



## The Lion and the Unicorn: Gladstone vs. Disraeli

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## **The Lion and the Unicorn: Gladstone vs. Disraeli** Richard Aldous

William Gladstone and Benjamin Disraeli were the fiercest political rivals of the nineteenth century. Their intense mutual hatred was both ideologically driven and deeply personal. Their vitriolic duels, carried out over decades, lend profound insight into the social and political currents that dominated Victorian England. To Disraeli—a legendary dandy descended from Sephardic Jews—his antagonist was an "unprincipled maniac" characterized by an "extraordinary mixture of envy, vindictiveness, hypocrisy, and superstition." For the conservative aristocrat Gladstone, his rival was "the Grand Corrupter," whose destruction he plotted "day and night, week by week, month by month." In the tradition of Roy Jenkins and A. N. Wilson, Richard Aldous has written an outstanding political biography, giving us the first dual portrait of this intense and momentous rivalry. Aldous's vivid narrative style—by turns powerful, witty, and stirring—brings new life to the Gladstone and Disraeli story and confirms a perennial truth: in politics, everything is personal.

## **The Lion and the Unicorn: Gladstone vs. Disraeli Details**

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## **From Reader Review The Lion and the Unicorn: Gladstone vs. Disraeli for online ebook**

### **Margaret Sankey says**

Dual popular biography of the intertwined personalities and careers of Gladstone and Disraeli, considering them to require one another as foils and political operators for more of the 19th century in Britain to unfold as it did.

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### **Lauren Albert says**

I spent most of the book confused as the two protagonists alternated between slinking away in shame and reveling in success. I couldn't keep track of what they were for or against and I had no understanding of the politics. The book is clearly more aimed at people familiar both with British history and British politics. I slink away in shame.

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### **Amy says**

I enjoyed this look at the battles between Benjamin Disraeli and William Gladstone, but my knowledge of English Parliamentary protocol and history didn't quite keep up with the intricacies of the story. Probably only a book for a real lover of English history and either Gladstone or Disraeli. I'll reread later and hope I understand it better.

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### **Denise says**

A very detailed book, and a bit on the dry side. Still, I was after information and I got it. Disraeli was the more interesting of the two and I may read more on him. It was his relationship with Victoria that really interested me.

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### **Sandra Strange says**

I needed information about Gladstone and Disraeli, political rivals who served as British Prime Minister, tossing the office back and forth as they competed fiercely (they REALLY didn't like each other) the last half of the 19th Century. This book traces their competition, giving good information about their contrasting views, personalities, lifestyles. I don't know about the author, but I came out rooting for Disraeli. He was unscrupulous in his political machinations, but much more admirable than the liberal Gladstone, who symbolizes well the hypocrisy of stereotypical Victorian society: he was religious, but in his youth fell to pornography; he combined the two by "reforming" the lowest London prostitutes, haunting the backstreets at night and indulging his basest instincts, then flagellating himself to atone. Of course, though his "secret" was known to many of his colleagues, it never hurt his political successes. Yuck! The book is almost too detailed

about the political maneuvering that allowed these rivals to best each other over and over. Hard to get through, though it has good information on these two and on Victorian English politics and reforms.

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### **Paula says**

Sad but true: my interest in Disraeli can be traced to a Family Guy episode. Peter's blathering on, as he does, and compares someone to Benjamin Disraeli. Cut to Disraeli in his study, who looks at the camera and sadly tells the viewer, "you don't even know who I am." Thus, my curiosity in the infamous British Prime Minister was piqued.

It turns out that "The Lion and the Unicorn" was not the best book for a first foray into the subject. Aldous assumes the reader is already familiar with the general timeline and issues of the day, and focuses almost entirely on the personal enmity and numerous smackdowns between Gladstone and Disraeli. Although the writing is excellent and the hatred palpable, I found it somewhat difficult to follow. Personally, my knowledge of British history fades out somewhere after 1812 and doesn't show up again until 1914, so lots of historical figures and bills (The Reform Acts, The Irish Question) were news to me. As if that weren't bad enough, I also had to decipher the Westminster system of government. I pieced most of it together while reading, but it was so confusing, I was sure I was missing a crucial part. So I went on to wikipedia and it turns out, it's just as confusing as I thought. Calling for an election whenever you feel like it? Poppycock! Casting a vote of no confidence in the government? Hell, in America, we'd do that every day.

