

Note

W.E. GLADSTONE, G.O.M.: ‘GOD’S ONLY MISTAKE’

It is a well-known fact that the Victorian statesman and four-time Liberal prime minister W.E. Gladstone (1809–98) was nicknamed the ‘Grand Old Man’. The origins of this sobriquet, often abbreviated as ‘G.O.M.’, have been traced in a *Notes & Queries* article by Richard Joseph Scully. Gladstone, according to Scully, ‘had been called a “grand old man” since the early days of his Midlothian campaign in the late 1870s’, and ‘[b]y mid-1882, the man himself, and his nickname, were synonymous in common usage.’¹ The initials ‘G.O.M.’ were frequently used to denote Gladstone. This is evident not only in contemporary private correspondence,² but also in the metropolitan and provincial newspaper and periodical press.³ In the words of one of Gladstone’s biographers, ‘[t]here was a touch of mockery as well as affection about its use’.⁴ In particular, Gladstone’s detractors and Tory critics, as Scully rightly notes, habitually and deliberately misinterpreted ‘G.O.M.’ ‘as a way of deflating the powerful political myth

against which they found themselves arrayed, and as a way of making Gladstone more human and changeable.’⁵ One of the most common ways in which this abbreviation was intentionally ‘misread’ was ‘God’s Only Mistake’. This has long been recognized.⁶ Yet there remain two problems which this note seeks to address. First, there is the prevalent assumption that it was Benjamin Disraeli who originated this alternative meaning of ‘G.O.M.’ This erroneous assumption has filtered into public discourse and consciousness, and continues to be perpetuated widely, not just in ‘public history’ books,⁷ but also in the British press which often regurgitates it as an entertaining anecdote.⁸ Second, even those scholars who have correctly cast doubt on the supposed roots of this meaning, arguing instead that it is more likely that the phrase originated with Lord Salisbury and the Cecil family, failed to provide any relevant citations to primary sources attesting to its usage during Gladstone’s lifetime.⁹ The aim of this note

⁵ Scully, ‘Origins’, 95.

⁶ For example, A. Delahunty, *Oxford Dictionary of Nicknames* (Oxford, 2006), 70; N. Rees and V. Noble, *A Who’s Who of Nicknames* (London, 1985), 71; D.C. Somervell, ‘The Qualities of a Great Prime Minister’, *Parliamentary Affairs*, vi/3 (1952), 246; D.C. Somervell, *Disraeli and Gladstone: A Duo-Biographical Sketch* (New York, NY, 1926), 283; E. Wasson, *A History of Modern Britain 1714 to Present* (Chichester, 2010), 163; J.B. Arnold, *Giants in Dressing Gowns* (Chicago, ILL, 1942), 92; and J. Hilderley, *Mrs Catherine Gladstone: A Woman not Quite of her Time* (Brighton, 2014), 178.

⁷ For example, Hilderley, *Mrs Catherine Gladstone*, 178; M. Read and C. Spencer, *The Writing on the Wall: 100 Iconic Blue Plaques Commemorating Britain’s History* (online edn, London, 2024), 85; M. Johnson, *Victorian Worthies: Vanity Fair’s Leaders of Church and State* (online edn, London, 2014), 13. On the relationship between the two Victorian statesmen, see R. Quinault, ‘Gladstone and Disraeli: A Reappraisal of their Relationship’, *History*, 91/304 (2006), 557–66.

⁸ One of the questions of *The Times’s* Daily Quiz on 22 March 2019 was: ‘According to Benjamin Disraeli, which Liberal politician’s nickname “GOM” stood for “God’s Only Mistake”?’: O. Bjortomt, ‘The Times Daily Quiz’, *The Times*, 72801 (22 Mar. 2019), [20]. The ‘Born on this Day’ section of the *Daily Mail* of 29 December 2015 wrote that Gladstone ‘was affectionately nicknamed “GOM”, short for “Grand Old Man”, though his Tory opposite number, Benjamin Disraeli, said the letters stood for “God’s Only Mistake”’: J. Black, ‘December 29, 2015 on this Day’, *Daily Mail*, 37200 (29 Dec. 2015), 22. A letter to the editor of the *Daily Telegraph* of 30 March 2016 made the same assumption: ‘Letters to the Editor’, *The Daily Telegraph*, 50029 (30 Mar. 2016), 15.

