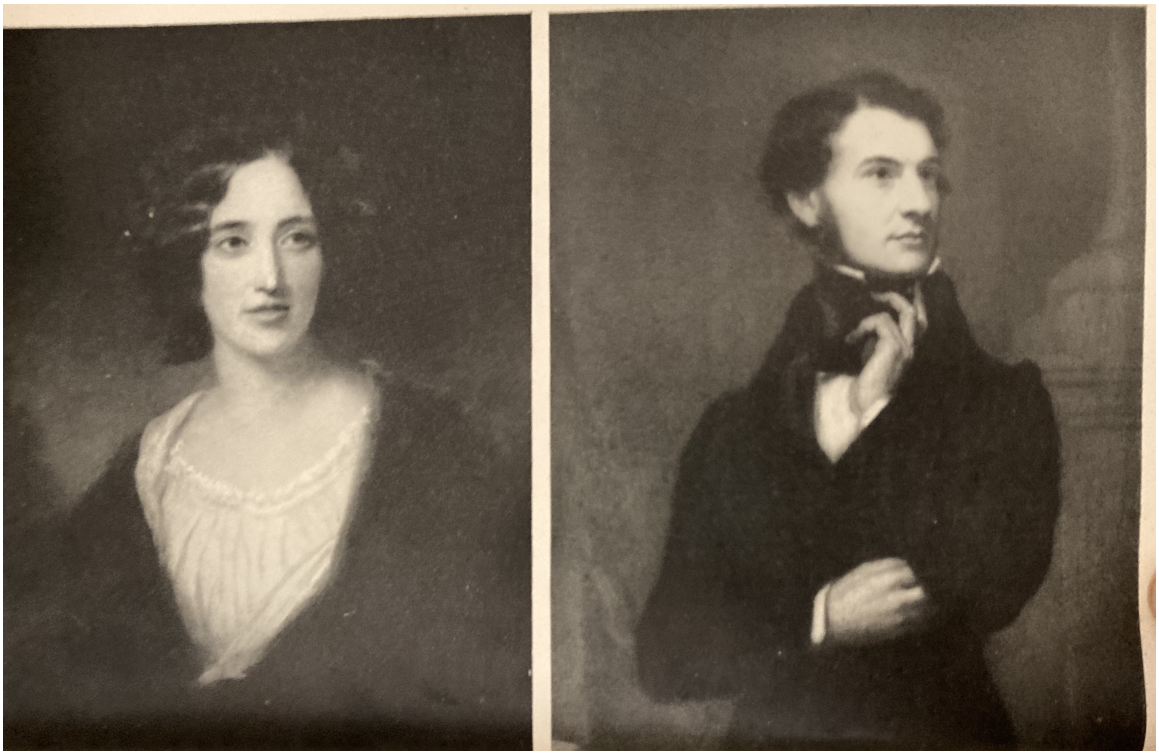
William Gladstone (1809-1898)

Proposed to Lady Caroline Farquhar (1814-1890). Rejected.
Proposed to Lady Frances Douglas (1819-1895). Rejected.
Proposed to Catherine Glynne (1812-1900). Married 1839.



Portraits of Catherine and William Gladstone, 1840
By Frederick Say and William Bradley

I have used a number of different sources, primary and secondary, in assembling this: see the "Note on Sources" at the end. These have some minor inconsistencies, which I note in the foootnotes.

In 1835, William Ewart Gladstone was a rising young star of the Conservative party.[1] He had been a Member of Parliament since 1832. His father had made a fortune in a wide range of business activities: sugar, tobacco, shipping insurance, and plantations in British Guiana and elsewhere. In 1833, when slavery was abolished in Britain and the slave-holders received monetary compensation, John Gladstone received £93,526[2] for 2039 slaves.

Throughout his life, Gladstone was extremely religious; he engaged in constant self-examination, endeavoring to live his life and use his gifts in the way that

[1] Gladstone was a Tory from 1828 to 1834; a Conservative from 1834 to 1846; a Peelite from 1846 to 1859; and a Liberal from 1859 until his death in 1898.

[2] According to Marlow. Diamond says £106,769.

would best carry out his duty to his Creator. By all accounts, he had a considerable talent for determining that his duty to his Creator aligned well with his personal and political advantage. Bertrand Russell, who knew him and admired him, wrote, "Invariably he earnestly consulted his conscience, and invariably his conscience earnestly gave him the convenient answer."[3].

