

## M. E. Grant Duff, Philosophic Liberalism and the Global Liberal Cause

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### Abstract

Historians disagree about how best to conceptualize nineteenth-century British Liberalism in relation to its international contexts. This article argues that we can better understand the patterns involved by interrogating individuals who bridged the worlds of partisan politics and elaborated thought. The article centres around Mountstuart Elphinstone Grant Duff (1829–1906), whom it identifies as the Liberal parliamentary party's most ambitious interpreter of global and imperial order in the 1860s and 1870s. It suggests that Grant Duff's highly intellectualized and internationally minded 'philosophic Liberalism' was aimed at energizing the fractious Gladstonian coalition, and at helping Liberals see themselves as part of a global progressive tide, running against the false and losing cause of Conservatism. The article contends that Grant Duff's case opens up new questions about how British Liberals situated themselves in relation to counterpart foreign liberalisms, as well as having wider methodological implications for the study of nineteenth-century international thought.

Nineteenth-century British Liberals did not always agree what Liberalism was, or what it was for. It is an underrated feature of their disputes that the career of Liberalism in Britain was often understood in relation to a global Liberal cause. This article approaches the problem of the interfaces between British Liberalism and its international contexts through a study of the cosmopolitan intellectual-in-politics M. E. Grant Duff, who insisted that Liberalism was a global phenomenon and took a detailed interest in its progress in foreign countries. Grant Duff argued that the international struggle for liberty, self-government and the rule of law was (or ought to be) central to British Liberal identity. As well as contributing to the ongoing project of recovering nineteenth-century Britain's competing Liberal traditions, the article raises new questions about how British Liberals situated themselves in relation to foreign Liberalisms.

British Liberalism in the age of Gladstone is now well served by a historiography that has come to insist on treating it as a complex and even contradictory amalgam of ideas, beliefs, and political strategies.<sup>1</sup> There is no shortage of scholarship asserting that the phenomenon must be studied in its international and imperial contexts. But there has been little shared enterprise between political historians and intellectual historians in advancing that argument.<sup>2</sup> Existing work in political history

The author would like to thank the reviewers for their comments, and Henry Miller and Jon Parry for their encouragement.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. J. P. Parry, 'Religion and the collapse of Gladstone's first government, 1870–1874', *Historical Journal*, 25/1 (1982), pp. 71–101, at p. 71.

<sup>2</sup> For the wider historiographical and methodological issues, see David Craig, 'Political ideas and languages', in David Brown, Robert Crowcroft and Gordon Pentland (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Modern British Political History, 1800–2000* (Oxford, 2018), pp. 13–31. Certain older studies can however be read as bringing political and intellectual approaches to the subject into productive, albeit tacit, dialogue: e.g. Richard Koebner and Helmut Dan Schmidt,

aims to capture patterns of international ideas among the political classes, and to relate them to the making of foreign and imperial policy, or otherwise to partisan tactics.<sup>3</sup> Studies from the field of intellectual history that tackle ideas about empire and international relations abstract themselves from everyday domestic political battles, prioritizing ‘armchair’ thinkers who were at least semi-detached from the institutional Liberal Party.<sup>4</sup> For many purposes, it is obviously necessary to preserve the distinction between these sub-disciplinary approaches.<sup>5</sup> But as newer work that systematically examines the languages of party and political ideology has shown, nineteenth-century actors did not perceive Liberalism (as a party-political force) and liberalism (as an intellectual tradition) as conveniently distinct entities.<sup>6</sup> Most such work so far has dealt with broad discursive patterns, but if we want to understand how contemporaries fitted these overlapping phenomena together – and, in turn, how historians might do so more persuasively – we also need to give sustained consideration to politicians who stood in close contact with the worlds of systematic thought.<sup>7</sup> Studying such figures can help us to grasp the links between domestic, international and imperial issues in visions of party and political ideology, and to draw out the more specific pressures which informed interpretations of global ‘L/liberalism’ (in either of its primary senses), as well as pinpointing the transnational connections that shaped Gladstonian-era ideas.<sup>8</sup> The results of attempting this new angle of approach suggest that historians can benefit significantly from reintegrating reflective politicians into their visions of Victorian international thought.

The article approaches these larger problems through the lens of the Liberal MP, sometime government minister, Indian governor and prolific public moralist, Mountstuart Elphinstone Grant Duff.<sup>9</sup> Though not part of the modern pantheon of eminent Victorians, Grant Duff held a prominent and distinctive position in

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*Imperialism: The Story and Significance of a Political Word* (Cambridge, 1964); P. J. Durrans, ‘A two-edged sword: The Liberal attack on Disraelian imperialism’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 10/3 (1982), pp. 262–84; Marvin Swartz, *The Politics of Foreign Policy in the Era of Disraeli and Gladstone* (New York, 1985).

<sup>3</sup> For example, Jonathan Parry, *The Politics of Patriotism: English Liberalism, National Identity, and Europe, 1830–1886* (Cambridge, 2006); Angus Hawkins, ‘British parliamentary party alignment and the Indian Issue, 1857–1858’, *Journal of British Studies*, 23/2 (1984), pp. 79–105; Geoffrey Hicks, ‘Don Pacifico, democracy, and danger: The Protectionist party critique of British foreign policy, 1850–1852’, *International History Review*, 26/3 (2004), pp. 515–40. For the wider literature, see Alex Middleton, ‘Victorian politics and politics overseas’, *Historical Journal*, 64/5 (2021), pp. 1449–76.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France* (Princeton, 2006); David Armitage, *Foundations of Modern International Thought* (Cambridge, 2013); Duncan Bell, *Reordering the World: Essays on Liberalism and Empire* (Princeton, 2016); Casper Sylvest, *British Liberal Internationalism, 1880–1920: Making Progress?* (Manchester, 2009); Amanda Behm, *Imperial History and the Global Politics of Exclusion: Britain, 1880–1940* (London, 2018). For earlier literature, see Duncan Bell, ‘Empire and international relations in Victorian political thought’, *Historical Journal*, 49/1 (2006), pp. 281–98; Jennifer Pitts, ‘Political Theory of Empire and Imperialism’, *Annual Review of Political Science*, 13 (2010), pp. 211–35.

<sup>5</sup> For another way past this distinction, see Faridah Zaman, ‘The abstraction of sovereignty: The Ottoman Empire in early twentieth-century Socialist thought’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 34/1 (2023), pp. 60–97.

<sup>6</sup> For the pioneering study of the language of ‘liberal’ parties and ideologies in nineteenth-century Britain, see David Craig, ‘The language of liberality in Britain, c. 1760–c. 1815’, *Modern Intellectual History*, 16/3 (2019), pp. 771–801; David Craig, ‘Tories and the language of liberalism in the 1820s’, *English Historical Review*, 135/576 (2020), pp. 1195–228. For languages of ‘C/conservatism’, see Emily Jones, *Edmund Burke and the Invention of Modern Conservatism, 1830–1914: An Intellectual History* (Oxford, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> For a complementary argument about the relations between political history and intellectual history, see David Craig and James Thompson, ‘Introduction’, in David Craig and James Thompson (eds), *Languages of Politics in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Basingstoke, 2013), pp. 1–20.

<sup>8</sup> Existing work on intellectuals-in-politics in nineteenth-century Britain says relatively little about international affairs: e.g., Joseph Hamburger, *Intellectuals in Politics: John Stuart Mill and the Philosophic Radicals* (New Haven, 1965); William Thomas, *The Philosophic Radicals: Nine Studies in Theory and Practice, 1817–1841* (Oxford, 1979), though note ch. 8.

<sup>9</sup> For the category ‘public moralist’, see Stefan Collini, *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain, 1850–1930* (Oxford, 1991).

the world of later-nineteenth-century international political argument. Canonical contemporaries certainly recognized him as an authority. Walter Bagehot's *The English Constitution* referred to Grant Duff, in relation to questions about politics overseas, as 'the most accurate and philosophical of our describers', while John Stuart Mill deferred in correspondence to his 'extensive knowledge of continental affairs'.<sup>10</sup> Lord Stanley, the Conservative Foreign Secretary, wrote to him in 1868 that he was the only English politician who had attempted a 'systematic and thorough' examination of foreign countries.<sup>11</sup> It was later reported that when someone put to Gladstone that Grant Duff's grip of international developments might qualify him to be a Foreign Office minister, the Prime Minister responded in dismissing the suggestion that '[h]e knows too much'.<sup>12</sup> But while there has been some work on Grant Duff's Indian career, the few historians of British politics who have noticed him do so only incidentally, while he features at best as a passing reference in intellectual-historical scholarship and histories of international thought.<sup>13</sup> His chief historiographical celebrity is as a high-society diarist.<sup>14</sup>

Recovering Grant Duff's vision of politics helps us interpret the architecture and paradoxes of Liberal political thinking and suggests new ways of conceptualizing the structural relations between nineteenth-century liberalism and international thought. Grant Duff married a theoretically grounded 'philosophic Liberalism', rooted in the primacy of knowledge and enlightenment in fostering social progress, with a modified version of peace-seeking Cobdenism, which permitted resolute support for (certain kinds of) British imperial rule. These doctrines were attached to concepts of 'Liberalism' and the 'Liberal Party' that were inextricable from international comparisons and global prognostications. But unlike most of the historians, jurists, political philosophers and reviewers who dominate studies of modern international thought, Grant Duff was an unashamed partisan, determined to advance the interests of the Liberal Party, and to seize rhetorical ground from the Conservatives. His writings and speeches on politics overseas underline how Victorian international theories could serve partisan political purposes, offering suggestive glimpses into what Grant Duff called 'the debateable [sic] land between the men of thought and the men of action', as it affected the formulation and communication of visions of

<sup>10</sup> Walter Bagehot, *The English Constitution* (London, 1867), p. 232; John Stuart Mill to M. E. Grant Duff, 4 Feb. 1868, in John M. Robson et al. (eds), *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill* (Toronto and London, 1963–1991, 33 vols), XXXII, p. 187. For Mill's international thought, see Georgios Varouxakis, *Liberty Abroad: J. S. Mill on International Relations* (Cambridge, 2013); and Georgios Varouxakis, *Mill on Nationality* (London, 2002). Leslie Stephen also thought Grant Duff 'most competent': Leslie Stephen, *Studies of a Biographer: Volume III* (London, 1902), p. 155.

<sup>11</sup> Henry Miller, 'GRANT DUFF, Mountstuart Elphinstone (1829–1906), of Eden, Aberdeenshire', *History of Parliament* online, <https://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1832-1868/member/grant-duff-mountstuart-elphinstone-1829-1906> (last accessed 25 September 2025).

<sup>12</sup> Anne Fremantle, *Three-Cornered Heart* (New York, 1971), pp. 34–5.

<sup>13</sup> Anthony Howe cites him as an 'archetypal secular' free trader in *Free Trade and Liberal England, 1846–1946* (Oxford, 1997), p. 93 n. 22, p. 120; he lurks at the edges of Christopher Harvie, *The Lights of Liberalism: University Liberals and the Challenge of Democracy, 1860–86* (London, 1976); he appears as a 'whig-liberal' who placed particular emphasis on the role of intellect in politics in J. P. Parry, *Democracy and Religion: Gladstone and the Liberal Party, 1868–1875* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 30, 77; and as an expositor of Liberal views on foreign affairs in Parry, *Politics of Patriotism*. Georgios Varouxakis notes in passing, via Mill, that Grant Duff was renowned among contemporaries for his 'most remarkable expertise in foreign affairs': Varouxakis, *Liberty Abroad*, p. 6. For Grant Duff's Indian career, see S. Gopal, *The Viceroyalty of Lord Ripon, 1880–1884* (Oxford, 1953); J. L. Duthie, 'Pressure from within: The 'forward' group in the India Office during Gladstone's first ministry', *Journal of Asian History* 15/1 (1981), pp. 36–71. See also, on his milieu, William C. Lubenow, *Secular Foundations of the Liberal State in Victorian Britain* (Woodbridge, 2024), esp. pp. 196–205.