⁹ Scully, ‘Origins’, 99. Without providing any evidence in the book’s references, Andrew Roberts has suggested that it was the Cecil family which first began to translate ‘G.O.M.’ as ‘God’s Only Mistake’ in 1886: A. Roberts, *Salisbury: Victorian Titan*

¹ R. J. Scully, ‘The Origins of William Ewart Gladstone’s Nickname, “The Grand Old Man”’, *Notes & Queries*, 61/1 (2014), 95.

² For example, Queen Victoria, *The Letters of Queen Victoria. Volume 6: 1879-1885*, ed. G.E. Buckle (Cambridge: 1928), 646; George Meredith, *The Letters of George Meredith*, Vol. 2, ed. C. L. Cline (Oxford: 1970), 968; J.L. Hammond, *Gladstone and the Irish Nation* (London and Edinburgh: 1964), 307; and R. Harcourt Williams, ed., *Salisbury-Balfour Correspondence: Letters Exchanged between the Third Marquess of Salisbury and his Nephew Arthur James Balfour 1869-1892* ([Ware], 1988), 128, 154, 167, 420.

³ There are many examples. See, for instance, ‘The G.O.M.’s Last Card’, *Morning Post*, 35488 (18 Mar. 1886), 3; and ‘Lord Hartington Mistrusts the G.O.M.’, *Cornishman*, 10/474 (4 Aug. 1887), 6. The acronym was also a favourite among caricaturists. See ‘The G.O.M.’s Manifest-toe’, *Judy*, or the *London Serio-Comic Journal* (30 Sept. 1885), 161; and ‘The Political Thermometer. No. 2—The G.O.M.’s’, *Funny Folks: A Weekly Budget of Funny Pictures, Funny Notes, Funny Jokes, and Funny Stories*, XI/578-579 (26 Dec. 1885), 412.

⁴ R. Jenkins, *Gladstone* (London and Basingstoke, 1995), 460. ‘Whilst [Gladstone’s] enemies use [“Grand Old Man”] with tongue in cheek and meaning wink of the eye, his admirers are content to adopt it as a literal description of a remarkable individuality’: Henry W. Lucy, *A Diary of the Salisbury Parliament, 1886-1892* (London, Paris and Melbourne: 1892), 229.

is thus to provide direct evidence as to the contemporary usage of the sobriquet 'God's Only Mistake'. In doing so, it amplifies the argument of those scholars who have contended that the Disraelian origins of this alternative meaning of 'G.O.M.' are dubious.

Victorians were quite fond of nicknames, especially political nicknames.¹⁰ Gladstone was a man of many. At Eton he was known by the name of 'Mr Tipple'.¹¹ Later in his public life he became 'the people's William'.¹² Others called him 'Napoleon of Oratory' or 'Etonian'.¹³ Following his refusal of a peerage, he became known as 'the Great Commoner', and because of his mission to rescue and reform prostitutes as 'Old Glad Eye(s)'.¹⁴ In

(London, 1999), 382. See also, K. Rose, *The Later Cecil* (New York, NY, 1975), 34; P. Brendon, *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire 1781-1997* (London, 2008), 194; D.R. Thorpe, *The Uncrowned Prime Ministers* (London, 1990), 25; D.R. Thorpe, *Supermac: The Life of Harold Macmillan* (London, 2010), 657, n. 2; R. Harris, *The Conservatives: A History* (London, 2011), 191; J. Browne, *The Prime Ministers: Stories and Anecdotes from Number 10*, ed. W.D. Home (London: 1987), 159; and A.N. Wilson, *Victoria: A Life* (New York, NY, 2014), 452-3.

¹⁰ W.G. Black, 'Political Nicknames: Chamberlain and Bülow', *Notes & Queries*, s9-ix/219 (8 Mar. 1902), 186; 'Nicknames', *All the Year Round*, 2/47 (23 Nov. 1889), 490-3. Lord Brougham was known as 'Beelzebub', Lord Bexley as 'Mouldy', Bishop Samuel Wilberforce as 'Soapy Sam', Disraeli as 'Dizzy', Lord Randolph Churchill as 'Randy', and Henry Labouchere as 'Labby': George Joachim Goschen, *Lord Goschen and his Friends (The Goschen Letters)*, ed. P. Colson (London and New York, NY: 1946), 22. Disraeli, as A.S. Wohl notes, was also known as 'Dizzi-Ben-Dizzi', 'Ben-Dizzy the Bold', 'Ben Ju ju', and 'Ben Sad Hasch', among other nicknames: "'Dizzi-Ben-Dizzi": Disraeli as Alien', *Journal of British Studies*, xxxiv/4 (1995), 375 n. 1, 396. There are many other examples. Sir William Harcourt was known as 'Historicus'; Chamberlain was called 'Pinchbeck Robespierre' by Lord Randolph Churchill; Lord Randolph was called an 'Old Woman in a bonnet' by Chamberlain; Lord John Russell was known as 'Finality John' and 'The Lycurgus of the Lower House'; Lord Brougham was described as 'Blundering Brougham' and 'Foaming Fudge'; and Sir Robert Peel as 'Orange Peel': 'Nicknames of Statesmen', *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, 78/14269 (2 Aug. 1902), [1].