As an indication of his views at this point in his career and of how he was generally regarded: In 1839 he wrote a book *The State in its Relations with the Church* in which he argued that the State was morally obliged to profess and promote its chosen religion. In Great Britain, he argued, no one but members of Church of England should be allowed to hold public office in the United Kingdom. (He allowed that there could be some flexibility for some Dissenters, and unhappily admitted that this could not be done in India, because of treaties.) In 1839, this was an extremely reactionary view. Macaulay, who was a liberal, wrote a fiercely negative review, but began it with some pleasant words for Gladstone personally: "The author of this volume is a young man of unblemished character, and of distinguished parliamentary talents, the rising, hope of those stern and unbending Tories who follow, reluctantly and mutinously, a leader [Robert Peel] whose experience and eloquence are indispensable to them, but, whose cautious temper and moderate opinions they abhor. ... [W]e believe that we do him no more than justice when we say that his abilities and his demeanour have obtained for him the respect and good will of all parties."

Proposal to Lady Caroline Farquhar: August 1835

Lady Caroline Farquhar was the daughter of Sir Thomas Farquhar, 2nd Baronet, and Sybella Martha Farquhar. She was 21 years old[4] tall, dark, and considered a beauty.

Her brother Walter[5] had been a friend of Gladstone's at Eton. Gladstone met her at a party in 1835, became a frequent visitor, and soon fell in love with her. He wrote to her father, Sir Thomas Farquhar, expressing his interest, and asking from permission to court her.

The three letters connected with this proposal that I include here, were transcribed by myself from scans of the handwritten original on the Gladstone Library website. These scans are often difficult to read, especially the first, which is presumably a draft later copied, and is full of insertions and cross-outs. Portions of these letters have been transcribed in Diamond; and two

[3]Bertrand Russell, *Unpopular Essays*

[4]Diamond says 19 years old, but the findagrave website `https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/80331215/caroline-eliza-grey` says that she was born in March 1814.

[5]Marlow says "brother"; Diamond says "cousin"; Lady Farquhar's letter does not specify the relation. There may have been two Walter Farquhars.

further readings were supplied by Nicholas Denyer. In my transcriptions below, '(?)' means that I am uncertain of the previous word; ??? indicates some word or phrase where I could not even conjecture the reading.

Draft of a letter from Gladstone to Sir Thomas Farquhar

The Albany Aug 25/35

My dear Sir,

I scarcely dare to conjecture with what feelings you and Lady F. will receive the request I am about to profer, ??? which is, that you will, if it be in accordance with your own inclinations and sense of duty, allow to me a continuance of those opportunities of intercourse with your family, which your kindness has led you already to afford me ?? and to ??? if not to justify the ??? upon which I have ?? ventured. It is scarcely necessary to explain that what I have now said has reference to your daughter, and should you and Lady Farquhar consider me guilty, as may perhaps be the case, of a boldness altogether unwarranted, still I think that your knowledge of her qualities and attractions to which I do not presume to give an epithet will induce you to regard such an error with indulgence and to forgive it.

Nothing can be less my right than to assume that any opportunities or circumstances could ensure me access to her affections: Yet I am not deterred even by unfeigned persuasion of my own unworthiness to possess them from thus using the means which may enable me to ascertain whether so precious a prize is as hopeless of attainment as I feel it to be unmerited.

I regret(?) that duty obliges me in describing(?) ??? as I could wish the theme of my letter. But I do not disguise ??? from myself that I have no pretensions to urge which are worthy of the name. My Father's liberality enables me, his fourth and youngest son, to contemplate a change of state. Without impropriety, though, I would guard(?) myself against appearing to imply that any great advantages of fortune are likely ever to be within my reach. Neither would my inclinations so far as I am acquainted with them be such as to ?? acquisitions become probable. My relations for the major part enjoy less of those and of other worldly advantages than has been the lot of our own immediate family. In my own person, I have been blessed by Providence. with what, though anything but great in itself, may nevertheless be deemed so, when viewed in relation either to my expectations or my deserts, but no one is more conscious than myself that the uncertainty of all things earthly has perhaps a particularly forcible application to one whose ??? have like ??? been early committed upon the perilous contingencies of political life, and who is therefore ??? especially ??? with reference to ??? objects which belong to such condition as human

beings. It would I think be indelicate ??? to particularise anything further, and it was not ??? which led me to this point; but allow me to add that I have written these few explanatory sentences under the ??? influence of desire to avoid taking advantage of the personal kindnesses which had been ??? yourself and Lady Farquhar for the purpose of flattering your ??? I must always feel gratified. The blinding influence of self-love is sufficiently known to me to make me believe it quite possible that by this letter I may, unconsciously, but with ??? have rendered myself liable to your displeasure; but it will be very painful to me if in forming such a conception as that which has now prompted me, I shall seem to have abused a favour which I do not value the less highly from discovering that I had never any claims to it.