All that aside, I still thought this book was a great read. Aldous is excellent at illuminating Gladstone's and Disraeli's vastly different personalities and how they affected British politics for half a century. The comparisons are integrated and don't feel repetitive, unlike what you'll find in, say, [The Courtier and the Heretic]. And though I was sometimes lost in historical debates, I was rarely bored. So if you're interested in political rivalries and mudslinging in the 19th-century fashion, I'd definitely recommend "The Lion and the Unicorn," but make sure you've got a solid understanding of the basics first.

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### **Thomas Canfield says**

'The Lion and the Unicorn' by Richard Aldous is an engaging and insightful account of the decades long struggle between Gladstone and Disraeli to forge political majorities in Parliament and to lead and fashion Britain according to Liberal or Conservative principles. It was, by any measure, a battle of heavyweights.

Two men of outsized talent – and of correspondingly large egos – pitted one against the other, dominating the political arena with their oratory, their intellects and the force and dynamic thrust of their personalities. To add to the drama, all of this took place against the backdrop of Britain's ascendency to the height of her powers, as the Industrial Revolution triumphed at home and Great Britain extended her power around the globe.

Aldous' book provides more than adequate context for this rivalry but its focus remains on the two men themselves, delivering fascinating portrayals of each, depicting not only their many strengths but their idiosyncrasies, their flaws and their failures – both political and personal.

Where it might be easy to champion one man at the expense of the other, Aldous maintains an admirable

impartiality, giving to each his due and favoring neither. This is easier said than done, given the strong contrasts between the two men, the genuine hostility and dislike which existed between them and the inevitable partisanship which such contrasts (political and personal) give rise to.

In the end, perhaps the greatest compliment which can be paid to the author is that one finishes the book with a genuine respect and appreciation for both men. Though flawed, each aspired to greatness and, in more than a few instances, attained it.

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### **Christopher says**

Pretty good read, worth 3 1/2 stars.

This is a very personality-driven account of the political rivalry between the 19th-century British political leaders Gladstone (a sort of Jimmy Carter character) and Benjamin Disraeli. Very influential figures, they loathed each other. The book is somewhat artificially organized around locations where something took place that can serve as a sort of "entree" into the subject of the chapter. This event is generally some sort of social occasion. This is a conceit that has dramatic potential, but is at times not very appealing in terms of analysis. I saw a review in which someone complained that the book concentrated on domestic policy and had little to say about foreign policy. That's certainly true, though even for the domestic disputes that are mentioned, these are mostly not treated in their own right but just as "props" in carrying along the story of the feud between these two characters.

Basically, if you want a reasonably interesting intro to the competition between these two important figures, this book is amusing enough. Taken on its own terms, the book mostly succeeds. What I sometimes felt was that because there was so much emphasis on their personal strife, I didn't have a good feel for the two individuals. That is, I don't know that I really understood either of them, especially Gladstone, who seems to be a figure important for his views, as opposed to Disraeli, whose dominance in politics seems to have been based more on trivial characteristics like literary style and mordant wit. The book seems to be more in line with Disraeli's traits than Gladstone's.

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### **Kelly says**

This is not a history of 19th century British politics. It does not pretend to be so. In fact, it states from the first that its mission is to recast the story of Gladstone and Disraeli for a 21st century audience, in a way that will appeal to us. Aldous' assessment of a 21st century audience's needs are a Reality Show-like combination of high drama, 'oh-no-he-didn't- personal pettiness, a fast paced showing of all the highlights on the grandest scale. I can't say that he's wrong in that assessment. This approach has shortcomings- such as if you don't already know about the bills and arguments going on, you never feel like you're getting all sides of the story. He does explain a few of the bigger bills- Reform Bills, the important Irish bills, but the legislation isn't his focus so much as where each of the two of them came down on supporting it or not.