¹¹ Alfred F. Robbins, *The Early Public Life of William Ewart Gladstone Four Times Prime Minister* (New York, NY, 1894), 66. He also wrote under the *nom de plume* of 'Bartholemey Bauverie' for the *Eton Miscellany*: 'Character Sketch: May. Mr. Gladstone.—Part II', *Review of Reviews*, v/29 (May 1892), 461.

¹² D.W. Bebbington, *William Ewart Gladstone: Faith & Politics in Victorian Britain* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1993), 95; Lucy, *A Diary*, 229.

¹³ Fannie Pamelee Deane, *Nicknames and Pseudonyms of Prominent People* (New Philadelphia, OH, 1897), 28, 70; Charles H. Jones, *A Short Life of William Ewart Gladstone, with Extracts from his Speeches and Writings* (New York, NY, 1880), 248.

¹⁴ Rees and Noble, *Who's Who of Nicknames*, 71

Edward Robert Bulwer Lytton's 1885 poem 'Glenaveril; or the Metamorphoses', Gladstone is referred to as 'Grandaevus'.¹⁵ In an address to the electors of South Paddington in June 1886, Lord Randolph Churchill described Gladstone as 'an old man in a hurry' when discussing his Irish policy.¹⁶ In Anthony Trollope's novels Gladstone was 'Mr. Gresham'.¹⁷ But the most common and widely used nickname was 'Grand Old Man' or 'G.O.M.'. Though Victorians knew what the acronym actually stood for, this did not stop them from 'reading' it in their own unique and inventive ways, often applying wit and sometimes criticism. Queen Victoria cited it in full with an air of irony in an 1883 letter to the German Crown Princess: 'I share your anxiety about politics in general and especially with such a very dangerous unaccountable man as the "Grand Old Man" is, as our Premier.'¹⁸ Following the Mahdi-led revolt in Sudan in 1885 which led to the death of General Charles George Gordon—an event for which Gladstone and his government were deemed responsible—'[t]he historical letters G. O. M.', according to the entry in the diary of Sir Edward Walter Hamilton, 'are distorted into representing "Gordon's Only Murderer".'¹⁹ The reversed acronym 'M.O.G.' ('Murderer of Gordon') was used in music halls, with one popular refrain condemning Gladstone running: 'The M.O.G., when his life ebbs out/Will ride in a fiery chariot/And sit in state/On a red-hot plate/Between Pilate and Judas Iscariot.'²⁰ For the author of a caustic article in *Macmillan's Magazine* of February 1886, 'G.O.M.' meant

¹⁵ Edward Robert Bulwer Lytton, Earl of Lytton, *Glenaveril; or, the Metamorphoses, Vol. 1* (London, 1885), 72; Albert R. Frey, *Sobriquets and Nicknames* (Boston, MA and New York, NY, 1887), 140.

¹⁶ 'Lord Randolph Churchill's Address', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 6634 (21 June 1886), 11. Cartoonists had a field day following Lord Randolph Churchill's address: 'Mr. Gladstone's Personally-Conducted Tour', *Fun*, xliii/1103 (30 June 1886), [291].

¹⁷ Frey, *Sobriquets*, 146.

¹⁸ Queen Victoria, *Beloved Mama: Private Correspondence of Queen Victoria and the German Crown Princess 1878-1885*, ed. R. Fulford (London: 1981), 148.

¹⁹ Edward Walter Hamilton, *The Diary of Sir Edward Walter Hamilton 1880-1885, Vol. 2: 1883-1885*, ed. D.W.R. Bahlman (Oxford: 1972), 797. One of Gladstone's biographers notes that the letters of the acronym were sometimes reversed into 'M.O. G.', meaning 'Murderer of Gordon': H.C.G. Matthew, *Gladstone 1809-1898* (Oxford, 2001), 400. See also, R. Aldous, *The Lion and the Unicorn: Gladstone vs Disraeli* (London, 2007).

²⁰ Quoted in P. Magnus, *Gladstone: A Biography* (London, 1968), 322.