<sup>14</sup> Accessed most digestibly via A. Tilney Bassett (ed.), *A Victorian Vintage: Being a Selection of the Best Stories from the Diaries of the Right Hon. Sir Mountstuart E. Grant Duff* (London, 1930).

global order.<sup>15</sup> His case also helps to expose the transnational social and intellectual contexts that shaped late Victorian political argument. Grant Duff's multilingual study, his travels and his European acquaintance saw him recognized in his own time as a 'true citizen of the world'.<sup>16</sup> He considered it his responsibility to use this exposure to currents of foreign political thinking to educate Britain's 'crowned democracy' about its duties towards the globe.<sup>17</sup> In pursuit of these points, following a rapid survey of Grant Duff's career, the article first examines the elements of his 'philosophic liberalism', before exploring its application to international and imperial affairs, respectively.

### Grant Duff's career

Grant Duff inherited an interest in the world beyond Britain.<sup>18</sup> His father, James Cuninghame Grant Duff, was an East India Company army officer who administered the state of Sattara, and later wrote a *History of the Mahrattas*.<sup>19</sup> M. E. was named for Mountstuart Elphinstone, a noted governor of Bombay. Born in Aberdeenshire in 1829, M. E. was educated in Scotland, then Balliol College, Oxford. After an interlude in the law, which included teaching at F. D. Maurice's Working Men's College and writing for the *Saturday Review*, he was elected in 1857 as Liberal MP for the Elgin Burghs. He held the seat until his appointment as Governor of Madras in 1881. Grant Duff was Under-Secretary for India in Gladstone's 1868–74 government, and Under-Secretary for the Colonies under the reinstated premier in 1880–1. His disgust at Gladstone's conversion to Home Rule ended his political career on his return from India in 1886. His distinctions included the Lord Rectorship of the University of Aberdeen, presidencies of the Royal Historical and Geographical Societies, the headship of sections at the British Association and the Social Science Association, and the chairmanship of the Liberty and Property Defence League, plus a knighthood in 1881. Numerous club memberships helped build the extraordinary social network detailed in Grant Duff's diaries, which included virtually every person of note in contemporary British politics and letters.<sup>20</sup> He was particularly close to the politically minded intellectuals James Fitzjames Stephen, Walter Bagehot, W. R. Greg and Henry Maine, all of whom shared and amplified the conservative elements of Grant Duff's Liberalism.<sup>21</sup> He died in 1906.

<sup>15</sup> Mountstuart E. Grant Duff, 'Presidential address, on opening the Section of Economic Science and Statistics', in his *Miscellanies, Political and Literary* (London, 1878), p. 1.

<sup>16</sup> T. H. S. Escott (ed.), *Pillars of the Empire: Sketches of Living Indian and Colonial Statesmen, Celebrities, and Officials* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1879), p. 59.

<sup>17</sup> Mountstuart E. Grant Duff, *Foreign Policy* (London, 1880), p. 5.

<sup>18</sup> For his life, see H. C. G. Matthew, 'Duff, Sir Mountstuart Elphinstone Grant', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2008); Mrs. Huth Jackson, 'Biographical memoir', in Tilney Bassett (ed.), *Victorian Vintage*, pp. v–xv; Miller, 'GRANT DUFF'.

<sup>19</sup> James Grant Duff, *History of the Mahrattas* (London, 1826. 3 vols). See also A. R. Kulkarni, 'Grant Duff and the Sattara case', *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 30 (1968), pp. 246–51.

<sup>20</sup> Sir Mountstuart E. Grant Duff, *Notes from a Diary, 1851–1872* (London, 1897. 2 vols); Sir Mountstuart E. Grant Duff, *Notes from a Diary, 1873–1881* (London, 1898. 2 vols); and later volumes. The published diaries avoid political matter. See also the starry list of attendees at Grant Duff's farewell dinner before he left for Madras: *Times*, 4 August 1881, p. 10; and the account of his sociability offered by his granddaughter, Fremantle, *Three-Cornered Heart*, chs 1–2.

<sup>21</sup> Stephen associated his own Liberalism with that of Grant Duff: Tom Dunne, 'La trahison des clercs: British intellectuals and the first home-rule crisis', *Irish Historical Studies*, 23/90 (1982), pp. 134–73, at p. 151. On this relationship, see Leslie Stephen, *The Life of Sir James Fitzjames Stephen* (London, 1895); K. J. M. Smith, *James Fitzjames Stephen: Portrait of a Victorian Rationalist* (Cambridge, 1988). For Greg's conservative Liberalism see Alex Middleton, 'William Rathbone Greg, scientific Liberalism, and the Second Empire', *Modern Intellectual History*, 19/3 (2022), pp. 681–707.

Grant Duff's parliamentary career was not a conventional success. Contemporary estimates deemed him too philosophical, subtle and erudite for the Commons, an arena in which overt intellectualism militated against promotion.<sup>22</sup> Grant Duff's reputation rested instead on extra-mural labours. He became a prominent public speaker, with the vast majority of his speeches focusing on foreign and imperial affairs.<sup>23</sup> His addresses to his Elgin constituents became one of the events of the parliamentary recess, reported across the country.<sup>24</sup> The *Saturday Review* reflected that unlike the boilerplate of most MPs' speeches, Grant Duff's were 'meant as a real contribution towards political education'.<sup>25</sup> In 1879, another observer noted that they had earned him a 'European reputation' as an expositor of international affairs to the British.<sup>26</sup>

Grant Duff burnished that reputation with his writings. These included a set of *Studies in European Politics* (1867); the world-spanning *A Political Survey* (1868); a volume of *Elgin Speeches* (1871); a set of *Miscellanies* (1878); dozens of articles in periodicals, including the *Edinburgh Review*, the *North British Review*, the *Fortnightly Review*, the *Contemporary Review* and the *Nineteenth Century*; and numerous pamphlets, memoirs, prefaces and addresses.<sup>27</sup> His inquiries extended, at different stages, to nearly every independent country on the globe. All this earned him wide contemporary recognition as a 'philosophic politician'.<sup>28</sup> For the *Spectator*, Grant Duff provided an 'intellectual treble accompaniment to the deeper-toned Liberal thought of the country', and for the *Saturday Review*, he was a conspicuous specimen of 'the enlightened member who unconsciously transposes popular sentiment into a different key'.<sup>29</sup> In 1867, another newspaper evaluated him as 'the most prominent specimen of the intellectual... Liberal that we have to show'.<sup>30</sup> He occupied a distinctive space in politics.

<sup>22</sup> *Times*, 13 January 1906, p. 17; 'Mr Grant Duff and the Elgin Burghs', *Dundee Courier*, 30 June 1881, p. 2; Sir J. G. Tollemache Sinclair, *A Glance at the House of Commons: A Lecture* (Wick, 1872), p. 18; *Illustrated London News*, 19 September 1863, p. 295; Escott (ed.), *Pillars of the Empire*, pp. 56–7. For the structural barriers to political advancement imposed by being too clever for the Commons see Michael Bentley, 'Party, doctrine, and thought', in Michael Bentley and John Stevenson (eds), *High and Low Politics in Modern Britain* (Oxford, 1983), pp. 123–53.

<sup>23</sup> Two-thirds of the volume he edited summarizing his political opinions in 1884 dealt with foreign and imperial questions: Mountstuart E. Grant Duff, *Some Brief Comments on Passing Events* (Madras, 1884).

<sup>24</sup> For their notoriety see, e.g., George Bentinck, *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates, Third Series* (hereafter *HPD3*), 197:771, 29 June 1869; 'Mr E. Grant Duff at Aberdeen', [sic], *Dundee Courier*, 23 March 1867, p. 2. Reports of his 1872 speech, for instance, appear in the *Preston Chronicle*, 14 December 1872, p. 2; *Trewman's Exeter Flying Post*, 18 December 1872, p. 5; *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette*, 12 December 1872, p. 4; *Berrows Worcester Journal*, 14 December 1872, p. 6; *Birmingham Daily Post*, 11 December 1872, p. 5; *North Wales Chronicle*, 14 December 1872, p. 4; across Scotland, inc. *John O'Groats Journal*, 12 December 1872, p. 3; and elsewhere. For Grant Duff as a jumping-off point for commentary on foreign affairs, see, e.g., 'Mr. Grant Duff on foreign policy', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 21 December 1871, p. 1.

<sup>25</sup> 'Mr. Grant Duff at Peterhead', *Saturday Review*, 28 December 1867, p. 813.

<sup>26</sup> Escott (ed.), *Pillars of the Empire*, p. 59. For the wider culture of extra-parliamentary speaking in this period, see H. C. G. Matthew, 'Rhetoric and politics in Great Britain, 1860–1950', in P. J. Waller (ed.), *Politics and Social Change in Modern Britain: Essays Presented to A. F. Thompson* (Brighton, 1987), pp. 34–58.

<sup>27</sup> Mountstuart E. Grant Duff, *Studies in European Politics* (Edinburgh, 1866); Mountstuart E. Grant Duff, *A Political Survey* (Edinburgh, 1868); Mountstuart E. Grant Duff, *Elgin Speeches* (Edinburgh, 1871); Grant Duff, *Miscellanies*. Official promotions stalled both a planned second series of *Studies in European Politics*, and a half-completed book on colonial policy: Grant Duff, *Diary, 1851–1872*, I, p. xi; Grant Duff, *Brief Comments*, pp. 198–9. Grant Duff's periodical articles, where anonymous, have been identified using Walter E. Houghton (ed.), *The Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals, 1824–1900*, 5 vols (Toronto, 1966–1989, 5 vols).

<sup>28</sup> 'Men of mark. no. X. Mr. Grant Duff', *London Review*, 7 December 1867, pp. 617–19, at p. 618.

<sup>29</sup> 'Intellectual politicians', *Spectator*, 5 November 1864, pp. 1263–4; 'Mr. Grant Duff at Elgin', *Saturday Review*, 19 September 1863, p. 380.

<sup>30</sup> 'Mr E. Grant Duff at Aberdeen', *Dundee Courier*, 23 March 1867, p. 2. See also, for a later example of the same sentiment, 'Mr Grant Duff at home', *Edinburgh Evening News*, 28 April 1880, p. 2.

## Grant Duff and ‘philosophic Liberalism’

Grant Duff’s 1869 entry in the first series of *Vanity Fair* cartoons of ‘Statesmen’ framed him as ‘A philosophic liberal’.<sup>31</sup> The label might seem appropriate, but its implications are not immediately obvious. Historians are used to associating specific principles with early- and mid-nineteenth-century schools of ‘philosophic Whiggism’ and ‘philosophic Radicalism’.<sup>32</sup> But in relation to its ‘philosophic’ formulation and others, there remain yawning gaps in our understanding of nineteenth-century liberalism. Historians have only recently begun to examine how contemporaries deployed the language of ‘liberalism’ and its cognates, and to probe systematically what they thought the terms actually meant.<sup>33</sup> These are significant issues. If studies of ‘liberal’ international thought are to be rooted solidly in their historical contexts, historians must be precise about how their subjects understood that protean label.