Neither is this the dual biography that the back of the book proclaims it to be, you don't get everything both of them ever did in their lives. You get the highlights, their interaction with each other, and a really good casting of their personalities.

It is like a boxing match in that when one rises, the other one falls, sometimes incredibly quickly. Also, that the book tries to get you to take sides and root for one or other. I had difficulty in rooting for either, simply because Aldous was so intent on exposing the flaws of both of them, always sully any triumph with something petty or awful about them. My opinion changed many times. In the end, I ended up thinking that Gladstone was a black and white moralist who only wanted to fight when he could ride in on a white horse, but nonetheless had principles and things he cared about, and for the great majority of his life, he appeared to really stick to those ideas. He was also difficult, cantankerous, had no idea how to deal with people, preachy, arrogant, mean, incredibly strict on religion, and yet very hypocritical- (he did extensive "rescue work" with prostitutes that mostly culminated in him sleeping with them rather than "saving" them), very small and petty on a lot of levels, and quite Anti-Semitic (a lot of which was directed right at Disraeli). And yet, many of his opinions are things that modern day liberals would agree with- self-determination, anti-imperialism, non-interference abroad, secret ballots and expanding the electorate. Basically, you end up really disliking him, though respecting him for several principled stands and some of his opinions. You don't want to ever talk to him in heaven though.

Disraeli? I was amused by him at first, then really disliked him, then came back around slowly to respect and admiration for him by the end. At first I thought he was kind of an amusing dilettante, the Byron wannabe with more styles than principles. His early years in parliament show him to be capable of lying and backstabbing and vicious, vicious personal attacks. Which never stopped. His absolute insistence on the survival and continuation of the British Empire may be the most consistent principle he stood for, along with a more general nationalism and slow, gradual domestic reform. But for awhile it really didn't look like he stood for anything but getting himself in power. He even said at one point that he lived for 'fame and reputation'. But then his many many talents, interesting policies, ways of dealing with people, and most of all, the great description of his performance at the Congress of Berlin and his interaction with Bismarck... there's also all that. Also, he was not a whoremongering hypocritical Christian doing 'rescue work'. By all accounts, he had great, long lasting Romantic relationships with women, among them the Queen. He did press for reform. Plus he was multitalented- he was also a novelist. His Romantic personality is realatable, his witty quips and speeches magnetic...Etc, etc, etc. This is definitely the guy you wanted to sit next to at dinner, anyway. Of the two, I definitely was more pleased to see Disraeli win whenever he did... but I don't think that was the best part of me who wanted him to win all the time.

It's just funny that in this story that was set up to be a boxing match, I really ended up not being able to root for either of them fully, because you see just how many flaws each of them had. It's just a never-ending mess. Yeah, I know. That's politics.

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### **AshleyS says**

Detailed and well-written, but unequal and lacking context

Aldous focuses on the personal nature of the rivalry, which helps to avoid dryness. The quality of the writing is high and consistent throughout, so that it is very easy to read.

He slightly undermines his thesis by seeming to accept that Disraeli was 'better' and Gladstone succeeded only through some phoney religious populism (he keeps mentioning Gladstone's reliance on prostitutes).

In describing the response to Gladstone's death, he quotes The Times: "[Disraeli] left a policy, a school of admirers and something like a creed and a cult. Where are the Gladstonites?...". He does not challenge this

statement, leading one to believe that he concurs. If it was such an uneven rivalry, why did it deserve 300+ pages?

Some knowledge of politics and history is assumed, and I was left googling around a few of the topics: what was the significance of the Corn Laws exactly? Who could vote before the first Reform Bill? What happened next for the Church of Ireland? Did the Peelites run as independents afterwards (I guess so)?

It lacked a sentence or two here and there to give sufficient context that you felt like you were learning about British political history and not just a personal rivalry.