'*Gladstonio Optimo Maximo*'.²¹ A year later, Gerard Manley Hopkins referred to Gladstone in private as 'the Grand Old Mischief-maker' in the context of the Home Rule debates.²²

Perhaps the most common 'misreading' of 'G. O.M.' was 'God's Only Mistake'. Although this is relatively well-known, those historians who cite this phrase do not bother to provide any evidence regarding its contemporary usage. Most of them take this as a given 'fact' not meriting any verification from the historical record whatsoever, whilst often making the assumption that Disraeli coined it. At the same time, major biographies of Gladstone and other relevant scholarly studies make no mention of this alternative interpretation of 'G.O.M.' at all—possibly due to the fact that no evidence was found. But the evidence certainly exists. One of the earliest references to this alternative meaning of 'G.O.M.' appeared in *St Stephen's Review* of 1887. This illustrated London journal was published between 1883 and 1892 and catered to a Conservative readership. It claimed to have 'the largest circulation of any weekly Conservative Illustrated Paper in the United Kingdom, India or the Colonies.'²³ 'Toryism is its key-note', announced the preface to its first issue, and 'there will be a steady endeavour by light handling to promote the national cause of Toryism'—though it also reassured readers that 'Mr. Gladstone will not be represented as an incarnate fiend'.²⁴ In the 'Private and Confidential' column of the journal's issue of 9 July 1887, the author—'a live lord' writing from '999, St. James's Place'—offers some observations after attending the Henley regatta a few days earlier. This short piece was defined by an air of sarcasm while carrying some overtly racist remarks about foreign (possibly Indian) visitors to the regatta.²⁵ Its concluding line reads: 'As, however, it is the only good thing I ever heard given out by a burnt-cork

performer, I may put on record here Squash's new reading of the awful initials "G.O.M." "God's Only Mistake" he calls it.'²⁶ Though this statement raises more questions than it answers, it suggests that the alternative meaning of 'G.O.M.' was already known in Conservative circles by this time. It is also noteworthy that the anonymous author chose the words 'new reading', so this could indicate that 'God's Only Mistake' was a recently-coined phrase. By the early 1890s it seems that it became more widely disseminated amongst Gladstone's opponents. On 20 August 1893, during the second year of his fourth ministry (1892–4), his private secretary Sir Algernon Edward West noted in his diaries that as the debate on the Budget was taking place in the House of Commons, an unidentified person whose name began with 'A' and was sitting in the galleries on the government's side, began shouting: "God's Only Mistake—the G.O.M."²⁷ After relating an ensuing heated exchange between this person and a 'mild Liberal', West noted his disapproval at this person's behaviour: 'What good manners!'²⁸ The following month, the poet Francis Joseph Thompson reported in a letter to Alice Meynell that he met the Catholic Archbishop William Benedict Scarisbrick. Scarisbrick, Thompson explained, rivalled the poet and literary critic Coventry Patmore 'in his hatred of Gladstone', and when he entered a house and saw a portrait of the premier, 'he turned its face to the wall', saying 'G.O.M. [...] stands for "God's only Mistake".'²⁹ In early 1894 the London-published periodical *The Speaker* reported that on one evening in the previous parliamentary session during the Home Rule debates, 'a tipsy Tory [...] persistently assailed Mr. G. with cries of "God's only mistake! God's only mistake!"—this being the foolish Tory rendering of the letters G.O.M.'³⁰ This confirms the Tory roots of the alternative reading of these

²¹ [Andrew Lang], 'The Great Gladstone Myth', *Macmillan's Magazine*, liii/316 (Feb. 1886), 244.

²² Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Collected Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins, Vol 2: Correspondence 1882-1889*, ed. R.K.R. Thornton and C. Phillips (Oxford, 2013), 889.

²³ *The Publisher's Circular and General Record of British and Foreign Literature. Containing a Complete Alphabetical List of all New Works Published in Great Britain and Every Work of Interest Published Abroad, Vol. LI* (London, 1888), 1711.

²⁴ William Allison, 'To All and Sundry', *St Stephen's Review*, 1 (17 Mar. 1883), 5.

²⁵ Indian princes attended the regatta in 1887: 'Royal visit to Henley', *Illustrated London News*, XCI/2516 (9 July 1887), 46.

²⁶ 'Private and Confidential. By a Live Lord', *St Stephen's Review*, 226 (9 July 1887), 20.

²⁷ Algernon Edward West, *Private Diaries of the Rt. Hon. Sir Algernon West, G.C.B.*, ed. H.G. Hutchinson (London: 1922), 191.