In Britain, developed reflection by politicians on the identities of their own ‘liberalisms’ only became common in the 1880s, as a response to the Home Rule crisis, the rise of Idealism and collectivism and Conservative attempts to invent intellectual antecedents.<sup>34</sup> Grant Duff was unusually articulate – and confident – about the meaning of ‘liberalism’ decades earlier.<sup>35</sup> For him, as for most, it denoted a sensibility, and a general direction of travel. But for Grant Duff, the term also meant something more specific about intellect and philosophy in politics. In articulating this vision, he sought to intervene in wider debates about the direction of British ‘liberalism’ and the Gladstonian Liberal Party. The companion blurb to the *Vanity Fair* cartoon identified Grant Duff as a member of a coming school who treated the study of politics as a ‘judicious preliminary’ to a political career, and concluded that it was his willingness ‘to apply solemnly the test of first principles to political situations... that has earned for him the claim to the title of a philosophic liberal’.<sup>36</sup> This assessment neatly captures his starting point.

Grant Duff wrote in 1891 that it was ‘extremely difficult to define precisely what is meant by the word Liberalism’, since usages were unstable.<sup>37</sup> But his own understanding, rooted in what one *fin-de-siècle* commentator called ‘the old optimistic Liberalism’ of the 1850s and 1860s, remained consistent.<sup>38</sup> For Grant Duff, ‘Liberalism’ was always a doctrine of reform. It meant adapting institutions to the best reason of the age, in a timely manner, to prevent destructive upheavals. He argued that Liberals existed to channel and realize public desire for ‘higher and nobler national life, for nobler manners and purer laws’.<sup>39</sup> Their creed was distinct from Radicalism, ‘desiring to tear nothing up by the roots’.<sup>40</sup> But its antithesis was ‘Conservatism’, a politics about the defence of institutions with only history on their side.<sup>41</sup>

Grant Duff’s version of ‘Liberalism’, as we will see, predisposed him to certain ways of thinking about institutions and policies. It also aligned him with a particular

<sup>31</sup> ‘Statesman, no. 33. “A philosophic liberal”’, *Vanity Fair*, 2 Oct. 1869, p. 190.

<sup>32</sup> J. W. Burrow, *Whigs and Liberals: Continuity and Change in English Political Thought* (Oxford, 1988); Thomas, *Philosophic Radicals*.

<sup>33</sup> See above, n. 6.

<sup>34</sup> Jones, *Edmund Burke*.

<sup>35</sup> See John Vincent, *The Formation of the Liberal Party, 1857–1868* (London, 1966); Joseph Coohill, *Ideas of the Liberal Party: Perceptions, Agendas and Liberal Politics in the House of Commons, 1832–1852* (Oxford, 2011).

<sup>36</sup> ‘Statesman, no. 33. Mr. M. E. Grant-Duff, M.P.’, *Vanity Fair*, 2 October 1869.

<sup>37</sup> M. E. Grant Duff, in W. R. Greg, *Enigmas of Life* (London, 1891, 18th edn), p. lxxv.

<sup>38</sup> Wilfred Ward, ‘Sir M. E. Grant Duff’s “Notes from a Diary”’, *Dublin Review*, 124/29 (1899), pp. 25–35, at pp. 26, 29.

<sup>39</sup> ‘Mr. Grant Duff, M.P., on the position of the Liberal Party’, *Liverpool Mercury*, 12 August 1868, p. 6.

<sup>40</sup> Grant Duff in Greg, *Enigmas of Life*, p. lxxv.

<sup>41</sup> There were echoes of classical Utilitarianism in this formulation: cf. Callum Barrell, *History and Historiography in Classical Utilitarianism, 1860–1865* (Cambridge, 2021), p. 119.

wing of the parliamentary party. But it must be stressed here that as a politician who sought above all to assert the fundamental rectitude and inevitable triumph of his 'liberal' cause, Grant Duff was also prone to cherry-pick facts, to prioritize vague uplifting notions that appealed to broad constituencies, and to vary his arguments over time and according to his audiences. His schemes of politics, both domestic and international, operated within a different register from the more robustly theoretical ones most familiar to intellectual historians. 'Progress' was his principle, and Grant Duff did not think as hard about parliamentarism, or self-determination, or the nature of liberty, as programmatically inclined contemporaries.<sup>42</sup> His partisan role meant that the seams of his thought were more ragged than comparable systematic thinkers.

Grant Duff nonetheless grounded his 'philosophic Liberalism' within an intellectualized vision of how practical politics operated. He told his constituents in 1864 that the British Liberal Party existed 'to incorporate with our institutions and our life the results of enlightenment'. This 'enlightenment', he explained, flowed from a body of thinkers including John Locke, Adam Smith, Jeremy Bentham, John Austin and John Stuart Mill.<sup>43</sup> Elsewhere, he cited Alexis de Tocqueville, Edmund Burke, Matthew Arnold and Walter Bagehot as members of this pantheon.<sup>44</sup> For Grant Duff, it was the role of Liberal politicians and statesmen to follow in the wake of these 'men of thought', mobilizing public opinion to overcome vested interests and prejudices, and bringing national life into correspondence with their ideal standards.<sup>45</sup> 'Politics', done correctly, meant the judicious application of great authorities to the knotty realities of practical reform, to increase material prosperity and to diffuse sound instruction.<sup>46</sup>

That intellect should govern political action was cardinal for Grant Duff. He delighted in seeing the 'ideas of philosophic statesmen' pass into legislation in contemporary Belgium.<sup>47</sup> He called the philosopher-emperor Marcus Aurelius 'the noblest ruler that earth has ever seen'.<sup>48</sup> He even approved of Peking having adopted 'the common-sense rule that intellect and acquirement alone should give a man control in the affairs of State'.<sup>49</sup> He insisted that 'anti-intellect' was 'at the root of all our evils'.<sup>50</sup> It was for this reason that Grant Duff celebrated the election of John Stuart Mill as MP for Westminster in 1865 not just as 'the triumph of intellect over anti-intellect', but as 'a triumph of pure good over pure evil'.<sup>51</sup> Mill's presence in the Commons would allow his enlightened ideas to act among a broader constituency, making new schemes of legislation imaginable and possible.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>42</sup> cf. Gregory Conti, *Parliament the Mirror of the Nation: Representation, Deliberation, and Democracy in Britain* (Cambridge, 2019); William Selinger, *Parliamentarism: From Burke to Weber* (Cambridge, 2019).

<sup>43</sup> Grant Duff, *Elgin*, 59.

<sup>44</sup> Grant Duff in Greg, *Enigmas of Life*, p. lxxvii; Grant Duff, 'Speech on the political situation, 1868', in his *Miscellanies*, p. 312; Sir Mountstuart E. Grant Duff, *Out of the Past: Some Biographical Essays* (London, 1903, 2 vols), II, p. 79; M. E. Grant Duff, 'Walter Bagehot', *National Review*, 34 (1899), pp. 532–44.

<sup>45</sup> Grant Duff, *Elgin*, pp. 58–9, 100.

<sup>46</sup> For example, [M. E. Grant Duff], *Mr Grant Duff on the Teachings of Richard Cobden* (London, 1871), pp. 30–1; Grant Duff, *Elgin*, p. 200.

<sup>47</sup> Mountstuart E. Grant Duff, *A Glance over Europe* (Edinburgh, 1867), pp. 19–20.

<sup>48</sup> Mountstuart E. Grant Duff, *Inaugural Address Delivered to the University of Aberdeen on His Installation as Rector* (Edinburgh, 1867), p. 7.

<sup>49</sup> Grant Duff, *Survey*, p. 77.

<sup>50</sup> Grant Duff, *Elgin*, p. 97.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76. Grant Duff later reflected, however, that Mill had proven a 'pathetic figure' in the Commons, despite his 'seminal' influence on the mind of his generation: Sir Mountstuart E. Grant Duff, *Address to the Royal Historical Society* (Kingston-on-Thames, 1892), p. 9.

<sup>52</sup> Grant Duff, *Brief Comments*, pp. 328–30.

So, Grant Duff was self-consciously a student of political thought, and he identified himself with the ‘much abused class which investigates political questions in a scientific spirit’.<sup>53</sup> But he disdained doctrinaires whose theories were ‘born all-armed’, and who sought their realization in defiance of circumstance.<sup>54</sup> He was hostile, as a result, to figures like John Bright, who clung to an overly narrow creed ‘with a zeal worthy of the Catacombs’.<sup>55</sup> It was, appropriately, a more practically inclined ‘man of thought’ who was Grant Duff’s greatest hero: Richard Cobden.<sup>56</sup> Into the 1890s, Grant Duff continued to proclaim himself an ‘ardent Cobdenian’.<sup>57</sup> He cleaved to the ‘almost sacred’ cause of free trade, and the ‘hard and imperative’ laws of political economy.<sup>58</sup> But Grant Duff insisted that the implications of Cobden’s political vision had not been followed through, and that this had left Britain in an ‘illogical’ position.<sup>59</sup> He demanded repeatedly that the Liberal Party take up ‘the legacy which was left to the party as a whole by Mr. Cobden’, and claimed bafflement that any Liberal who studied Cobden’s works could disagree.<sup>60</sup> That legacy, Grant Duff asserted, embraced the reduction of indirect taxation and defence spending, and the elimination of remaining restrictions on trade, labour and land. Grant Duff stressed that Cobden’s body of doctrine was ‘not exempt from heresy’, and that he held erroneous views about foreign policy.<sup>61</sup> But he could never abandon the basic logics of free-trading Cobdenism, which lent the conservative constitutional elements of his liberalism a distinctive cast.<sup>62</sup>

Grant Duff’s ‘philosophic Liberalism’ harmonized with unflinching adherence to the parliamentary Liberal Party. He was a self-professed ‘decided party man’, and a member of ‘the rank and file of the Liberal phalanx’.<sup>63</sup> Famously, that phalanx did not always agree.<sup>64</sup> Grant Duff ranged himself rhetorically on the progressive wing of the party. He told his constituents that he wanted to be part of ‘a Liberal-Reforming-Movement party’, and under Lord Palmerston, he was openly frustrated with the government’s ‘rather negative than positive Liberalism’.<sup>65</sup> In the terms of modern scholarship, however, Grant Duff is better understood as a conservative Liberal.<sup>66</sup> He accepted the rise of democracy, but he did not share the Gladstonian faith that political wisdom could emerge from the combined impulses of masses of men, and he thought that Disraeli’s Second Reform Act had gone too far. He believed instead in the capacity of the masses to recognize the wisdom of the properly instructed few.<sup>67</sup> Such conservative-Liberal constitutional preferences could accompany a variety of attitudes towards ecclesiastical order, and where Fitzjames

<sup>53</sup> Mountstuart E. Grant Duff, *The Eastern Question: A Lecture* (Edinburgh, 1876), p. 50.

<sup>54</sup> Grant Duff, *HPD3*, 170:1327, 7 May 1863. See also Grant Duff, *Cobden*, p. 29.

<sup>55</sup> ‘A Scottish M.P.’ [M.E. Grant Duff], *A Few Words on France* (Reprinted from the *Saturday Review*, 1860), p. 28.

<sup>56</sup> As synthesized by Louis Mallet: Grant Duff, *Elgin*, p. 26n; Grant Duff, *Out of the Past*, I, p. 189.

<sup>57</sup> ‘Sir M.E. Grant Duff on questions of the day’, *Times*, 19 October 1892, p. 3.

<sup>58</sup> Grant Duff, *Elgin*, p. 13; Grant Duff, ‘Presidential Address’, *Miscellanies*, p. 3.

<sup>59</sup> Grant Duff, *Cobden*, p. 31.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>61</sup> Grant Duff, *Studies*, p. 373.

<sup>62</sup> See Howe, *Free Trade*.

