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978-0-521-08277-8 - The Gladstones: A Family Biography, 1764-1851

S. G. Checkland

Excerpt

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Part I
The self-made trader
1764–1812

J.G. *aet.* 0–47

W.E.G. *aet.* 0–3

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[More information](#)

1

The grandfather of a Prime Minister : Thomas Gladstones

ABOUT 1746, not long after the final defeat of Prince Charles Edward Stuart at Culloden, a fourteen-year-old lad Thomas Gladstones waited in the little Scottish Lowland town of Biggar for the carrier's cart.¹ His father, knowing he had no prospects at home, had arranged for him to be taken to Leith, there to be apprenticed to a wine merchant. Two years later another lad of similar age, Benjamin D'Israeli, born at Cento near Florence in northern Italy, emigrated to England in search of better prospects.² Each boy, the earnest Scottish Evangelical and the adaptable Italian Jew, was to have a grandson who would become Prime Minister of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland at the height of its wealth and power.

Neither boy as he entered upon a new and frightening life could of course have had any idea of the distinction that was to come to the name he brought from his little town. Nor was either ever to have any such notion, for both were to die as old men with no hint that celebrity was so close. Because Scotsman and Jew married their own kind, and their sons did the same, each grandson received the heritage of his peculiar people in such a way that though overlaid and amended it was never effaced.

Thomas was apprenticed to Alexander Somerville, wine merchant. He sadly missed the security and piety of his Biggar home. The boy found the rougher world of Leith a lonely place; he yearned for the close and devout family circle.

His father John Gladstones had been the centre of his life. He was a small-town miller, trader and farmer.³ As giralman or storekeeper to Lord Fleming he received the local rents in kind. At various times he held most of the chief offices of the town.⁴ When the military were

¹ There survives a collection of some 193 letters, Thos. G., to J.G., from 1787 to 1809.

² Blake, 1966, 5.

³ See memorandum by James W. Gladstone, Biggar, 9 February 1855. The family had been holders of the small exposed upland farm of Arthurshiel near Liberton not far from Biggar for many generations, but at the end of the seventeenth century they lost it. One William Gladstones, it would seem, migrated to Biggar where the family began again. The story is established, all but the move itself, for which the presumptive evidence is very strong.

⁴ Hunter, 1867, 143.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*The self-made trader, 1764-1812*

quartered on Biggar he was appointed quartermaster 'so that none might be wronged'. He supervised the division of the peat-moss between the townsmen, a most important function, for peat was the main source of fuel and a matter of frequent argument. As a member of the Biggar Free Operative Masonic Lodge he served as warden and deputy master.¹ The ancient office of birlawman or judge in cases of disputes over property boundaries and the management of the parochial poor were claims on his time. Chosen very young, he had become one of the most respected Elders of the Biggar Kirk. With his fellow Elders he judged the wrongs of parish sinners at a time when Kirk discipline could exercise absolute authority over personal conduct down to the minutest detail. His eldest surviving son James was from earliest infancy dedicated to the ministry of the Church of Scotland.

Five sons and six daughters reached adulthood: Thomas was the fourth son.² He was born in 1732 when his father was thirty-six and his mother thirty-two. The potato had been introduced into the Lowlands about ten years earlier but was still scarce.³ This grandfather of a Prime Minister was raised on oaten bread. About the time of Thomas's birth the last witch-burning took place in Scotland. Memories of Covenanting were still strong. Thomas was ten years old when the Evangelical outburst known as the 'Cambuslang Wark' brought burning religious fever to the upper ward of Lanarkshire.⁴ Sin and punishment were never far from the minds of men like John Gladstones of Biggar, to whom preparation for the confrontation with God was the great end of life.

Thomas continued to keep in close touch with his family in Biggar even after his father died in 1757 aged sixty-one. He became accepted as the man of business of the family; it was he who had drawn up and transcribed his father's will.⁵ His elder brother the Reverend James, the rector of Leith Academy, was a link with home and family.

