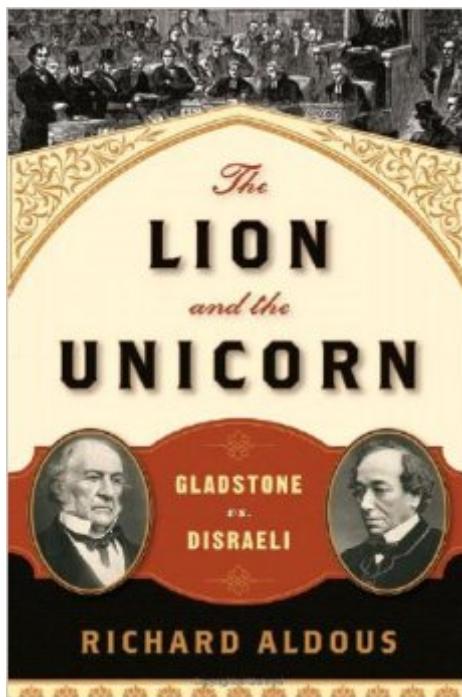


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The Lion And The Unicorn: Gladstone Vs. Disraeli



Synopsis

The vicious political struggle that electrified Victorian society, brilliantly re-created for a new generation. William Gladstone and Benjamin Disraeli were the fiercest political rivals of the nineteenth century. Their intense mutual hatred was both ideologically driven and deeply personal. Their vitriolic duels, carried out over decades, lend profound insight into the social and political currents that dominated Victorian England. To Disraeli "a legendary dandy descended from Sephardic Jews" his antagonist was an "unprincipled maniac" characterized by an "extraordinary mixture of envy, vindictiveness, hypocrisy, and superstition." For the conservative aristocrat Gladstone, his rival was "the Grand Corrupter," whose destruction he plotted "day and night, week by week, month by month." In the tradition of Roy Jenkins and A. N. Wilson, Richard Aldous has written an outstanding political biography, giving us the first dual portrait of this intense and momentous rivalry. Aldous's vivid narrative style "by turns powerful, witty, and stirring" brings new life to the Gladstone and Disraeli story and confirms a perennial truth: in politics, everything is personal. 16 pages of illustrations

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Customer Reviews

Back in College, more than seven years ago, I took a course on 19th century Britain. One of the papers I submitted for that class was on Britain's converted Jewish Premier, Benjamin Disraeli, and specifically on his rivalry with that other icon of the Victorian age, William Gladstone. I have to confess I remember almost nothing of that class. I found "The Lion and the Unicorn: Gladstone vs.

Disraeli" in the gigantic Piccadilly Waterstone's in London, and I knew I had to get it, if for no other reason than old time's sake. Few characters would be more appropriate choices for a double biography than Disraeli and Gladstone; They alternated as Premiers (Gladstone was British Prime Minister four times), and their clashes in the house of Commons defined an age. Both their similarities and contrasts potentially shed a great light on Victorian Britain. I wish Aldous would have spent more time contextualizing the Disraeli-Gladstone rivalry. The Victorian world was very different than our own, and Aldous might have done well to introduce it to the modern reader. He says almost nothing on Britain's foreign situation, and only touches briefly the 1832 Reform Act, so it is hard to understand why it is "perhaps the defining constitutional landmark on the long road to democracy" (p. 25). Significantly, we never learn why Both Gladstone and Disraeli decided to start their careers as Tories rather than Whigs. The first public controversy Aldous genuinely pays attention to was the crisis over the repeal of the Corn Laws. The Corn Laws were tariffs on the importation of grain, particularly wheat, in a system meant to keep its price stable.

The Lion beat the Unicorn all round the town. Some gave them white bread, some gave them brown: Some gave them plum-cake and drummed them out of town. "The original illustrations of the Lion and the Unicorn in Lewis Carroll's Through the Looking Glass, created by noted illustrator Sir John Tenniel, bear a startling resemblance to Tenniel's illustrations of Benjamin Disraeli (the Unicorn) and William Gladstone (the Lion) published in Punch. The resemblance is no coincidence according to historian Richard Aldous and the image of the Lion and Unicorn fighting all around the town provides Aldous with a perfect title for his biography of the decades-long political rivalry between two giants of 19th-century British politics. "The Lion and the Unicorn" is an entertaining and very informative look at a political rivalry that changed the face of British politics and presaged the type of personalized electioneering that is found in both the United States and Britain today. Aldous doesn't set out to give a straight-line biography of both Gladstone and Disraeli. He notes that there is plenty of material on their individual lives and that, rather, he has set out to take a comprehensive look at their bitter relationship, a relationship that produced titanic clashes for over 40 years. The result is an almost breathless recitation of a roller coast ride in which a political rivalry turned decidedly personal is played out in Parliament and across Britain. Gladstone, who first entered Parliament in 1832, and Disraeli (arriving in 1837) were both Tories at the start of their career and (ostensibly) political allies. However, Gladstone soon left for the Liberals while Disraeli remained with the Tories.

For those who are familiar with the rivalry between Gladstone and Disraeli there is little new in substance in this account; but this is a quite superb retelling of it - beautifully written and a huge pleasure to read. It is rich in its evocation of the personalities of these two men, and of many other characters in the story. The focus is on the principals, but at the same time it gives a very full account of the complicated parliamentary history of the time, and the only topic which I thought was a little too cursorily treated was the international situation culminating in the Congress of Berlin which was considered such a triumph for Disraeli. The only other criticism I have to make is that on one occasion Richard Aldous cannot resist telling with a straight face the story of how Palmerston was said to have died, two days short of his 81st birthday, sprawled across a billiard table in flagrante delicto with a chambermaid, only to start the next paragraph: "whether or not this local gossip ... was true..." Unless all the other accounts of Palmerston's death, cited in notes at the end of the book, are inventions, it manifestly was not true. Not the least of the achievements of these two men were their performances when they were physically ill or exhausted. Gladstone, the physically more robust of the two, suffered psychosomatically from diarrhoea before big occasions; Disraeli was always rather frail and suffered severely when the weather was cold. Over and over again contemporaries noted how ill they looked when they entered the House of Commons, but how they pulled themselves together to deliver very long and often electrifying speeches. Aldous brings out very well how each man worsted the other, only to be worsted by the other in turn.

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