<sup>63</sup> Grant Duff, ‘1847 and 1876’, in his *Miscellanies*, p. 115; Grant Duff, *HPD3*, 172:1391, 24 July 1863. See also his entries as a ‘Liberal’ in *Dod’s Parliamentary Companion* (London, 1859–81); on which publication see Joseph Coohill, ‘Parliamentary guides, political identity and the presentation of modern politics’, *Parliamentary History*, 22/3 (2003), pp. 263–84.

<sup>64</sup> Parry, *Democracy and Religion*.

<sup>65</sup> Grant Duff, *Elgin*, pp. 8, 64–5.

<sup>66</sup> Grant Duff’s daughter suggested that her father preferred Disraeli to Gladstone, but it is impossible to square this claim with his public statements: cf. Fremantle, *Three-Cornered Heart*, pp. 34–5; and the section on ‘Philosophic Liberalism and empire’ below. See also Miller, ‘GRANT DUFF’.

<sup>67</sup> Grant Duff, *Royal Historical Society*, p. 21. See also, on one of Grant Duff’s speeches, ‘England under working men’, *Spectator*, 12 January 1889, p. 41.

Stephen shared similar views with sympathy for the established Church, Grant Duff asserted that the state was ‘a community existing for temporal objects’, and that it had no right to show favour to any religion.<sup>68</sup> Grant Duff was scathing about churchmen who presumed to comment on politics, and saw voluntarism as the future.<sup>69</sup> His personal Christianity was undogmatic and rarely coloured his political language.<sup>70</sup> Grant Duff adopted the standard conservative Liberal position against Irish Home Rule, always arguing that separation was unimaginable and that insurrections should be put down unsentimentally.<sup>71</sup> He treated Gladstone’s proposals of 1886 as ‘ill-starred and criminal’, aligning the premier with ‘anarchic forces’.<sup>72</sup> Formed by the politics of the mid-Victorian era, Grant Duff had little time for the reinventions of the *fin-de-siècle*. He saw the ‘neo-Radicalism’ that had gathered force during his time in India as nothing to do with Liberalism, since it was ‘lineally descended’ from Rousseau.<sup>73</sup> Socialism, too, as it seemed to grow in influence during the 1890s, offered only ‘abominable follies’.<sup>74</sup>

Until the 1880s, however, Grant Duff was convinced that elementary political metaphysics guaranteed the progress of the Liberal Party’s cause. Liberal government, he insisted, was a natural condition for a country like Britain, ‘overflowing with energy’, and conscious that improvements in political machinery could liberate that energy.<sup>75</sup> Open discussion of great political questions in parliament and the press would always dispose the electorate to act wisely.<sup>76</sup> In this context, the advance of Liberal views was ‘like the advance of the tide over the low lines of rock in our bay’, and speaking in 1880, he declared that the Liberals ‘had a right to rule this country’.<sup>77</sup> His thought was anchored in the vindication of that right.

Grant Duff’s version of Liberalism drew extensive contemporary criticism. Conservatives attacked his claims that Liberals had a monopoly on practical reform and accused him of following Cobden too slavishly.<sup>78</sup> More telling, from political allies, were charges of unworldliness and unreality. He was faulted for lacking sympathy with the people he sought to guide and to improve – even his daughter agreed that he ‘did not care two straws about Humanity in the mass’.<sup>79</sup> He was particularly blamed for over-emphasizing the power of ideas. Grant Duff argued that enlightenment and civilization walked in lockstep with the diffusion of knowledge, and that moral and political iniquities could be eliminated by wider subscription to better theories. This fastidious focus on intellect left little room in his schemes for rising levels of practical wisdom, freedom, and moral training – fundamental issues for Liberals of other stripes, not least John Stuart Mill. Lord Acton thus remarked that Grant Duff was ‘not a very passionate votary of political freedom’ and that he might prefer a system of enlightened despotism to a nation of free

<sup>68</sup> Grant Duff, *HPD3*, 170:1327, 7 May 1863.

<sup>69</sup> ‘Mr Grant Duff on future legislation’, *Glasgow Herald*, 18 November 1868, p. 6; Grant Duff, *HPD3*, 221:1166, 3 August 1874; 171:1679, 29 June 1863.

<sup>70</sup> For his attraction to Tractarianism and Catholic devotion, see Huth Jackson, ‘Memoir’, pp. viii, x–xi.

<sup>71</sup> Grant Duff, *Glance*, p. 39. For this constellation of attitudes, see Parry, *Democracy and Religion*.

<sup>72</sup> ‘Sir M.E. Grant Duff on questions of the day’, *Times*, 19 October 1892, p. 3; Mountstuart E. Grant Duff, ‘After six years’, *Nineteenth Century*, 22/125 (1887), pp. 1–30, 9. See also Grant Duff, *Out of the Past*, I, pp. 217–18, II, p. 197; M. E. Grant Duff, ‘Lord Acton’s Letters’, *Nineteenth Century and After*, 55/327 (1904), pp. 765–75, 774.

<sup>73</sup> Grant Duff, ‘After six years’, p. 30.

<sup>74</sup> M. E. Grant Duff, Review of *National Life and Character: A Forecast*, by Charles H. Pearson, in *The Academy*, 4 March 1893, pp. 189–91, at p. 189.

<sup>75</sup> ‘Mr Grant Duff at Elgin’, *Glasgow Herald*, 8 January 1874, p. 2.

<sup>76</sup> Grant Duff, *Cobden*, p. 10; Grant Duff in Greg, *Enigmas of Life*, p. lxxvii.

<sup>77</sup> Grant Duff, *Elgin*, p. 66; ‘Mr. Grant Duff at Elgin’, *Standard*, 22 December 1880, p. 3.

<sup>78</sup> ‘Liberal Ideas’, *Aberdeen Journal*, 18 December 1872, p. 5; ‘Mr. Grant Duff’s Elgin speech’, *Examiner*, 23 December 1871, p. 1260.

<sup>79</sup> Huth Jackson, ‘Memoir’, p. xiv.

but blundering Philistines.<sup>80</sup> John Ruskin attacked his emphasis on the material and intellectual purposes of politics, at the expense of politicians' moral and ethical duties.<sup>81</sup> Elsewhere, in the press, Grant Duff's Liberalism was characterized as 'hard and rather abstruse and unsympathetic', and even more damningly as 'transcendental, philosophical, dictatorial, and altogether unpractical'.<sup>82</sup> As this commentary suggests, Grant Duff was treated as a consequential figure in the era's intensifying debates about how Liberalism should be conceptualized and practised. But his arguments on these issues cannot be understood in isolation from his visions of international and imperial affairs.

### Philosophic Liberalism and international politics

The discussion of foreign politics was a crucial field on which the Victorians battled over competing political, social and economic doctrines.<sup>83</sup> Historians are familiar with the analyses outlined by those intellectual titans who took an interest in the area, including John Stuart Mill, Fitzjames Stephen and James Bryce.<sup>84</sup> But most nineteenth-century British political thinkers concentrated elsewhere, and most debates about politics overseas were driven by lesser known figures. Their analyses formed an essential context for practical politics, furnishing the information and arguments on which thinking politicians based their activities.

During the 1860s and 1870s, Grant Duff was one of the most influential players of this game. In fact, with (arguably) a hiatus during Mill's interlude as Member for Westminster – and a possible case to be made for the sharp but less prolific Charles Dilke – Grant Duff was the parliamentary Liberal Party's most intellectually ambitious interpreter of global order. He claimed to investigate empirically, but as Acton saw, '[a]n undercurrent of political doctrine visibly directs his sympathies'.<sup>85</sup> Grant Duff's interest in international politics was globe-spanning, but he sought in particular to advance mutual understanding between Britain and Europe. Contemporaries saw in him a 'spirit of cosmopolitan Liberalism' and noted that he possessed 'a more Continental type of mind than is elsewhere to be found in English politics'.<sup>86</sup> He was labelled 'The Member for Europe', and his grasp of European affairs was frequently said to surpass any politician of his generation.<sup>87</sup> Examining Grant Duff's ideas about politics overseas reveals how Victorian international theories could be shaped by international exchanges. His thinking, however, was more than an echo of foreign texts. His presentation of international affairs depended on and developed his concept of 'philosophic liberalism', in ways that supported his attempts to promote Liberal Party interests at home.

<sup>80</sup> [Lord Acton], 'Mr. Grant Duff's Glance over Europe', *The Chronicle*, 11 January 1868, pp. 31–2, at p. 32.

<sup>81</sup> John Ruskin, *Fors Clavigera. Letters to the Workmen and Labourers of Great Britain* (Orpington, 1872), Letter XIV, pp. 3, 8–9.

<sup>82</sup> 'Men of mark. No. X. Mr. Grant Duff', *London Review*, 7 December 1867, pp. 617–19, at p. 618; *Vanity Fair*, 13 September 1884, p. 177.

<sup>83</sup> See R. T. Shannon, *Gladstone and the Bulgarian Agitation, 1876* (London, 1963); Geoffrey Hicks, *Peace, War, and Party Politics: The Conservatives and Europe, 1846–59* (Manchester, 2007); William Mulligan and Brendan Simms (eds), *The Primacy of Foreign Policy in British History, 1660–2000: How Strategic Concerns Shaped Modern Britain* (Basingstoke, 2010); Parry, *Politics of Patriotism*; Swartz, *Politics of Foreign Policy*.

<sup>84</sup> Varouxakis, *Liberty Abroad*; K. J. M. Smith, *James Fitzjames Stephen: Portrait of a Victorian Rationalist* (Cambridge, 1988); H. S. Jones, *Liberal Worlds: James Bryce and the Democratic Intellect* (Princeton, NJ, 2025). For the wider historiography, see Middleton, 'Victorian politics'.

<sup>85</sup> [Acton], 'Grant Duff's Glance over Europe', p. 31.

<sup>86</sup> 'Mr. Grant Duff's Annual', *Examiner*, 14 December 1872, p. 1220; 'Mr. Grant Duff', *Spectator*, 4 January 1868, p. 7.

<sup>87</sup> 'Tommy' (ed.), *The Popular Dod. Part III* (London, [1880]), pp. 12–13; Huth Jackson, 'Memoir', p. x; 'Mr. Grant Duff', *Spectator*, 4 January 1868, p. 7.

Grant Duff's international political thought had a distinctive foundation. More than any other contemporary Liberal thinker, his arguments were based on experience of the world beyond Britain and its empire. Even before his studies at Balliol, he was travelling as far afield as Hungary.<sup>88</sup> Once in parliament, most recesses were devoted to foreign travel. By 1875, he had been to every European country except Portugal, as well as to North Africa, the Middle East and India.<sup>89</sup> At every destination, he sought introductions to influential figures on all sides of politics, as well as literary and scientific luminaries (including Karl Marx), and engaged them in detailed conversation.<sup>90</sup> He also immersed himself in European literature, developing a thorough knowledge of major Continental periodicals.<sup>91</sup> Grant Duff never saw the Americas but was keenly interested in them, especially (unusually) Latin America. He wrote that enlightened thought, as the key to the progress of civilization, had to be searched out wherever it arose.<sup>92</sup>

His intensive study of politics overseas was, in part, an attempt to recast British foreign policy. His basic convictions here were conventional Cobdenism. Grant Duff wanted to see consigned to the past the 'old evil ways' of massed armaments, national jealousies and artificial contrivances to secure balances of power.<sup>93</sup> These distasteful relics were to be replaced by policies of non-intervention, wherever possible, and by international co-operation. Such, he argued in the 1860s, was the natural direction of things, with the diffusion of better principles of government on the Continent diminishing the prospect of unnecessary wars driven by inflamed passions.<sup>94</sup> The arbitration of the Alabama claims in 1872 fired Grant Duff's anticipations for the future: it was 'at once one of the best pieces of statecraft and one of the most Christian acts recorded in history'.<sup>95</sup> He hoped that the next step would be multilateral disarmament.<sup>96</sup> Events did not fulfil Grant Duff's expectations.<sup>97</sup> But the desire to further the cause of peace and non-intervention was fundamental to his political project. His refrain was that a wider and deeper knowledge of foreign affairs would make the public less inclined to accept entangling alliances and would eliminate the possibility of British policy being led by enthusiasm instead of tangible interests.<sup>98</sup>

Grant Duff insisted, further, that the need for this knowledge was dictated by Britain's place in the world. That place was 'indisputably the foremost', and it needed to be maintained.<sup>99</sup> But it could not be preserved on the basis of narrow, national principles. He argued that while Britain was pre-eminent among the constitutional countries of Europe, it was essentially an 'oceanic power', whose greatness depended on its relations to mankind as a whole, within and beyond the empire.<sup>100</sup> He was sanguine about the idea of a constitutional France taking the lead in Europe, while

<sup>88</sup> Grant Duff, *Glance*, pp. 34–5. He later asserted that his motion at the Oxford Union in sympathy with the Hungarian cause had been the first in England.