Thomas had fought down his nostalgia and pleased his master well. Somerville formed a high opinion of the young Gladstones; the regard was mutual for they became life-long friends, in later years sharing trading ventures abroad.⁶ Thomas, even when he became his own master, was not one for the social 'howffs' or taverns of Leith and Edinburgh where so much male time was spent over pipes and drams of whisky. But he was happy in his small office with an intimate friend and a pair of modest wine-glasses.

¹ Minute Books, Biggar Free Operative No. 167. Transcripts provided by Brian Lambie.

² Memo, Gladstone, J. W., 6.

³ For the general condition of Scotland at this time see Smout, 1969; Pryde, 1962.

⁴ Fawcett, 1952.

⁵ Will executed 20 June 1758.

⁶ Memo by David Gladstone, written for his daughter, Mrs A. R. Bennett, November 1861.

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S. G. Checkland

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Thomas Gladstones, grandfather of a Prime Minister*

The corn trade offered better prospects than did wine. Thomas struck out on his own as a provision merchant and corn dealer, eventually trading at both wholesale and retail.

For sixteen years after his arrival in Leith, in spite of loneliness, he remained a bachelor. But Nelly Neilson changed this. In 1762, when he was thirty years of age and she was twenty-three, they married. She was to make of the withdrawn bachelor, older than herself by Plato's ideal seven years, a patriarch.

She was a young lady of great firmness of purpose.¹ Her father Walter Neilson, a merchant of Springfield near Edinburgh, having been widowed had taken a housekeeper. To the outrage of Nelly and her two brothers their father's attitude to the lady became distinctly warmer. Indeed there was 'an improper intimacy' of the sort that many a kirk session had condemned. Miss Neilson would have none of this. Her mother had been a beautiful woman who married at fourteen, bore eighteen children, and died in her forty-first year. She had brought property to her husband. In indignation at the defilement of her memory Nelly departed from her father's home with her two brothers and removed to Leith. The three of them sought to establish a shop for their mutual support.

Like Thomas Gladstones the young Neilsons had found themselves in a strange and difficult world. Somehow, perhaps through the North Leith Kirk, Thomas and Nelly came together. There was a natural sympathy between them. Thomas was soon giving Nelly Neilson advice and assistance in business. He began to wonder if he could not improve on his bachelor's life.

Marriage brought Thomas a great increase in responsibilities. Nelly Neilson bore him sixteen children, with fourteen pregnancies. Over a period of some twenty-three years, at intervals of eighteen to twenty months, she was delivered. There were two sets of twins. Four of the children were lost in infancy, their deaths ascribed to 'teething'. Twice a girl followed by a boy died, so that there were two age gaps in the family.

What with pregnancies, household duties and her husband's business Nelly had little time merely to sit and talk. But she cherished her children in her busy way. A particularly delicious marmalade was a family luxury. Every spring, to purge her family of winter humours she dosed young and old with brimstone and treacle. They all loved her for she was the centre of their security, more accessible in spite of her many tasks than their preoccupied father. She showed great tact, especially in managing her seven sons. Nelly was a good deal less nervous of her eldest son John as he grew to manhood than was her

¹ Memo by Mary Watson, 1885.

Cambridge University Press

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S. G. Checkland

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The self-made trader, 1764-1812**Children of Thomas Gladstones and Nelly Neilson
(Married 21 April 1762)*

Age of father (b. 1732)		Date of birth	Age of mother (b. 1739)	Interval (in months)	Date of death
31	Margaret	29 March 1763	24	12	1814 (Mrs Peter Cruden)
32	John	11 December 1764	25	18	7 December 1851
34	Euphan	27 October 1766	27	22	in infancy
36	Walter	13 July 1768	29	20	in infancy
38	Murray and Janet	4 May 1770	31	19	10 September 1841 1842 (Mrs David Ogilvy)
40	Thomas	18 February 1772	33	21	10 April 1844
41	Robert	1 December 1773	34	21	31 August 1835
43	James and Helen	9 July 1775	36	19	27 September 1832 1839 (Mrs Alexander Goalen)
45	Hugh	26 April 1777	38	22	27 November 1835
47	Marion	26 February 1779	40	22	1834 (Mrs John Watson)
48	Anne	4 October 1780	41	19	in infancy
50	Charles	13 June 1782	43	21	in infancy
51	David	17 October 1783	44	16	16 August 1863
54	Mary	31 August 1786	47	34	1871 (Mrs John Nimmo)