Although I have been led to write at so much length, I may have left unsaid which ought to have been said(?), but I do not feel that I have a right to indulge before you the ??? of my feelings which it seems an imperative duty to control as long as it is possible or likely that these expressions may give pain who are the objects of them.

Early tomorrow, I propose to leave town for Norfolk, where my direction is "Shoteshaine Park, Long Stratton," but by the mail of Thursday evening I hope to return to town, as on public business I have sufficient occasion to do.

Believe me, my dear Sir
Respectfully and faithfully yours,
W.E. Gladstone

Since Sir Thomas was busy and unwell, Catherine's mother, Lady Sybella Farquhar, wrote back to Gladstone. She said that Catherine had been unaware that he was interested in her, and felt toward him no warmer feelings than general admiration of his character, but that she had no special attachments, so it was OK for him to court her.

Sybella Farquhar to Gladstone

Thursday Evening
Roehampton
Aug 27 1835

Dear Mr Gladstone,

As Sir Thomas is much engaged with business and is also very unwell, I have requested him to allow me to reply to your letter received yesterday, which would have been more immediately answered had not Sir Thomas wished to discuss its contents with me. — Before I enter more fully on the subject, I beg to assure you we

both feel much gratified at the preference you express for our Daughter, and we hope to see you at Roehampton whenever you feel disposed to come to us. At the same time, as I think iit best to be frank and candid on all occasions, I will not disguise from you the exact position of things. — As my Daughter's happiness has always been our first consideration, and she is now of an age to judge of her own feelings and views, we thought it right to mention to her the contents of your letter and I had a very long conversation with her afterwards on the subject. — She expressed extreme surprise at the communication, not having the smallest idea you entertained any preference for her. — She told me she considered the acquaintance of so short a duration, it was impossible to form any decision as to the future, or whether on more intimate acquaintance a congeniality of tastes and opinions might lead to any warmer sentiments than at present exists, for I should not feel justified in withholding from you the conviction that her affections at present are *entirely free,* nor at this moment does any impression (?) lead me to *promise* a favorable result to future (?) intercourse. — At the same time, she seemed pleased and flattered at the preference you have expressed for her, and it seems desirous of ???. I trust my dear Mr Gladstone I may not, most undesignedly, have wounded your feelings in speaking thus openly, but I have been anxious, *most anxious* to guard against implying a preference on her part, which must be more a creation springing from *future* intercourse than from any past acquaintanceship. As her home has hitherto been the happiest of the happy and as she professes the most exalted ideas of the duties of married life, she naturally feels a diffidence of entering upon it, ??? every sentiment of devotion and affection ???? I have pondered much on the policy of putting her au courant of what is going on, as with ?? a sensitive and delicate mind. The knowledge of an existing preference and the position in which you stand relative to her must naturally throw a ??? over her feelings and conduct. ??? the state of her feelings without a complete explanation. There was no alternative left.

Believe me Dear Mr Gladstone
Yours very sincerely,
Sybella M. Farquhar

Gladstone found this letter encouraging.

Gladstone Diary

Friday August 28 [in Italian]

Found an excellent letter, on waking up, from the mother, which, without being too flattering to my pride displays mother and daughter alike in the best possible light. Oh how much I owe to the grace of God, whatever the result of my prayer may be. Everything makes dearer to me the aim I have in view.

Some of Catherine's relatives, including Walter, were encouraging; others were more doubtful. Gladstone wrote more letters to the Farquhars. I have not read these. According to Marlow, "they were obscure, daunting dissertations upon his religious views and a code of social conduct such as he hoped his wife would follow." Eventually Lady Farquhar put an end to it with a letter informing him that Caroline's affections were directed elsewhere.