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### **Katharine says**

Very readable account of the long and fractious political disagreements of Gladstone and Disraeli. Not a strict biography but the author manages to give a good portrayal of both men and their differences. Readers looking for heavy political analyses of both men won't find it here but for a vivid and enjoyable impression of their careers in relation to each other this is hard to beat.

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### **Carlos says**

Gladstone and Disraeli were two greatest British statesmen of the second half of the nineteenth century, and they hated each other. It is almost impossible to write the biography of one without including the other, since they were like two sides of the same coin. The book is very well written, I would only complain of the excessive use of the word 'brilliant' (but it might be possible that the adjective really applied to every speech made by them). Why this period is important? In the first half of the nineteenth century, British politics was still a exclusive club. Only a minority of the population could vote and the parliament was populated almost exclusively by aristocracy. After a series of reforms, the voting population was expanded, culminating in the ascension of the labour party in the twentieth century. Disraeli and Gladstone were the ones that passed the majority of those reforms through parliament, albeit from different sides of the political spectrum. It is quite a unique phenomenon in history: elites relinquishing power voluntarily to obtain the new electorates' sympathy for their parties and an immediate advantage in the political competition. It is the second book I read about the same subject and it is hard for me not to sympathise more with Disraeli, the reason being that he was a jew and thus an outsider to the aristocratic group when he started and because he was more of a human character: imperfect but capable of great deeds. This book also clarified something that puzzled me: Gladstone's 'charity work' with prostitutes was not charity at all.

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### **Susanna - Censored by GoodReads says**

Fascinating and well-written.

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### **Bill says**

I selected this book when looking for a modern biography of Disraeli, one of the most influential British

prime ministers of the 19th Century. I thought that I had struck a bargain, getting two biographies for one: Disraeli and Gladstone. Sadly, what I got was more like half a biography.

In its diligence to capture their personalities, their witticisms, and above all their cutting and deeply personal rivalry, the author loses what it was they believed and fought for. Some of this may be simply a flavor of our age, casting politics as celebrity and debates as being fundamentally groundless. But whether it is the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland, imperial foreign policy, or Disraeli's tremendously fascinating One Nation Conservatism and the ensuing progressive conservative tradition, the author chooses to spend one to three lines describe the policy and pages on the bitter personal hatred. And foibles - oh the foibles. I read more about Gladstone's late night "rescue" missions of prostitutes that I did about any of the aforementioned policy debates.

It may be argued that at a distance, the policy debates lose their meaning and relevance, but the personalities persist. That not only to my mind does a disrespect to Disraeli and Gladstone (or any historical figure), but flies in the face of reality. Free trade, increasing representation of the underrepresented, squaring tradition and reform, the role of religion in public life, the extent to which a foreign policy is far-seeing or merely adventurous - these topics matter now as they mattered then. Pity I didn't just read a book about those.

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### **Frank Stein says**

This book is a missed opportunity. William Gladstone and Benjamin Disraeli were two of the oddest characters to traipse across the 19th century. Their political feud reached almost apocalyptic proportions, and came to define the nature of Great Britain when that country was at the pinnacle of global power. It's hard to imagine a better feud about which to write. Yet time and again the author decides to focus on fripperies and odd set-piece scenes rather than the real struggle between the two.

William Gladstone, like his hero, Tory Prime Minister Robert Peel, was the son of a wealthy manufacturer who had bought a country estate and provided his children with all the advantages of the British aristocracy, except the title. Gladstone's indefatigable high-church conscience pushed him to work incessantly. He rose through the political ranks, and became head of the Board of Trade under Peel by 1843, when he was only 34 years old. After the Tory Party broke apart under Peel's low tariff policy, he joined the rump group of "Peelites" fighting for free trade and the memory of their hero. He finally moved over to the Liberal Party, and became prime minister four separate times. Despite his attachment to the Church of England, he championed the freedom of Irish Catholicism and eventually Irish nationalism, and despite his frugal inclinations, supported increased outreach to the poor. Gladstone's dark secret, however, was that he spent many nights wandering the London streets looking for prostitutes, under the guise of "saving" them, and then whipped himself for his transgressions later. His whole life he walked a tight line between salvation and damnation.