Note: This table is from a list compiled at different dates by different hands mostly in the eighteenth century.

husband. Her servants loved her too, remaining with her for many years.

The family lived in its modest parlour on the ground floor of their house in the Coalhills of Leith. The shop was at the front. A small pane of glass separated the tiny office from the parlour; the greatest honour for a child was to be allowed while the rest of the family were at dinner to sit in the office so that a tap upon the pane could bring Thomas Gladstones to attend to a customer.¹

Before his marriage Thomas's corn business had been growing in a steady but quiet and unambitious way. Nelly not only encouraged her husband to extend his ventures but took an active part in the business herself as was common gossip in the family. Thomas came to depend a great deal upon his wife, strong in will and body. Yet she never sought to impair his authority but afforded him all honour as the head of his household.

Under their joint efforts the business prospered. Thomas began to experiment. He became lessee of Dalry Mills near Leith where he installed his favourite brother-in-law, James Murray from Biggar, as superintendent. As a buyer of Baltic grain cargoes Thomas made

¹ Memo by Mrs A. R. Bennett, 1899.

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S. G. Checkland

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Thomas Gladstones, grandfather of a Prime Minister*

contact with continental markets. He became a shareholder in the Leith syndicate of whalers to Greenland.

In a different direction altogether he shared a pioneer venture. From 1770 he had an interest in one of the earliest oil of vitriol (sulphuric acid) plants, at Barrowmuirhead not far from Leith.¹ He had come into contact with Dr Thomas Steel, one of the many Scots medical men of the day who had sensed the industrial potential of the new physical science. In spite of the novelty of the venture Thomas and Nelly decided to share in it. They provided part of the capital and took considerable responsibility for sales. Walter Neilson, Nelly's father, also supplied finance. The firm was known as Steel, Gladstones and Co. and the works as the Tipperlinn Chemical Works.² One of the principal raw materials was brimstone, brought from Italy; in return for it Thomas arranged for cargoes of herring to be sent to Leghorn.

But Thomas even with Nelly's help was not the man for really large transactions. He never employed a clerk and was alarmed by the suggestion that he should do so. Indeed when a leading London dealer proposed that he should address his Leith consignments to Thomas Gladstones the latter took fright at what might be involved. In his provision business, selling butter, oranges, wine, vinegar and other goods, he was much concerned with bad debts.

By 1785 when his eldest son John came of age, Thomas had built up a range of business interests which though not of the first rank was considerable. His most important function was that of a dealer in corn and flour, but his interests in milling, oil of vitriol, the whale fishery and his minor shares in ships represented a modest policy of business diversification. He accepted thankfully his own place as a respected merchant of the second order. In 1777 having paid his dues and made oath he was admitted a Gildbrother of Edinburgh.³

In spite of the modesty of his ambitions Thomas Gladstones both gave and inspired much affection. Though the cares of business and the long periods of talking with friends and clients that these involved did not leave him much time for his younger children, he secured a little cottage not far from Leith where the family spent the summer holidays.

As his father at Biggar had done Thomas concerned himself much with Church affairs, becoming one of the Elders of North Leith Church. The minister, the Reverend David Johnson, became a close family friend.⁴ Thomas's children were well trained in their devotions. Strict

¹ The Royal Bank of Scotland awarded a cash credit to 'Thomas James and John Steel, Chymists, at Barrowmuirhead', of £500, with T.G. as guarantor (Minute Books, 20 February 1787). ² See *The Book of the Old Edinburgh Club*, vol. x, 1918, 207.