Sybella Farquhar to Gladstone

Roehampton
6 March

My dear Mr Gladstone,

I should have written you some time ago, but my mind has been otherwise painfully occupied, and I have naturally shrunk from any additional exertion; I therefore requested Walter first to speak to you on a subject very interesting to us both, & I intended when my spirits were calmer to write to you myself. Hearing however from Walter that you asked often ??? from me *now*, I hasten to comply with your request. Such perfect candor has hitherto existed on the subject in question, I felt it my duty to make a communication through my son, though in fact it was extremely premature. I thought Walter would explain better than I could do, *why* I thought it advisable to give up all idea of a future alliance. — At the time I spoke to you in the summer, I informed you though my daughter had no preference for you, I believe she was equally indifferent to any other person. As long as her heart remained untouched(?), I saw no reason why a more intimate acquaintance with you that(?) lead to warmer sentiments and create feelings of attachment & regard. Since that period, however, I have had reason to change my opinion & I must acknowledge to you I think her affections are *now* no longer at her own disposal. Whether or not her wishes may ever be realized is quite another question. The future alone can decide on an affair of *great uncertainty,* but this does not alter the case as regards yourself, as I consider it unfair and dishonorable to leave you in ignorance of such a circumstance. ??? took place or not, it was right for you to know the truth. — I cannot close my letter without assuring you whatever has passed on the subject of religion. Whatever fears I may have imbibed of estrangement and separation from my daughter they have long since ??? easy. I feel that her mind is so strongly bent on serious thoughts, your being more than usually religious would have been a circumstance rather favorable than otherwise. In making this explanation (which I hardly need say is quite confidential), I am happy in the conviction that your pride(?) and feelings must be ??? as you have not met since the summer.

Believe me

My dear Mr Gladstone
Yours sincerely
S. M. Farquhar

Caroline Farquhar married Lord Charles Grey, a Whig MP and son of Prime Minister Earl Grey, in July 1836. She became a Lady of the Bedchamber for Queen Victoria, had four daughters and a son (plus a second son who died in infancy) and lived to the age of 76.

Lady Frances Harriet Douglas

Lady Frances Douglas was the eldest daughter of the Earl and Countess of Morton. At the time of Gladstone's proposal to her in summer of 1837 she was 18 years old.[6] Little seems to be known about her or about Gladstone's proposal. Gladstone's diaries make only one slight, indirect reference to the proposal. Marlow's account is as follows:

"Gladstone . . . remet a young woman named Lady Frances Douglas with whom he had a nodding acquaintance, and within a very short space of time he proposed marriage to her. Lady Frances was very ordinary and immature less able to cope with the Gladstonian onslaughts than Caroline Farquhar had been, but her initial reaction was one of silent bewilderment, which only encouraged her ardent and by now somewhat matrimonially desperate suitor. Early in November 1837, having heard nothing from Lady Frances, Gladstone unburdened himself to friends [E.B. Ramsay] in Edinburgh and they promised to make enquiries on his behalf. A week later he received 'a crushing letter' in answer to the queries, but it did not crush him entirely, and he continued to remain hopeful until the end of January 1838, when he heard conclusively that Lady Frances did not wish to marry him."

In September 1838, she married William Thomas Spencer Fitzwilliam, 6th Earl Fitzwilliam, who was one of the richest men in England. (When he died in 1902, he left a fortune of £3 billion from Yorkshire coal). She had 14 children, two of whom died in infancy. She died at the age of 75.

[6] https://www.thepeerage.com/p2716.htm

Proposal to Catherine Glynne

Catherine Glynne came from an aristocratic and politically-connected family. Her father was Sir Stephen Glynne, 8th Baronet, of Hawarden Castle, She and her sister Mary were considered great beauties; Catherine had a reputation for flirtatiousness.

Gladstone and Catherine's older brother, Stephen Glynne, became friends at Christ Church, Oxford. Gladstone first met Catherine in 1834. In 1838, Catherine, Stephen, and Mary travelled to Rome; so did Gladstone, separately. Gladstone courted Catherine at the Colosseum and in Naples — at least, he considered it courting, though apparently she didn't catch on. Finally he proposed by letter:

William Gladstone to Catherine Glynne

62 Piazza di Spagna 17 January, 1839: night

I address you, my dear Miss Glynne, in terms below my desires, yet perhaps beyond my right to say in the simple words which I believe will in any event be most acceptable to you, and which no occasion has offered to address to you otherwise than by letter. My heart and hand are at your disposal.

I seek much in a wife in gifts better than those of our human pride, and am also sensible that she can find little in me: sensible that, were you to treat this note as the offspring of utter presumption, I must not be surprised: sensible that the lot I invite you to share, even if it be not attended, as I trust it is not, with peculiar

disadvantages of an outward kind, is one, I do not say unequal to your deserts, for that were saying little, but liable at best to changes and perplexities and pains which, for myself, I contemplate without apprehension, but to which it is perhaps selfishness in the main, with the sense of inward dependence counteracting an opposite sense of my too real unworthiness, which would make me contribute to expose another — and that other!

