results between 1868-98, including the 81 cartoons, allows us to see that textual references to Gladstone far outstrip his appearance in cartoons. Gladstone's first year as Prime Minister (1868), for example, returns only four images that are classed as 'cartoons' in comparison to almost weekly mentions in 'feature articles'. It appears, however, that cartoons were intended to have the greatest impact. All four of the 1868 cartoons feature Gladstone and Disraeli, locked in rivalry. 'Rival Stars' (14 March 1868: 115) depicts a preening 'Bendizzy' as Hamlet; they argue over a personified Ireland in 'Paddy's Bad Tooth, or Doctors Differ' (28 March 1868: 137); 'A Crisis!' (16 May 1868: 213) has them both weighed down with their respective solutions to the problem of Ireland; finally, 'Rival Actors' (31 October 1898: 185) reverses the iconography of 'Rival Stars', this time with Gladstone performing William Tell. The political antagonism that

in some ways would go on to define both men's careers is already clearly in evidence, even in Gladstone's first year in power. A further research question presents itself here: to what extent did *Punch* create, rather than simply document, this relationship?

The larger cartoons specifically name their principle actors. As we explore below, this can hinder the researcher. Textually, Gladstone appears most frequently in the regular round-up of political events, 'Essence of Parliament', which contains a small unlabelled cartoon in the top corners. The column of 8 July 1871: 2 depicts Gladstone as a cat, hackles raised. Aside from his naming in the body of the text, the cartoon is otherwise unlabelled, illustrating how some visual depictions of Gladstone can be missed.

Gladstone in Caricature

Some caveats to our search become immediately obvious. Any text search for 'Gladstone' simply harvests any instance of that word. While Gladstone is a comparatively unusual surname, W. E. Gladstone was not the only prominent bearer of that name - his son Herbert Gladstone, for instance, features in several search results. The archive's thumbnail preview of the keyword search assists us in scanning the results relatively quickly. A second word of warning: search results duplicate. Indeed, looking at the breakdown of the 1868-98 search results, we can see that 49 results are references to Gladstone in the Index.

A potential solution to this nominative confusion is to look for Gladstone's distinctive caricature in *Punch*'s glorious illustrations. We can see that the first pictorial

representation of Gladstone within our thirty-year period appears on 16 June 1855, 'Gladstone's Lullaby', over a decade before he becomes Prime Minister. Gladstone is consistently depicted as upright, unsmiling and hawk-eyed. Fetching check trousers offer light relief and are a consistent motif - so consistent that they allow us to identify the otherwise poor likeness in 'My Old Friend Homer' (14 December 1872: 247) as Gladstone. Placing digital copies next to one another allows us to click rapidly through three decades of cartoons. Unsurprisingly the representations become more detailed as Gladstone's political career advances, his recognisable face allowing the cartoonist to position him in a range of allegorical poses: chasing down political rivals on horseback ('Stable Companions; Or, the Two Bills', 5 March 1881: 102-103); a chef about to prepare Irish stew ('The Bill of Fare', 5 February 1870: 47); as a shrunken elder statesman in a pair of natty socks, dwarfed by an enormous winged collar ('Grand Old Energy', 12 March 1892: 130). Poignantly, the last image of Gladstone during his life depicts a be-slippered, dressing-gowned retiree reflecting on his life's legacy ('Where's Your Wheelie Gladstone Now?' 10 April 1897: 170). In this final image before his death in May 1898, the recurrence of the check trousers, the classical bust, the sporting paraphernalia and piles of books speaks to the range of iconographical references that artists drew on and that readers had become familiar with. Accessing this range of representations so swiftly, juxtaposing them and clicking through the decades, is significantly enhanced via the format of the digital archive.

Opportunities for Further Research

There are, however, limitations common to all digital repositories, and the *Punch Historical Archive* is no exception. Inevitably, a text search will return results based entirely on optical character recognition. Images that are unmistakably of Gladstone, but are not captioned as such, will not be incorporated in the results. A magazine like *Punch* inevitably relies on pictorial shorthand and coded allusions in order to engage their audience in wry political observations. A striking example is 'The Colossus of Words' (13 December 1879: 270), literally an image of a giant Gladstone, resplendent in a three-piece checked suit. Yet, there is no combination of text search terms - Gladstone, William, Prime Minister, Grand Old Man, etc. - that would return this image other than the title of the image itself. This should be recognised as a fantastic opportunity to crowdsource the metadata that would allow images where the personages are unnamed to come to light in a text-based source. Likewise, a comparison of named and non-named images sets the context for the identification and exploration of allusive images by future researchers using the *Punch Historical Archive*.

Professor Michael Wheeler, historian and trustee of Gladstone's Library, once told us a remarkable fact - Gladstone featured in almost every weekly issue of *Punch* from his first Premiership in 1868 until his death in 1898. Certainly the 3,841 results suggest great frequency over a very long period of time. Rather more interestingly, however, is that the question of whether this is true has opened up several other lines of enquiry. We could, for instance, compare Gladstone's number of appearances to the appearances of his great

antagonist, Benjamin Disraeli. Even more broadly, the archive allows us to compare Gladstone with similarly dominant and divisive political icons from the twentieth century, such as David Lloyd George, Winston Churchill and Margaret Thatcher. There are also questions on the relation between caricature and the development of visual literacy in the nineteenth century. The kind of search facilitated by digitisation helps us to explore these avenues more quickly.

Seminars

This case study is deliberately based on making an open-ended search using search terms appropriate to finding a prominent politician who was perennially present in *Punch*. We did not expect such a search to offer immediate answers to scholarly questions. However, similarly simple and open-ended questions that span a relatively large period of time can provide several useful lessons to students for both under- and post-graduate seminars:

- The practicalities of using an archive; developing active research skills in students;
- The use of digital archives as a historical resource; problematising digital resources;
- Discernment in the use of a digital resource: awareness of limitations as well as opportunities; looking beyond the search results;
- Broad date sets; the benefits and limitations to advanced/limited searches;
- Juxtaposition of digital with physical resources; engaging with the politics of digitising the nineteenth century;
- The image in isolation vs the image in context.

- There is also the potential for the archive to facilitate debates linked to the theme of visual representations in the nineteenth century:
- How is Gladstone depicted by *Punch's* various illustrators?
- Is there a correlation between Gladstone's depictions and his political career? Students would use the *Punch Historical Archive* alongside other nineteenth century news outlets, via Gale Historical Newspapers;
- Iconography of masculinity, race, gender and religion - particularly when comparing images of Gladstone to those of Disraeli;
- The rhetoric of images; synecdoche and shorthand in visual culture;
- Social perspectives and the potential for Victorian political propaganda;
- The Victorians and visual humour.

Suggested search terms

- Gladstone, William Ewart
- Grand Old Man
- G.O.M; Bill Gladstone
- Gl-dst-ne
- Disraeli; Dizzy
- Gladstonian; Liberal Party
- Umbrella
- lion and unicorn
- Ireland
- Home Rule
- Free Trade
- Hawarden; Midlothian.

CITATION

Yates, Louisa and Butler, Gary: "Representations of Gladstone in the *Punch Historical Archive*." *Punch Historical Archive 1841-1992*: Cengage Learning 2014

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