³ Certificate of Admission, 5 November 1777.

⁴ There are ten letters from Dr David Johnson to J.G., from 22 February 1805 to 6 September 1822.

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S. G. Checkland

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The self-made trader, 1764-1812*

church attendance was reinforced by family prayers and Bible sessions. Thomas read them a chapter every evening. His voiced rolled onward and over his wife and children in harmless histrionics. For long hours he would silently ponder volumes of sermons by Scottish divines, writing lengthy commentaries in the backs of such books. Preaching, for Thomas, meant earnest exposition of the Scripture, warming to admonition and finally to exhortation, stirring the conscience and exalting the soul.

There were three centres to the life of Thomas Gladstones: his religion, his family and his business. The conflict between these could be very real when as he well knew failure in the least of his three functions, namely business, could mean suffering for his family and even such a degree of distress as to dethrone religion. As it turned out, though Thomas was certainly not one of the great merchant princes of his day, he did accumulate much more than his father had done and easily outdid all his brothers.

The religious faith of Thomas was the result of the Lowland earnestness of many generations, strengthened by the persecution borne by covenanting forebears. It was dogmatic, concerned with correctness of belief about God and man, and with the inner isolated life of the individual. It demanded the strictest personal morality.

Such a code contained much negation and renunciation. It allowed Thomas to withdraw from the problems that arose in tasting life, indeed it forbade him even to encounter them. Of the theatre and of the heavy drinking so common among the Scotsmen of his day he entirely disapproved. Music he knew nothing of; the novel he condemned. It was wrong to titivate the sense or to cultivate vain appetites. For him the Sabbath was indeed holy and was not to be profaned either by frivolity or work. For some who could not follow Thomas in his austere way of life the result of such an outlook was either drunkenness (as promoted by drinking conventions from which only men of the strongest will could escape), or 'moral irregularity'.

The Enlightenment of the eighteenth century made no appeal to this devout searcher of the Scriptures. Indeed it is doubtful if he knew of the existence of Montesquieu, Voltaire, Diderot, Locke or Hume. He felt no mission to remedy the abuses of the world. His attitude to the slave trade was simply that if Britain gave it up on principle others would take over her share, so that no good would ensue to put against the damage to British trade.¹ Yet Thomas was a great admirer of George Washington, perhaps because he seemed to stand for freedom of conscience against external human authority²

¹ Thos. G. to J.G., 23 February 1788.

² Thos. G. to J.G., 15 December 1790.

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[More information](#)*Thomas Gladstones, grandfather of a Prime Minister*

Having no contact whatever with the great flowering of Scottish culture of the last quarter of the eighteenth century, Thomas felt no urge that his sons should do so either. With the easy-going moderates, then the dominant party in the Scottish Kirk, he had nothing to do. His whole instinct was to cling to the inspired word of God as set forth in the Bible.

As an Elder of the North Leith Kirk, however, he could not opt out of the duty of understanding and enforcing the rules of behaviour imposed by the Church. As his father had done he sat with fellow Elders to hear the indictments of delinquents and their defence, struggled to talk them into better ways, and if all else failed, recommended their expulsion.

In politics Thomas was a passive Whig. He was against irresponsible authority of the sort represented by Henry Dundas, the political boss of Scotland. Since 1774 Dundas had been steadily consolidating his power. Pitt, who began his ministry in December 1783, relied on Dundas to keep Scotland steady, using all the patronage available, including that of the East India Company, to control the tiny Scottish electorate, a mere 2,624 voters. But Thomas Gladstones was no radical: he left it to others to protest.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

2

The young trader of Leith : John Gladstones, 1764–87

NELLY AND THOMAS GLADSTONES had begun their family in 1763 with a daughter, Margaret. Then came John, born 11 December 1764.¹ As the eldest son he was named for his late grandfather of Biggar following the Lowland custom.