<sup>89</sup> 'Mr Grant Duff, M.P., at Elgin', *Aberdeen Journal*, 26 May 1875, p. 6; Huth Jackson, 'Memoir', p. vii; Fremantle, *Three-Cornered Heart*, pp. 26–7.

<sup>90</sup> For his practice, see, e.g., *Few Words on France*, pp. 5–6. Grant Duff spoke French, German, Spanish and Italian.

<sup>91</sup> Grant Duff, *Studies*, pp. 47, 366–7; Grant Duff, *HPD3*, 154:205–8, 9 June 1858; [M. E. Grant Duff], 'Italy in 1867', *North British Review*, 47/94 (1867), pp. 463–96, at pp. 491–2.

<sup>92</sup> Grant Duff, *Inaugural Address*, p. 48.

<sup>93</sup> Grant Duff, *Cobden*, p. 7.

<sup>94</sup> Grant Duff, *Glance*, pp. 56–7; [M. E. Grant Duff], 'England and Europe' *North British Review*, 39/78 (1863), pp. 538–56, at pp. 554–5.

<sup>95</sup> Grant Duff, 'Must We Then Believe Cassandra?', *Miscellanies*, p. 84.

<sup>96</sup> Grant Duff, *Glance*, p. 21; Grant Duff, *HPD3*, 238:1875, 22 March 1878.

<sup>97</sup> 'Sir M.E. Grant Duff on questions of the day', *Times*, 19 October 1892, p. 3.

<sup>98</sup> Grant Duff, *Elgin*, p. 188.

<sup>99</sup> Grant Duff, *Survey*, p. 173.

<sup>100</sup> Grant Duff, *HPD3*, 158:1129, 11 May 1860; 'Mr Grant Duff, M.P., at Elgin', *Aberdeen Journal*, 12 September 1879, p. 7; Grant Duff, *Glance*, p. 4.

Britain fell back on its ‘unquestioned cosmopolitan hegemony’.<sup>101</sup> Because Britain was an imperial and cosmopolitan country, its views had to be correspondingly wide-ranging.<sup>102</sup> British politicians needed to be alive to opinion both in Europe and America – given the location of ‘these Atlantic islands’ between the Old World and the New – as well as being able to look further afield to the colonies, and to India.<sup>103</sup> Lying behind this insistence was a dynamic model of the transnational operation of political influences. This was in part a response to new communication and transport technologies.<sup>104</sup> Grant Duff was fascinated by the dissolving of distance, noting in 1876 that for men of his generation, the ‘planet itself has, for all practical purposes, become much smaller’.<sup>105</sup> He delighted in tracing the progress and prospects of railways, ‘that great harbinger of political change’, which promoted civilization by facilitating international travel, and by breaking up provincial jealousies.<sup>106</sup> The telegraph, ‘the great instrument that science has put in our hands’, promised even more spectacular results, while Grant Duff looked forward to sea communication between the Atlantic and the Pacific, and even to flying machines which would eliminate the gulf between Europe and the United States.<sup>107</sup> As a result of these intensifying interconnections, the countries of Europe increasingly had the power to ‘act and react upon each other’.<sup>108</sup> He stressed that the ‘heightened pulse of English Liberalism’ had an outsize impact on Continental politics.<sup>109</sup> But he also saw lines of influence running in other directions, as with the impact of French culture on the Spanish upper classes.<sup>110</sup> And these influences were not confined to Europe: he traced the path of the ideas which had shaken Continental society in 1848 as far afield as New Granada.<sup>111</sup> His transnational travels and reading provided the basis for a firmly transnational analysis of modern politics.

For Grant Duff, it was the responsibility of English statesmen to remain abreast of foreign affairs and ideas, and to communicate them to the public. This was a duty they were failing to fulfil.<sup>112</sup> He lamented that so few aspiring politicians made any special study of international questions, and was equally distressed that public interest in the wider world, despite increasing in intensity since the revolutions of 1848, was so ill-directed.<sup>113</sup> Grant Duff maintained that all this had to change. Asserting that no European politician who aspired to be a true statesman could afford not to know ‘pretty intimately’ France, Germany, England and Italy, he insisted that English politicians needed to abandon their prejudices, and ready themselves ‘to learn from the Continent as well as to teach it’.<sup>114</sup> This would involve connecting themselves directly, as he had, with prominent European circles.<sup>115</sup> More broadly, he called on

<sup>101</sup> *Studies*, p. 375.

<sup>102</sup> Grant Duff, *Survey*, p. 173.

<sup>103</sup> Grant Duff, *Elgin*, pp. 202, 188; Grant Duff, *Out of the Past*, I, pp. 26–7. For contemporary comment on Grant Duff’s American ideas, see, e.g., Charles Harcourt Chambers, *Phases of Party* (London, 1872), pp. 51–2.

<sup>104</sup> Duncan S. A. Bell, ‘Dissolving distance: Technology, space, and empire in British political thought, 1770–1900’, *Journal of Modern History*, 77/3 (2005), pp. 523–62.

<sup>105</sup> M. E. Grant Duff, ‘Eastern affairs at the close of the session’, *Contemporary Review*, 28 (1876), pp. 694–712, at p. 695.

<sup>106</sup> Grant Duff, *Glance*, p. 15; Grant Duff, *Studies*, p. 62.

<sup>107</sup> Grant Duff, *Survey*, pp. 20, 169; Grant Duff, *Diary, 1851–1872*, I, p. 3.

<sup>108</sup> Grant Duff, *Studies*, p. 288.

<sup>109</sup> Grant Duff, *Survey*, p. 21. See also Grant Duff, *Studies*, pp. 115, 64; [Grant Duff], ‘England and Europe’, p. 541.

<sup>110</sup> Grant Duff, *Studies*, p. 59.

<sup>111</sup> Grant Duff, *Survey*, p. 181.

<sup>112</sup> Grant Duff, *Cobden*, p. 18.

<sup>113</sup> [Grant Duff], ‘England and Europe’, p. 538; Grant Duff, *Foreign Policy*, p. 27; Grant Duff, *HPD3*, 174:118, 16 March 1864.

<sup>114</sup> Grant Duff, ‘Emilio Castelar’, *Miscellanies*, p. 286; [Grant Duff], ‘England and Europe’, p. 555.

<sup>115</sup> [Grant Duff], *Few Words on France*, pp. 7–8.

‘influential men and bodies of men’ to gain a clearer knowledge of the ‘real state, aspirations, and ideas of foreign countries’, and of political tendencies in foreign parts.<sup>116</sup> The acquisition of this knowledge, he suggested, would be facilitated by reforms to the diplomatic service, drawing inspiration from the best foreign models.<sup>117</sup> He called for the Foreign Office to reinvent itself as an engine for the collection and dissemination of information on politics overseas, publishing as much as possible for public consumption.<sup>118</sup> Here, he aligned himself with the Canningite tradition in foreign policy, scaled up in informational ambition for a more democratic era.

No material progress was made on these fronts as a consequence of Grant Duff’s campaigns. Instead, he made it his mission to supply the deficiency. Grant Duff boldly claimed for his writings and speeches the power to expand British horizons, to offer guides to thought overseas, and to make sense of complex international predicaments. He promised to clear away the incidental smoke, and the wilful misrepresentations, which distorted Britain’s understanding of the world.<sup>119</sup> Lacking either the coherence or the formal ambition of later studies of contemporary political institutions like W. E. H. Lecky’s *Democracy and Liberty* (1896) or James Bryce’s *Modern Democracies* (1921), Grant Duff’s studies in international political sociology deployed an eclectic range of conceptual tools. His ambition, as he told his constituents, was to make himself acquainted with ‘everything that can largely affect the interests of this great Empire’.<sup>120</sup> He appears to have meant this seriously. In the opening pages of his *Studies in European Politics*, Grant Duff ranged over discussions of Russia in the Calcutta press, a Tractarian inquiry into the Spanish Church, a French political dictionary, an Austrian study of the Spanish possessions in the Eastern Archipelago and a collection of Latin American treaties compiled by a former Paraguayan chargé d’affaires.<sup>121</sup> He took particular interests in the impact of nature and geography on the shaping of societies, in the science of despotic rule, and in Austria, a country he described as ‘a science in itself’.<sup>122</sup> From the mid-1860s, he cultivated a knowledge of ‘the frontier lands between Christendom and Islam’, which earned him some renewed celebrity in the 1870s debates on the Eastern Question.<sup>123</sup> But his agenda was about more than the provision of ostensibly accurate information to the public. What united his works was an analysis of the global progress of ‘Liberalism’. His vision of international order, in which the irresistible tendencies of the age dictated the ultimate triumph of the global Liberal cause, buttressed his claims that the British Liberal Party was the nation’s natural ruling force.

There were additional complexities in interpreting foreign affairs. Grant Duff saw great battles of principles playing out on the international stage, speaking in 1865 of a ‘silent but desperate struggle... between authority and opinion, between the mediaeval and the modern spirit’, and characterizing this elsewhere as a conflict between intellectual bondage and liberty of thought.<sup>124</sup> It was not always straightforward, however, to discern which side was which. He insisted that it was only by applying his brand of careful, detailed, judicial analysis of the issues facing Europe

<sup>116</sup> Grant Duff, *Glance*, p. 56; Grant Duff, *Elgin*, p. xviii.

<sup>117</sup> See, e.g., Grant Duff’s motion for a committee on the diplomatic service, *HPD3*, 159:714–22, 19 June 1860.

<sup>118</sup> E.g. Grant Duff, *Cobden*, p. 21.

<sup>119</sup> See, e.g., on British views of Russia being distorted by German and Polish feeling, Grant Duff, *Studies*, p. 66.

<sup>120</sup> Grant Duff, *Survey*, p. v.

<sup>121</sup> Grant Duff, *Studies*, pp. xix, 54–6, 39–40, 44–5, xvi.

<sup>122</sup> Grant Duff, *Survey*, p. 28. See Tibor Frank, *Picturing Austria-Hungary: The British Perception of the Habsburg Monarchy 1865–1870* (New York, 2005).

<sup>123</sup> Grant Duff, *Glance*, p. 36. For criticism of Grant Duff’s proposals at this juncture by well-known figures, see Richard Congreve, ‘England and Turkey’, *Fortnightly Review*, 20/118 (1876), pp. 517–36, at pp. 519–20; Edward A. Freeman, ‘Present aspects of the eastern question’, *Fortnightly Review*, 20/118 (1876), pp. 409–23, at pp. 422–3.