²⁸ Algernon Edward West, *Private Diaries of the Rt. Hon. Sir Algernon West, G.C.B.*, ed. H.G. Hutchinson (London: 1922), 191.

²⁹ Francis Joseph Thompson, *The Letters of Francis Thompson*, ed. J.E. Walsh (New York, NY: 1969), 103.

³⁰ 'This Morning's Paper. By a Mere Outsider', *The Speaker: A Review of Politics, Letters, Science, and the Arts*, ix (20 Jan. 1894), 69.

initials. However, no reference was made to Disraeli being its originator. A few months earlier, an American man writing from Cambridge giving his impressions of that university town to readers of *The Round Table*, the organ of students, alumni, and friends of Beloit College in Wisconsin, noted the following:

The name of Mr. Gladstone brings me to a remarkable fact in English opinion—the intense and pervasive hatred of the great liberal leader by the upper and upper-middle classes in society. The Conservative Club’s grim interpretation of ‘G.O.M.’ as ‘God’s Only Mistake’ is quite typical of the attitude of the classes towards their great Premier.³¹

That a foreigner picked this up suggests how widespread this alternative meaning of ‘G.O.M.’ was. Equally significant is his observation that it primarily stemmed from the Conservative Club at 74 St James’s St. This is confirmed by other American newspapers and periodicals, with many commentators finding the phrase highly inappropriate and distasteful.³² News about the use of this alternative meaning of ‘G.O.M.’ also reached Australia, with one newspaper conjecturing that this definition was the product of ‘a modern satirist’.³³ Following Gladstone’s death in 1898, the New York *Literary Digest* noted that Gladstone’s

opponents were ‘fond of translating’ ‘G.O.M.’ into ‘God’s Only Mistake’.³⁴ Bemoaning the fact that Gladstone was ‘a mark for obloquy of the basest and vilest sort’, another New York magazine catering to women added this phrase to the list of terms his opponents used against him.³⁵

Based on the above evidence we can make the following conclusions. First, it seems that the phrase ‘God’s Only Mistake’ began to circulate amongst Gladstone’s critics and opponents in the late 1880s. Second, it is unlikely that Disraeli was its originator since he died in 1881. Indeed, there is no indication in any of the sources examined here that Disraeli coined the phrase. On the other hand, there seems to have been a consensus that the phrase was well-known and shared in London’s Conservative clubs and amongst Gladstone’s detractors and opponents more widely. Though tentative, the findings of this note will undoubtedly be of interest to Gladstone scholars, as well as to all those working on Victorian political culture.

PETROS SPANOU 

University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

<https://doi.org/10.1093/notesj/gjag041>

© The Author(s) (2026). Published by Oxford University Press. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted reuse, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

³² ‘That “G.O.M.” stands for “God’s Only Mistake” is one of the grim jokes of the Conservative clubs, and old ladies will avow their willingness to walk miles with peas in their shoes to see him hanged’: ‘Politics and Society in England’, *The Nation: A Weekly Journal Devoted to Politics, Literature, Science & Art*, lvii/1474 (New York, NY, 28 Sept. 1893), 223. See also, ‘Gladstone’s Position’, *Morning Oregonian*, xxxiii/10689 (Portland, OR, 3 Oct. 1893), 4. The American journalist F.B. Sanborn wrote from London quoting the phrase ‘God’s Only Mistake’ ‘merely to show the thousand ways (for there are 999 others) in which Englishmen of “of property and standing,” as we used to say in Boston, allow themselves to insult the most distinguished person now living in their little island’: ‘The Breakfast Table’, *Boston Daily Advertiser*, 162/5 (Boston, MA, 6 July 1893), 4.

³³ ‘Saturday, August 20, 1892’, *Warwick Angus*, XXVII/2134 (20 Aug. 1892) 2, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/76640682> (accessed 30 Aug. 2025).

³⁴ ‘Miscellaneous. Some Characteristic Anecdotes about Mr. Gladstone’, *The Literary Digest*, XVI/22 (New York, NY, 28 May 1898), 656. See also, ‘Obituary. William E. Gladstone’, *Werner’s Magazine*, XXI/4 (New York, NY, June 1898), 400.

³⁵ ‘Among Ourselves’, *The Designer*, VIII/4 (New York, NY, Aug. 1898), 61.

³¹ Horace S. Fiske, ‘Impressions of a University Town’, *The Round Table*, xl/5 (29 Nov. 1893), 63.

© The Author(s) (2026). Published by Oxford University Press.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted reuse, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Notes and Queries, 2026, 00, 1–4

<https://doi.org/10.1093/notesj/gjag041>

Note