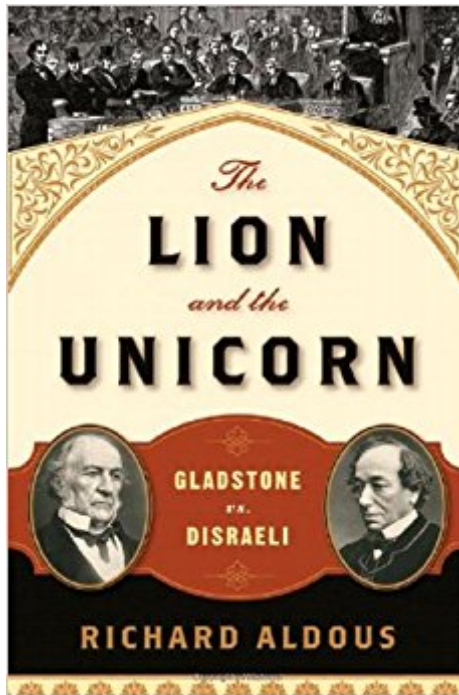


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The Lion And The Unicorn: Gladstone Vs. Disraeli



Synopsis

The vicious political struggle that electrified Victorian society, brilliantly re-created for a new generation. 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's legendary dandy descended from Sephardic Jews this 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 is 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. 16 pages of illustrations

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Customer Reviews

Two titans, Disraeli and Gladstone, dominated English politics in the Victorian age. Each did multiple stints as prime minister and as leader of the Conservative (Disraeli) or Liberal (Gladstone) party. Political opposition shifted over the years to mutual personal disapproval and finally to rage-driven attack. Aldous (of University College, Dublin) traces the development of this seemingly

pathological antagonism amid the policy disputes of the era. Both combatants displayed rhetorical skills unimaginable in a politician today. Both were writers, Gladstone of dull works on religion and on Homer, Disraeli of novels lampooning notable figures of his day, especially Gladstone. Aldous portrays both as possessing repellent character traits, such as Disraeli's vindictive mockery and Gladstone's moral hypocrisy. All these tangy ingredients make this joint biography highly appetizing, even if some readers may find issues like the Corn Laws, that so energized Gladstone and Disraeli, a bit faded. However, vexing issues of international trade, religion in public life and voting rights divide our nation as they did Victorian England. Aldous's smooth pacing and adroit writing bring a forgotten world back to life and demonstrate how two forceful if warring personalities can create a history that neither could have achieved acting alone. (Sept.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

William Gladstone and Benjamin Disraeli dominated the British political scene in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Gladstone, the leader of the Liberal Party, served four terms as prime minister; Disraeli, the unconventional leader of the Tories, held the same office for two terms. This dual biography of these Victorian icons is engrossing, informative, and frequently surprising. Aldous does a fine job of explaining the very real policy differences that made the rivalry between these men and the interests they represented so intense. Gladstone, a pure nineteenth-century liberal reformer, was dedicated to expansion of the franchise, free trade, social reform, and Home Rule for Ireland. Disraeli's political views were more difficult to pin down; like Gladstone, he showed interest in social reform but only within the limits set by upper-class traditionalists. As an archimperialist, he opposed Home Rule and favored an expansive, even adventurous foreign policy. And, as Aldous makes clear, they despised each other. This is a superbly written chronicle that explains much about these men and the political development of nineteenth-century Britain. Freeman, Jay

Interesting and amusing in many ways. But the fact that poor Gladstone produced volumes of diaries detailing his weird sexual problems tends to mesmerize biographers. This creates imbalance in the treatment of a great and immensely successful politician, who represented and drove the most progressive movements of the British 19th century. Gladstone's last administration was still concerned with an attempt to reform and reconcile the relations between Ireland and Britain. His efforts did not succeed, but, given the hideous history of Britain's mistreatment of the Irish, what he tried to do is admirable, even noble. Reading his Irish speeches on Kindle is enough to make you weep.

Wonderful introduction to the world of 19th century British politics. One can draw conclusions from the major political events of the time and how statesmen/politicians dealt with them. One can learn much from the political history of these political giants of the Mother Country.

This is a masterful book about two flawed but fascinating giants of British history. The story sets a fast pace through decades of political rivalry and extravagant backbiting between Gladstone and Disraeli, while also giving us well-rounded and reasonably sympathetic views of their personal lives. The author has chosen an episodic approach to telling his story, using set-piece events to move the narrative along and bring the protagonists into focus against the political world they dominated in the second half of the 19th century. In the end, it's obvious the author admires and enjoys Disraeli somewhat more than Gladstone, but then again, it's easy to see why: Disraeli is the seductive and magical unicorn to Gladstone's priggish (and yet perverse...) old lion. The writing is beautiful and tight and the storyline is perfectly paced. I sometimes finish a book, put it down and breathe a sigh of relief: I finished this book and wished for more. Well done!

Gladstone was right about issues and a pious hypocrite in his personal life. Disraeli was wrong about issues, especially imperialism, but he was a warm, humane politician. Add to that the great price and quick delivery, and this book is a bargain.

Professor Aldous concentrates here on the unrelenting political gamesmanship between Disraeli and Gladstone as they jostled for power in the House of Commons. To a modern reader (maybe especially an American one) the causes of some of these disputes will be obscure. I think the story could have been recounted by the able professor with some additional background to help readers of the present day better understand the intense emotions on certain key issues (Ireland, franchise reform, etc.) between the two men and their shifting political coalitions. On a personal note, it would have been interesting to me to have been told the positions of the two great English leaders on the American Civil War, which raged during their careers and had direct ties to England's statecraft. (How did they each handle the tension between the much desired trade in Southern cotton and the more noble anti-slavery impulses of the English public?) All in all, a nicely done look back at the dawn of modern party politics, the height of the Victorian Age, and the long public careers of two very different public and private personalities. (In terms of the latter, Mr. Gladstone might be the patron saint of some pompous modern day television evangelicals who have strayed from the

righteous path.)

Mr. Aldous has put together a very good biography of both men in a compact book. I read a biography of Disraeli which was twice as long as this book, but every important event was mentioned in this book. I have only one small problem with this book; the author is clearly an admirer of Disraeli, but Gladstone spent twice as much time as prime minister as Disraeli, and he must have done something right.

Professor Aldous has researched and written well an excellent history of the rivalry between Disraeli and Gladstone. It is a fast paced narrative. A brilliant piece of work. Five stars in every way. Highly recommended.

A very well done parallel biography of two of England's legendary Prime Ministers under Queen Victoria. Great insight into the House of Commons and how it works, along with the making of the prime minister and his/her cabinet. Shows how historic world events impact individual countries and the course of history. Great read

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