<sup>124</sup> Grant Duff, *Elgin*, p. 77; Grant Duff, *Studies*, pp. 85, 371.

that it would become clear whether particular developments or shifts in policy ‘will or will not deserve the sympathies of the Liberal party in Europe’.<sup>125</sup> For Grant Duff, this was always the really essential question.

Internationally as domestically, however, political metaphysics loaded the dice in favour of the Liberal cause. Grant Duff attributed vast motive power to what he variously called ‘the spirit of the age’, and ‘the resistless stream of tendency’.<sup>126</sup> He argued that the relentless forward march of intellect, knowledge and science was moving human society away from religious bigotry, irrational warfare and political reaction, and towards toleration, peace and freedom. He shared with the mid-Victorian historian H. T. Buckle the conviction that the keynote of human history was the progress of knowledge.<sup>127</sup> This direction of travel was, for Grant Duff, the necessary consequence of the application of increased intelligence to public affairs. He asserted that political arrangements that did not align with the ‘ideas of the time’ could only be temporary.<sup>128</sup> Short-term setbacks did not matter, he contended, because the Liberals had on their side ‘that one great force which is stronger than all the others put together – the modern spirit, the example of all progressive countries, the nature of things’.<sup>129</sup> Here, Grant Duff rested his case on the politician’s favoured vague yet uplifting reassurances.

Tracing the progress of the Liberal cause across the globe confirmed this assessment. Though he offered individual studies of the career of Liberalism in different states, Grant Duff’s view was that it was ‘idle and wholly misleading to attempt to trace its progress in one country only’, since politics and thought operated between countries.<sup>130</sup> Overseas, as at home, he identified a Liberal party – whether or not it laid claim to the label – as one which attempted to realize in practice ‘the conclusions of our best theoretical guides’.<sup>131</sup> He recognized that Liberal parties tended to divide into sections.<sup>132</sup> In Belgium, for instance, he found a battle between liberalisms ‘militant and aggressive’ and ‘philosophical and conciliatory’.<sup>133</sup> But his overall narrative was one in which the Liberal cause in all countries was gradually gaining ground; provided despots did not league together, he expected that ‘before long the Liberal party would be able to completely crush their oppressors’.<sup>134</sup>

It was easy to celebrate the progress of Liberalism in countries like Holland, which since 1848 had seen old ways ‘superseded by a system instinct with the modern spirit’, in trade, infrastructure and law.<sup>135</sup> The same was true in relation to the constitutional transformation of Austria in the 1860s, and Grant Duff identified the Hungarian statesman Ferenc Déak as the man in Europe who ‘has shown most of the spirit by which our own liberties were won’.<sup>136</sup> But Grant Duff saw cause for optimism everywhere. Even in the strongholds of European conservatism, forces were at work which would break up the crust of traditionalism, and create ‘nobler forms of life’.<sup>137</sup>

<sup>125</sup> Grant Duff, *Studies*, p. 93.

<sup>126</sup> Grant Duff, *Glance*, p. 25; Grant Duff, *Studies*, p. 369.

<sup>127</sup> Lawrence Goldman, *Victorians and Numbers: Statistics and Society in Nineteenth Century Britain* (Oxford, 2022), ch. 11, esp. pp. 199–200, 209.

<sup>128</sup> Grant Duff, *Studies*, p. 53; ‘Mr Grant Duff, M.P., at Elgin’, *Glasgow Herald*, 7 February 1876, p. 4.

<sup>129</sup> Grant Duff, *Studies*, p. 372.

<sup>130</sup> ‘Mr. Grant Duff, M.P., at Elgin’, *Glasgow Herald*, 11 December 1872, p. 5.

<sup>131</sup> Grant Duff, *Studies*, p. 352.

<sup>132</sup> Grant Duff, *Studies*, pp. xxxiv–xxxv, 109, 230; Grant Duff, *Glance*, p. 17.

<sup>133</sup> Grant Duff, *Studies*, p. 339.

<sup>134</sup> Grant Duff, *HPD3*, 158:1129, 11 May 1860. For a later, and less optimistic usage, of ‘the Liberal party’ as a Europe-spanning force, see, e.g., J. A. Hobson, *Imperialism: A Study* (London, 1902), pp. 150–1.

<sup>135</sup> Grant Duff, *Studies*, pp. 296–7.

<sup>136</sup> Grant Duff, *Glance*, pp. 33. See also Mountstuart E. Grant Duff, Preface to [Florence Arnold-Forster], *Francis Déak, Hungarian Statesman, a Memoir* (London, 1880).

<sup>137</sup> Grant Duff, *Inaugural*, p. 44.

Writing in the mid-1860s, he argued that the influence of Bismarck on the affairs of Europe had hitherto been ‘simply evil’, but he did not fear even for Germany because while political institutions could hold out against ‘the spirit of the time’ for a few years, ‘down they must go in the end’.<sup>138</sup> The spread of enlightenment, and the rising wealth of the middle class, would ultimately prove decisive, and a German Liberal party would come to dominate.<sup>139</sup> In Russia, too, Grant Duff was sure that the ‘mining influences of individualism’ would push communitarian institutions aside, while the recent emergence of a free trade party was an encouraging sign.<sup>140</sup> He delighted in tracing Russia’s apparent progress towards ‘legal as distinguished from arbitrary government’, though what was needed for it to become a truly positive force in the world was ‘the success of the wiser portion of the Liberal party’.<sup>141</sup> Even in Latin America, seen by many Victorian Liberals as a particularly benighted part of the world, Grant Duff identified ‘the probability of an often interrupted but on the whole continuous advance in prosperity’.<sup>142</sup> The same was true of Spain, which had been mischaracterized by H. T. Buckle as a ‘torpid mass’.<sup>143</sup> There was progress to celebrate in religion, too, and Grant Duff saw purer forms of Christianity continuing to take hold more widely across the globe.<sup>144</sup>

Grant Duff, in short, offered his audiences a triumphant story about the identity of the Liberal cause with the modern spirit, and about its inexorable global progress. This was an imprecise but invigorating story to tell potential Liberal voters. It did not appeal to everyone, even on his own side. His emphasis on the power that accompanied knowledge, and on the need for ‘intelligent direction’ to advance less developed communities, was too abstract and too imperious for some.<sup>145</sup> He was criticized for his ‘idealised view of the intrinsic value of the forces creating and developing civilisation’ internationally, and Acton noted that he was shy of considering questions of right apart from questions of progress.<sup>146</sup> But Grant Duff’s vision of the world was one which put British Liberal politicians firmly on the front foot.

### Philosophic Liberalism and empire

Recent work on nineteenth-century imperial political thought has prioritized professional intellectuals: historians, jurists, political economists, political philosophers and reviewers.<sup>147</sup> It is worth remembering that many of them wrote, as one of their purposes, with the goal of influencing policy. This meant influencing politicians. Many of the landmark Victorian debates about empire were, therefore, inextricably connected with party-political (and intra-party) struggles and cannot wholly be made sense of apart from these partisan contexts. Examining the imperial ideas of articulate politicians is necessary both to understand whether ‘formal’ imperial political thought was doing the job it was intended to do, and to identify what was at stake in the major public debates about imperial expansion and rule.

<sup>138</sup> Grant Duff, *Studies*, pp. 234, 245. He did not change his view of Bismarck: cf. M. E. Grant Duff, ‘Seeley’s *Life and Times of Stein*’, *Macmillan’s Magazine*, 40 (1879), pp. 1–13; M. E. Grant Duff, ‘Sir Horace Rumbold’s recollections’, *The Speaker*, 29 November 1902, pp. 231–2, 232.

<sup>139</sup> Grant Duff, *Studies*, pp. 247, 250.

<sup>140</sup> M. E. Grant Duff, ‘Russia, Part I’, *Nineteenth Century*, 1/1 (1877), pp. 72–96, at p. 93; Grant Duff, *Survey*, p. 70.

<sup>141</sup> Grant Duff, *Studies*, pp. xvii–xviii, 109.

<sup>142</sup> Grant Duff, *Survey*, pp. 238–40.

<sup>143</sup> Grant Duff, *Studies*, p. 28.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 105, 37–8.

<sup>146</sup> Ward, ‘Grant Duff’s “Notes from a Diary”’, pp. 26, 29; [Acton], ‘Grant Duff’s Glance over Europe’, p. 32.

<sup>147</sup> See above, n. 4.

Grant Duff's pursuit of a global understanding of politics necessitated treatment of empires. Britain's own, he recognized, was the largest concern it had on its hands, and the means through which it was responsible for 'moulding the future of half the world'.<sup>148</sup> But Grant Duff's imperial theories were largely derivative. Their significance lies in their interfaces with his other priorities, and Liberal partisanship. As in his studies of foreign affairs, Grant Duff sought to elevate public understanding of Britain's empire. But in this field, he had a more specific political enemy to combat, who he took to represent an alternative imperial philosophy: Benjamin Disraeli. The overriding purpose of Grant Duff's pronouncements on imperial questions in the 1870s was to refute Conservative claims that Liberalism was anti-imperial, by asserting an alternative, positive and distinctly Liberal approach to empire.<sup>149</sup>

It fits that Grant Duff would defend aspects of the imperial project. British Liberals who emphasized the role of intellect in politics tended to be supportive of civilizing missions, imperial and otherwise.<sup>150</sup> Grant Duff's friend W. R. Greg is a case in point, so committed to the merits of empire that he imagined British tutelage would be the best thing for countries as diverse as China, Japan and Mexico.<sup>151</sup> Grant Duff's committed Cobdenism might be expected to have encouraged a more critical attitude towards imperialism, but as we have noted, he considered Cobden mistaken on questions of international policy. The reason was that, for Grant Duff, enlightenment had to come before anything else. In the 1860s, debating with the English Positivists, he argued that it was entirely reasonable to have pressured the government of Japan for the purpose of advancing the country's civilization.<sup>152</sup>

Grant Duff read much of the leading imperial literature of the period and was clearly familiar with the relevant thoughts of Maine, Mill and Tocqueville. He was not a systematic thinker about the general merits of empires as civilizing spaces. He did write about other European nations' imperial projects, supporting Russia's incursions into Central Asia, and spitting venom about the 'narrowness' of the Dutch in their exclusive, forced-labour handling of colonial affairs.<sup>153</sup> But his interest in these matters was limited. His focus was always on British imperial responsibilities, especially in the settler colonies and the Indian empire. His contentions here often echoed those of that other self-appointed contemporary Liberal expert on foreign and imperial affairs, Charles Dilke. But Grant Duff's convictions had most in common with those of his friend from undergraduate days, Goldwin Smith.<sup>154</sup> Smith combined scepticism about the value of the imperial tie in the case of the settler empire with an increasingly defensive argument for the continuance of British rule in India, as a moral duty to its natives.<sup>155</sup> Grant Duff's positions were similar, if less forthright. The difference was that they supported a series of further arguments with a much harder party-political edge.

<sup>148</sup> Grant Duff, *Brief Comments*, p. 198.

<sup>149</sup> For more radical positions, see Gregory Claeys, *Imperial Sceptics: British Critics of Empire, 1850–1920* (Cambridge, 2010); Mira Matikkala, *Empire and Imperial Ambition: Liberty, Englishness and Anti-Imperialism in Late-Victorian Britain* (London, 2011).

<sup>150</sup> See Alexander Zevin, *Liberalism at Large: The World According to the Economist* (London, 2019).

<sup>151</sup> See Middleton, 'Greg'.

<sup>152</sup> Grant Duff, *Survey*, p. 93. He was responding here to *International Policy: Essays on the Foreign Relations of England* (London, 1866), on which see H. S. Jones, 'The Victorian lexicon of evil: Frederic Harrison, the positivists and the language of international politics', in Tom Crook, Rebecca Gill and Bertrand Taithe (eds), *Evil, Barbarism, and Empire: Britain and Abroad, c. 1830–2000* (Basingstoke, 2011), pp. 126–43.