Benjamin Disraeli, by contrast, was the son of an immigrant Jewish family, and he wore his converted religion very lightly. His fame came from his novels, such as *Coningsby*, which became the talk of the literary world, and made him a young romantic hero, one who rouged his cheeks and sauntered around town in flashy clothes. Disraeli soon, however, also became the surprising hero of the conservative movement that broke with Peel, when he defended the value of the aristocracy and the Church of England against liberal reform. And despite his scandalous reputation, he was intensely attached to his older wife, Mary Anne, who became one of the most powerful political women in England. Disraeli's two terms as prime minister caused him to champion gradual conservative reform and international realpolitik, especially in defending the Ottoman Turks against the expanding Russian empire.

The two men, who were so dissimilar in every way, and who somehow took the political stance which seemed more appropriate to the other one, absolutely despised each other. It didn't help that Queen Victoria was clearly infatuated with Disraeli, yet threatened to not even accept a government with Gladstone as its head. Victoria gave Disraeli and his wife titles (they became the Earl and Viscountess of Beaconsfield), and ignored his opponent. Gladstone's public attacks against "Beaconfieldism," as the ultimate corrupting influence in British life, in his famous Midlothian campaign of 1880, helped make him the "People's William," but only further tarnished the Queen's opinion of him.

So, a great story, but the author seems incapable of telling it straight. Instead, in each chapter we get boring vignettes, followed by backtracking over some older stories, followed by a series of new narratives with little relation to the political stakes. I'm sure there are better versions of this amazing tale out there.

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### **Sarah says**

First book I've managed to finish in a month, which says something. This was really nicely written, very readable, and remarkably entertaining given it's about the intricacies of Victorian parliamentary tactics. I did find the second half dragged a bit but I can't imagine how the author could have helped that. Overall, highly recommended if you want to learn about this period and/or either man. In conclusion: Team Disraeli.

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### **Daniel Kukwa says**

It's the anti-"Team of Rivals". A story of competitiveness, jealousy, and power at the height of the British Empire. Addictive & compelling, with an easy writing style combined with a system of counter-pointing each chapter, based on either Disraeli or Gladstone. It transforms a dense text, packed with information, into a smooth reading experience.

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### **Andy says**

Gladstone spent more evenings with more hookers than Spitzer ever dreamed of - but he did feel guilty about it! The book assumes more knowledge of the British parliamentary system and of Victorian era history than most American readers possess (i.e. me) - but quick trips to the Wikipedia for background on, for instance, the Corn Laws, fill in the gaps. G and D dominated their respective parties for a generation - a thing scarcely possible in our system with a separate executive and a two-term limit. The personal rivalry dwarfs the actual policy differences.

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### **Roger Woods says**

This is an excellent book. Richard Aldous gives a vivid account of the lives and rivalry of Gladstone and Disraeli which is very enjoyable to read. The political shenanigans of today are not that much different from those of the nineteenth century when Gladstone and Disraeli were bitter rivals. Their personalities and political styles were so different and the author drives the narrative along in great style highlighting their

many political battles.

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### **Palindrome Mordnilap says**

A very enjoyable and informative review of two great titans of British political history. Both men are given a fair hearing, though it is apparent that the author favours Disraeli over Gladstone (which is fine by me as that chimes with my own opinions). The book emphasises the struggle between them rather than simply giving potted histories of each man, which makes the material all the more interesting to read. Some of Disraeli's barbs aimed at Gladstone were just as funny to read now as they must have been at the time. The book also pulls back the covers (!) on Gladstone, revealing his night time dalliances with prostitutes (his "rescue work" as he deemed it) and his insatiable sexual appetite - not something you would expect from the severe portraits and gruff speeches through which we tend to analyse Gladstone's personality.

An excellent book for anyone with even a passing interest in the period, and definitely one for Disraeli fans like myself.

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