Only the year before, Britain had asserted her world supremacy, emerging from the Seven Years War as victor over France, becoming master of India and North America and the unrivalled ruler of the high seas. During Jack's boyhood the Empire underwent rapid economic development. At the same time great stresses appeared, culminating in the revolt of the American colonists when Jack was twelve years old. Jack Gladstones came to manhood during the long struggle that followed. In Scotland the first phase of the industrial revolution was making its impact.

Jack was taken from school at the age of thirteen. His education, as he later described it, was 'a very plain one – to read English, a little Latin, writing and figures comprehending the whole'.² He achieved not much more than the barest literacy. At puberty the real preparation for the business of life began with an apprenticeship. In high summer of 1777, with his father and that notorious gossip his Reverend uncle at his elbow, Jack signed articles binding himself for three years to Alexander Ogilvy, manager for the Edinburgh Roperie and Sailcloth Company in Leith.³ The said Alexander was to 'teach or cause to be taught the said John Gladstones in the Knowledge of the Mercantile Part of the Business and in Keeping Regular Accounts and Books'. As an apprentice he had attained a kind of manhood – his breakfasts, formerly oatmeal and nothing else, were now amplified.⁴ When Jack was fifteen, at the height of the American War of Independence, Commodore John Paul Jones appeared off Leith with an ultimatum that the town pay him £50,000 within the hour: the wind changed, blowing the American ships out of the Forth.⁵

¹ For the condition of Britain in John Gladstones' birth year see Lindsay, 1959.

² J.G. to E.C., 10 March 1786.

³ Indenture of Apprenticeship, 8 July 1777.

⁴ J.G. to R.G., 16 January 1843.

⁵ Morrison, 1960, 212, 219.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*John Gladstones, young trader of Leith, 1764–87*

In May 1781, the year before the American War of Independence ended, John finished his apprenticeship.¹ He was too young, as he himself later remarked, to have learned much. But he came under good men, the Ogilvys, and saw something of a business that was much larger than his father's. Moreover the roperie was closely related to overseas trade, for the hemp came from the Baltic. His apprenticeship finished, the seventeen-year-old boy entered his father's corn-chandling business.²

The outlines of the man were now apparent. Jack was very tall, big-boned and gangly, with broad shoulders, large hands and notable feet. Without strain he could lift a sack of grain, heave it onto his back and carry it to a cart waiting outside the shop. Through his powerful hands he learned to run the grains offered for sale, sensing their fullness and resilience. Craggy even in youth, he had the fledgling promise of a patrician nose. Dark eyes made his father wonder what risks he might take and what affronts he might offer. He was capable of a restrained witticism. But there was more than a touch of dourness.

As he approached manhood he had difficulty in controlling the energies and impatience that came with the accession of his strength, confined as he was by the tenets and tranquillity of his home. He read an occasional novel, to the silent but intense misgiving of his father.³ The indulgence of fantasy was forbidden by Thomas Gladstones' code; the only permissible escapism lay in the contemplation of the peace of the after-life.

This was a set of values for middle and old age. Yet much of it sank deep into young Jack's being, taking fast hold upon him in spite of his youthful restlessness. Duty to God was always to come first and indeed all thought and action were to be seen in the light of it. The young man worried about his own assertiveness and tried hard to keep humble before his Maker. Yet his mind does not seem to have been troubled as that of his father was with the theological arguments about faith and religion that were so disturbing to so many people in Scotland.

For Jack business had its own excitement. Very early he felt the exhilaration of pitting his judgment against events and against his fellows. With his super-abundance of energy Jack had no fear, as did his father, that he would fall slave to the game and lose his soul amid the merchandise on the wharves.

Sometimes the presence of the eldest son hung heavily over the Gladstones home. Jack's energies and ambitions pressed against his limited opportunities. He roused great concern in his parents. He was touchy and defensive and not easily quelled.

¹ Discharge, 18 May 1781.

² Memo dictated by J.G. to W.E.G., September 1837: *BM Add. MSS.* 44727, fo. 176.

³ See Thos. G. to J.G., 31 March 1787 (Appendix 1, below).