<sup>153</sup> Grant Duff, *Studies*, pp. 104, 120, 331. He did not want to see Russia come any further West: *Glance*, pp. 33–4.

<sup>154</sup> For example, Grant Duff, *Survey*, p. 143; Grant Duff, *Elgin*, pp. 17–18.

<sup>155</sup> Duncan Bell, *The Idea of Greater Britain: Empire and the Future of World Order, 1860–1900* (Princeton, 2007), ch. 7.

Empire for its own sake was anathema to Grant Duff. He accepted that safeguarding the strength of England might – in limited circumstances, like a threat to the routes to India – demand further expansion.<sup>156</sup> In most contexts, however, he was unremittingly hostile to the prospect. He wrote in 1868 that the British people had ‘got disgusted with territorial acquisition’.<sup>157</sup> His antagonism towards making the empire larger was, he explained, a result of strenuous efforts to ‘make clear to my mind in detail to what awful responsibilities our world-wide empire has already committed us’.<sup>158</sup> Making it smaller was not unimaginable. Grant Duff applauded the cession of the Ionian Islands in 1864, and the ‘sober calculation’ which underpinned it.<sup>159</sup> Costs and benefits were a significant part of his imperial calculus.

Keeping the bonds of empire universally taut, then, was irrational. Following Goldwin Smith’s lead, Grant Duff advocated the loosening of ties with the settler colonies, which would be advantageous on both sides of the equation.<sup>160</sup> Like most parliamentary Liberals after the 1850s, he was enthusiastic about responsible self-government in Canada, Australia, New Zealand and eventually South Africa, and strongly supported the transfer of responsibility for military spending to the colonial assemblies.<sup>161</sup> But he was, more unusually, entirely sanguine about these colonies parting from Britain, as soon as they wanted to.<sup>162</sup> Britain, he thought, could be proud of its status as ‘the mother of free nations’.<sup>163</sup> But its proper position was as the titular head of a company of allied Anglo-Saxon states. For Grant Duff, therefore, the schemes which grew in popularity from the 1860s for drawing the settler colonies institutionally and economically closer together – some of which were cloaked in the language of ‘Greater Britain’ – were rebarbative.<sup>164</sup> He thought that other countries, too, would benefit from his policy of slackening imperial ties, proposing a version of it for Spain in the 1860s, and taking issue with French journalists who ascribed undue significance to the Algerian colonies.<sup>165</sup> He was encouraged that some Spaniards adopted the same hostile attitude towards the Spanish colonial empire that Goldwin Smith did towards the British.<sup>166</sup>

But India was an entirely different proposition. Grant Duff’s maiden speech in parliament, in 1858, advocated the abolition of the East India Company, as an exhausted institution which could not be reconciled with modern reason.<sup>167</sup> Thereafter, he asserted a sequence of decided views on the Indian empire. Britain’s rule, he argued, was a ‘quite unspeakable blessing to India’.<sup>168</sup> It diffused peace, prosperity, justice and the science of the West, as well as providing to other nations ‘an example of how a strong race should rule weaker ones’.<sup>169</sup> It was, in fact, the ‘most beneficent experiment in government that ever was made’.<sup>170</sup> And it was largely altruistic. In material terms, the possession of India was clearly a weakness

<sup>156</sup> Grant Duff, *Out of the Past*, I, pp. 213–15; Grant Duff, ‘After six years’, p. 18.

<sup>157</sup> Grant Duff, *Survey*, p. 104.

<sup>158</sup> Grant Duff, *Eastern Question*, p. 30.

<sup>159</sup> Grant Duff, *Elgin*, p. 29.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 17–18. Cf. Goldwin Smith, *The Empire: A Series of Letters Published in ‘The Daily News,’ 1862, 1863* (Oxford and London, 1863).

<sup>161</sup> Grant Duff, *Brief Comments*, p. 200; Grant Duff, *Elgin*, pp. 17–18, 184–5.

<sup>162</sup> Grant Duff, *Elgin*, pp. xvii–xviii.

<sup>163</sup> Grant Duff, *Foreign Policy*, p. 32.

<sup>164</sup> Grant Duff, *Elgin*, p. 201; ‘Sir M.E. Grant Duff on questions of the day’, *Times*, 19 October 1892, p. 3.

<sup>165</sup> Grant Duff, *Studies*, pp. 45–6; Grant Duff, *Survey*, p. 116.

<sup>166</sup> Grant Duff, *Survey*, p. 138.

<sup>167</sup> Grant Duff, *HPD3*, 148:1381–5, 15 February 1858.

<sup>168</sup> Grant Duff, *Eastern Question*, p. 41.

<sup>169</sup> Grant Duff, *Elgin*, pp. 221–3, xvii. See also M. E. Grant Duff, ‘A bird’s-eye view of India’, *Nineteenth Century*, 25/148 (1889), pp. 812–26, at p. 824.

<sup>170</sup> Grant Duff, *HPD3*, 213:573, 6 August 1872.

to England.<sup>171</sup> Its only advantages were that it ‘enlarges our national view of things’, provided certain commercial benefits and obtained increased consideration for England from other nations.<sup>172</sup> It represented a field for imagination, enterprise and beneficence which other countries – not least France – sorely lacked.<sup>173</sup> Here, Grant Duff tapped into ‘republican imperial’ languages, associated particularly with J. A. Froude, which stressed the advantages of empire in widening national horizons, and in providing safety valves for social elites.<sup>174</sup>

In the Indian context, Grant Duff’s philosophic commitment to enlightened rule demanded an uncompromising firm hand. His view was that India was ‘a barrel of gunpower, round which sparks are perpetually flying’, a country stirred by poorly understood forces.<sup>175</sup> In another dissent from Cobden, he asserted that the crushing of the Mutiny of 1857–8 had been right.<sup>176</sup> Seeing the subcontinent for the first time in the 1870s sharpened his views. Having travelled East believing that the Indian empire was so extraordinary as to be necessarily insecure, his experience taught him that Indians would remain in permanent need of British rule.<sup>177</sup> Writing after his return from Madras, he continued to make the case that ‘[m]ore light and more leading, not less, are what is wanted’.<sup>178</sup> He dismissed the idea that the best-educated natives were hostile to British rule, beyond a few ‘professional malcontents’.<sup>179</sup> It followed that the cautious gestures made in the 1880s and 1890s towards Indian participation in government were misguided. Grant Duff argued that the British must rule, or retire.<sup>180</sup> There was, he insisted, no purpose in being in India simply to prop up a native aristocracy.<sup>181</sup> All this attracted the ire of the Indian polymath, nationalist and later British MP Dadabhai Naoroji, who took issue with Grant Duff’s characterizations of the Indian educated classes, and his failure to extend native employment when in office.<sup>182</sup> But Grant Duff never altered his view that it was by enlightened rule that ‘empire will be deserved and will be held’.<sup>183</sup> While British rule remained Liberal – that is, as he clarified for the imperial context as in others, in accord with the best modern theory – it would be necessary in India indefinitely.<sup>184</sup> He argued, further, that the fact that the grave task of civilizing Asia was part of England’s destiny was another reason for pressing forward with ‘true Liberalism’ more generally.<sup>185</sup>

<sup>171</sup> Mountstuart E. Grant Duff, *Notes of an Indian Journey* (London, 1876), p. 251.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 244.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 247; M. E. Grant Duff, ‘Echoes of the late debate’, *Nineteenth Century*, 4/19 (1878), pp. 478–93, at p. 493.

<sup>174</sup> Duncan Bell, ‘Republican imperialism: J.A. Froude and the virtue of empire’, *History of Political Thought*, 30/1 (2009), pp. 166–91.

<sup>175</sup> Grant Duff, *Survey*, p. 69.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>177</sup> ‘Mr Grant Duff, M.P., at Elgin’, *Aberdeen Journal*, 26 May 1875, p. 6.

<sup>178</sup> M. E. Grant Duff, ‘India: A reply to Mr. Samuel Smith, M.P. II’, *Contemporary Review*, 51 (1887), pp. 181–95, at p. 195.

<sup>179</sup> M. E. Grant Duff, ‘India: A reply to Mr. Samuel Smith, M.P. I’, *Contemporary Review*, 51 (1887), pp. 8–31, at p. 11.

<sup>180</sup> ‘Sir M.E. Grant Duff on Indian affairs’, *Edinburgh Evening News*, 6 November 1888, p. 2.

<sup>181</sup> Grant Duff, ‘India, I’, pp. 21–4.

<sup>182</sup> Dadabhai Naoroji, ‘Sir M.E. Grant Duff’s views about India. I’, *Contemporary Review*, 52 (1887), pp. 221–35; Dadabhai Naoroji, ‘Sir M.E. Grant Duff’s Views about India. II’, *Contemporary Review*, 52 (1887), pp. 694–711. These articles were reprinted in Dadabhai Naoroji, *Sir M. E. Grant Duff’s Views about India* (London, 1887). There were further attacks on Grant Duff in Dadabhai Naoroji, *Poverty and Un-British Rule in India* (London, 1901). On these exchanges, see Julie F. Codell, ‘Islam, women, and imperial administration: Encounters and antagonisms between British and colonial authors in the Victorian press’, in Laurel Brake and Julie F. Codell (eds), *Encounters in the Victorian Press: Editors, Authors, Readers* (Basingstoke, 2005), pp. 195–212, at pp. 204–8.

<sup>183</sup> Grant Duff, *Elgin*, p. 279.

<sup>184</sup> ‘Mr Grant Duff, M.P., at Elgin’, *Aberdeen Journal*, 26 May 1875, p. 6.

<sup>185</sup> Grant Duff, *Elgin*, p. 240.

All these truths, in Grant Duff's view, were widely misunderstood. They needed explaining to Europe as well as to Britain. Just as he had done on foreign affairs, Grant Duff offered himself for the role. As Under-Secretary for India, he transformed the regular parliamentary statement of Indian finances into a much wider ranging political survey. His stated hope was that an official annual account might bring enlightened opinion more firmly to bear on the management of India, and make Britain's benevolent policy better appreciated by France, Germany and Russia.<sup>186</sup> Again, the move did not have the impact he hoped for.<sup>187</sup> Later, in 1879, Grant Duff outlined a plan for an Imperial museum, which would communicate to the British citizen 'a wide knowledge of the gigantic Empire to which he belongs'. By stimulating a romantic attraction towards India, it would neutralize the inevitable realization that Britain's material gains from the country were at best modest. The museum would also diffuse 'true Imperialism' among the people and act as an antidote to 'false Imperialism'.<sup>188</sup>

This language, in 1879, had a very specific target. In each of his discussions of empire after the Conservatives took office in 1874, Grant Duff's central goal was to reveal the radical illegitimacy of their approach to the subject.<sup>189</sup> He had always viewed Disraeli as a politically immoral figure, who valued only immediate success.<sup>190</sup> As Prime Minister, Grant Duff declared, Disraeli had taken Britain back to 'the old bad ways of vulgarity, violence, and braggadocio'.<sup>191</sup> In particular, Grant Duff abominated 'the bastard Imperialism of the Prime Minister and his immediate following', which he saw as a deliberate attempt to emulate the system of Napoleon III in France.<sup>192</sup> The Conservatives' policy in Afghanistan, most spectacularly, was 'one vast web of crime', cynically conceived to stir up feeling in the constituencies.<sup>193</sup> Grant Duff fulminated that the 'blood-and-thunder' imperialists barely grasped the nature of the empire they were so eager to expand.<sup>194</sup> His distaste for Disraeli was of a piece with his loathing of Bismarck. Both men cared only for tactics, and not for ideas.

Disraeli's Crystal Palace speech of 1872 hung over Liberal politicians for decades. There, famously, he had told his audience that 'since the advent of Liberalism, 40 years ago, you will find that there has been no effort so continuous, so subtle, supported by so much energy, and carried on with so much ability and acumen, as the attempts of Liberalism to effect the disintegration of the Empire'.<sup>195</sup> Finding ways to combat this allegation was one of the great challenges facing the Liberal Party in the 1870s. The strategy Gladstone pursued in his Midlothian Campaign was one solution.<sup>196</sup> Grant

<sup>186</sup> For example, Grant Duff, *HPD3*, 198:1147–74, 3 August 1869. This speech was also reprinted, as many of Grant Duff's speeches were, as a pamphlet, [M.E. Grant Duff], *East India: Financial Statement, 3 August, 1869* (Edinburgh, 1869). For his intentions, see Grant Duff, *HPD3*, 179:584, 19 May 1865.

<sup>187</sup> Though see Colonel Sykes, *HPD3*, 198:1195, 3 August 1869; 'Mr Grant Duff's Survey of India', *Economist*, 21 August 1869, p. 981.

<sup>188</sup> Grant Duff, *HPD3*, 248:1721–32, 31 July 1879.

<sup>189</sup> See Durrans, 'A two-edged sword'.

<sup>190</sup> Grant Duff, Preface to [Arnold-Forster], *Francis Deák*, pp. xi–xii; Grant Duff, *Elgin*, p. 98.

<sup>191</sup> 'Mr Grant Duff, M.P., at Winchester', *Daily News*, 7 February 1879, p. 2.

<sup>192</sup> Grant Duff, *Foreign Policy*, p. 22. Napoleon III's system had been, in turn, as much like the Imperialism of ancient Rome as the lapse of centuries allowed: [Grant Duff], *Few Words on France*, p. 20.

<sup>193</sup> Mountstuart E. Grant Duff, *The Afghan Policy of the Beaconsfield Government and its Results* (London, ?1880), pp. 39, 19. See Christopher Wallace, 'The Liberals and Afghanistan, 1878–89', *Historical Research*, 85/228 (2012), pp. 306–28.

<sup>194</sup> 'Mr Grant Duff in Peterhead', *Aberdeen Journal*, 21 December 1880, pp. 6–7.

<sup>195</sup> *Times*, 25 June 1872, pp. 7–8. For the (supposed) impact of the speech, see, for instance, Robert Blake, *The Conservative Party from Peel to Churchill* (London, 1970), pp. 125–30; Anthony Webster, *The Debate on the Rise of the British Empire* (Manchester, 2006), p. 34.

<sup>196</sup> Jonathan Parry, *The Rise and Fall of Liberal Government in Victorian Britain* (New Haven, 1993), ch. 12; Robert Kelley, 'Midlothian: A study in politics and ideas', *Victorian Studies*, 4/2 (1960), pp. 118–40.

Duff's approach was different. He insisted that Liberals were not cold and distant to the colonies, but fully appreciated their due importance.<sup>197</sup> But he made the case that the real 'Imperial temper' thought more of the duties imposed by vast possessions, than of the rights they conferred over others. The acceptance of, and emphasis on, the gravity of this responsibility added to the power of England, and of Englishmen.<sup>198</sup>

Expanding this point, Grant Duff argued that 'true Imperialism' was not about the display and ostentation of which the Conservatives were so fond. What really impressed Indians, he said, was not masquerading but solid power; not Lord Lytton in his overblown pageant dress, but John Lawrence in his shirt-sleeves.<sup>199</sup> Grant Duff always argued that if the public mind could acknowledge the true greatness of Britain – as a European, African, Australian, Oceanic and Asiatic power – then the political class of the country might stop fussing about its 'prestige and our position', and simply resolve to 'do our duty as a cosmopolitan power'.<sup>200</sup> Grant Duff's philosophic, grave, dutiful approach to empire was deliberately framed to contrast with Disraeli's unreasoned, flighty, self-interested version. It may well have been sincere, but it was also calculated to win rhetorical ground from Conservatives, in imperial as in international affairs. So it was another integrated element of Grant Duff's tightly wound, globe-spanning political vision, that was tied as much to the immediate demands of Liberal politics as it was to 'liberal' political theory.

## Conclusion

This article has aimed to show that the sustained study of reflective politicians can advance the project of understanding Victorian Liberalism in relation to its international contexts. It has sought to bridge the historiographical divide that persists between political-historical and intellectual-historical approaches to nineteenth-century British international ideas, by indicating how partisan forces and philosophical traditions could inform one another.<sup>201</sup> Reflective politicians operated in conscious dialogue with the better known thinkers who dominate recent scholarship on the history of international thought, while also being acknowledged by contemporaries as authentic and authoritative exponents of 'liberal' ideas. But their political-intellectual projects were distinct from the strands of elaborated liberalism with which historians are mainly familiar.<sup>202</sup> Grant Duff was an outstanding character within this instructive but understudied category of nineteenth-century actors, exceptional in the scope, clarity and public recognition afforded to his international arguments.

Grant Duff's main significance lies in exposing the intellectual architecture of British Liberalism in the age of Gladstone, particularly in its relations with the wider world. Except in the case of Gladstone himself, historians have barely attempted to establish how individual parliamentary Liberals imagined the connections between domestic, international and imperial politics, especially not in relation to new questions about languages and competing definitions of 'liberalism'.<sup>203</sup> Grant Duff

<sup>197</sup> 'Mr Grant Duff at Elgin', *Glasgow Herald*, 8 January 1874, p. 2.

<sup>198</sup> Grant Duff, *Notes of an Indian Journey*, p. 246.

<sup>199</sup> M. E. Grant Duff, 'British interests in the East', *Nineteenth Century*, 7/38 (1880), pp. 658–76, at p. 674.

<sup>200</sup> Grant Duff, HPD3, 204:888, 24 February 1871.

<sup>201</sup> See above, notes 2–4.

<sup>202</sup> See, recently, Alan S. Kahan, *Freedom from Fear: An Incomplete History of Liberalism* (Princeton, NJ, 2023); Michael Freeden, Javier Fernández-Sebastián and Jörn Leonhard (eds), *In Search of European Liberalisms: Concepts, Languages, Ideologies* (New York, 2019); Helena Rosenblatt, *The Lost History of Liberalism: From Ancient Rome to the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton, NJ, 2018); Edmund Fawcett, *Liberalism: The Life of an Idea* (Princeton, NJ, 2018).

<sup>203</sup> See, seminally, H. C. G. Matthew, *Gladstone, 1809–1898* (Oxford, 1997).

helps us to understand the ideological dynamics of the conservative, ‘philosophic’ Liberalism of which he was a leading proponent. Bringing Britain, foreign states and the empire into a unified analysis, Grant Duff celebrated the application of intellect to the art of government, his definition of ‘true Liberalism’. His political metaphysics predicted a world order ultimately dominated by interdependent Liberal causes; and, thanks to Cobdenite schemes of non-intervention, at peace. This world-spanning vision, in which the great desiderata were always better theories and more thoughtful leaders, aligned with Grant Duff’s views that the Second Reform Act had gone too far, that the masses had no inherent political wisdom, and that Home Rule was a ‘fatal surrender’.<sup>204</sup> Grant Duff presented an invigorating (and assertively anti-Conservative) vision of ‘philosophic’ Liberalism on the global stage: casting British Liberals as part of an unstoppable progressive tide, possessing a monopoly on political rationality, and with right on their side. Rising above the parliamentary party’s coarse disagreements on policies and priorities, he offered an uplifting cause to array behind. His ideas remind us that certain strands of ‘liberal’ international thought only make sense in their relatively ephemeral party-political contexts, and as hard-edged rejections of specific party-political alternatives.

There are two broader points we can draw out from the substance of Grant Duff’s thought. The first is that the dividing line between ‘international’ and ‘imperial’ thinking that has shaped so much writing on the global engagements of later-nineteenth-century Liberalism can, in some situations, do with being blurred. For Grant Duff, at least, working from a Liberalism that was rooted in a grand concept of progress, the two categories were evidently interdependent. There will be other, and perhaps deeper, interdependencies to find. The second point is that Grant Duff’s concepts of ‘Liberalism’, the ‘Liberal’ cause and even of the ‘Liberal Party’ were not nationally bounded. It was part of his project as a political educator of the British public to situate British Liberalism in relation to counterpart foreign Liberalisms, and to establish which pretending members of the latter category truly merited the label. Grant Duff was not alone in these habits of thought. There remains much more to be said about the ways in which British attempts to grapple with the content and meaning of the vexed category ‘liberalism’, both in the Gladstonian era and beyond it, became increasingly anchored in attempts to assess overseas claimants to the mantle. In this vital sense of basic ideological and institutional self-definition, then, there is a pressing need to reconnect the thought-worlds of British Liberalism more systematically with its interpretations of its international competitors.

It is also worth reflecting more gingerly on the wider implications of this case for the writing of the history of international thought. This article has sought to show that Grant Duff was a meaningful contributor to the landscape of late-Victorian international thought. It would, however, be hard to make a case for his election to a canon of international thinkers. He left little traceable intellectual legacy, precisely because his thinking was tied so closely to the political currents, battles and ambitions of his day. But a preoccupation with canons and lineages can obscure the fact that nineteenth-century international-political argument, as it faced the British public, was in significant part the business of groups with partisan axes to grind. Figures like Grant Duff entered into debates about global issues both to make genuine contributions to political theory and public understanding, but also to achieve political goals. They needed to combat their enemies, to further their careers, and to drag those on the parliamentary benches around them towards their own particular visions of the future. Their thinking responded to imperatives distinct from

<sup>204</sup> Grant Duff, *Out of the Past*, I, p. 217.

those that guided more academic inquiries into international affairs, not least the need to satisfy constituents and to flatter superiors. But the respective agglomerations of argument that resulted reached similar readerships. They also interacted. Articulate politicians helped to define for contemporaries, including canonical thinkers, what 'liberal' policies and stances looked like abroad. Most of the best known international thinkers, in turn, shared the goal of influencing politicians and policy. A new-model history of late-Victorian international thought that set these interactions centre stage might look quite different. There is something to gain by experimenting with other ways of drawing the parameters of who counts in 'liberal' international thinking, and by engaging more seriously with the messy, combative late-nineteenth-century political-intellectual environment in which British international political thought took shape.

The very last point can be made with greater confidence. Historians of later-nineteenth-century international thought, in common with historians of nineteenth-century British politics, have had little to say about the patterns of transnational connection behind British international and imperial ideas. Grant Duff's case, though in important ways exceptional, throws into sharp relief how deeply these dynamics could matter. His political project, as we have seen, was in large part about communicating the results of a committed programme of international reading and network-building to the British public, and in turn about representing Britain to Continental elites. This programme would have been impossible half a century earlier. Since then, as a result of technological advances and shifting sensibilities, British politicians had gained much readier access to foreign literatures, the international press, regular overseas travel and more rapid and reliable international postal networks. These developments plainly opened up new possibilities for transnational intellectual exchanges. Historical understanding can only benefit from looking more closely at their impact on British politics and political ideas. Grant Duff took comprehensive advantage of the new opportunities of his age, concocting a cosmopolitan scheme of politics which would have been literally unthinkable without the sustained study of foreign-language newspapers, periodicals, and other texts, and his copious experiences overseas. His case points the way towards a new approach to later-nineteenth-century British international thinking: one which pays systematic attention to the seams which connected it with webs of European, Atlantic and global ideas, and to the influences those webs exerted.