For the substance of what I write I have no apology to offer which can be effectual. As respects its time, my own mind required no postponement, and I could not presume that it would give me any more reasonable hope of access to your affections. I wait your Command with the humility which I owe to a being so far purer and better than my own, and with other feelings which I have not the right to describe in the colours of truth. And, indeed, they are chequered with the consciousness that I ought to wish you a more blessed portion in life than that which alone it is in my power to tender. For pardon, for indulgence, I do not ask. Your own nature will yield me, unsolicited, much more than I desire. But I must cease. May you live, and die, it is not less my anticipation than my desire, from day to day more possessed of the peace which passeth understanding, and of the holiness which is its fountain.

With esteem, with gratitude, suffer me by one more act of boldness to add, with warm and true affection,

I am, Yours,
W.E.Gladstone

In Marlow's account, "[T]he proposal took [Catherine] by surprise, Gladstone's conviction that she was the woman he truly desired and admire having not apparently communicated itself, Catherine responded with a concise letter[7] and a personal interview, in both of which she said that, if Mr. Gladstone wanted an immediate reply, it would necessarily be negative, but in which she intimated that she held him in high regard that given time might ripen into love.

She had still not decided by February, and Gladstone was getting depressed about it.

Gladstone's Diary: February 6, 1839

The truth is I believe my affections are more useless than ever. Poured forth more than once & more than once repudiated they have become stale and unprofitable: and I am strangely divided between the pain of solitude in the heart and the shame of soliciting a love which I sometimes fear is impossible for me to repay. I am so deadened and exhausted by what has taken place: my still dreams of romance have

[7] I have not been able to find the text of this.

been so near my real life and their dissipation has brought so much devastation, at least the pain of devastation, upon it: that I am to one who freshly and genuinely loves, what a sacked and blackened country, seared with recent conflagration, is to the green shady and well watered vales which have never known the tread of the spoiler. and yet I suffered more & more from being *inwardly* alone, & I more & more felt my childish dependence: childish, not childlike, because it is gracefully appropriate to the nature of a child, whereas I fear that in my circumstances a nature truly noble would probably come to the conclusion that it had nothing left to give which would be worthy of any woman herself such as to be worthy of its attachment. — I offer myself therefore with many conflicting feelings, but this time must I suppose be the last, were it only for shame's sake.

In her C.G. I saw what I desire, as I think distinctly developed: the admiration of sacrifice made for great objects — and a gentle not unwomanly contempt for the luxurious pleasures of the world. She said to me in a Church when we observed upon the profusion of labor bestowed in its embellishment and our secular luxuries "do you think we can be justified in indulging ourselves in all these luxuries?" I loved her for this question: oh how we want that whch shall surrender, that rather which shall escape from, some at least of the burden [of] outward life, that our souls may be free to look at God and our Redeemer and to have the putting His will simply into act for their hourly & continual as well as their daily discipline. And now that she has I think kindly and generously desired, or hinted, a suspension, how sweet a thing it is to reflect, that her heart and will are entirely in the hands of God to do as it seemeth Him fit; she is removed from all advantitious circumstances: in the clear recesses of her own mind where Divine light alone I trust shall penetrate, she will be led to a decision in which second motives have no part. My He in this and in all things be with her.

But by June, Catherine's heart had been won.

Gladstone's Diary: Saturday June 8, 1839

I went down with the G.s — & here my Catherine gave me herself. We walked apart and with an effort she said that all doubt on my part might end. I intreated her to try & know me well: I told her what was my original destination & desire in life, in what sense & manner I remained in connection with politics — all this produced no revulsion in her pure and lofty spirit. She asked for the earliest Communion, that we might go together to the altar of Christ. Blessed creature! until I escape from these distractions of business I cannot feel the boon I have received nor do her even the scanty justice that would otherwise be in my power. We agreed that I should remain silent until tomorrow, for I wished to show her the letter of September 1835, and explain to her, at the least, that subject.

Gladstone's Diary: Sunday June 8, 1839

I was with Catherine between Churches & in the afternoon. I told her what I had to say: she read the letter and rejoiced in it. It was not fear that she would view it differently, but it was the desire to fulfil an inward compact with myself, which prompted me to leave her free until she had read it: but now I freely and absolutely call her mine and I have kissed her cheek. They are all most kind: & may I have from my God a due sense of the value and the sweetness of this gift, and of the responsibility connected with it: and the power to lay it as a sacrifice before Him. — I have given her (led by her questions) these passages for canons of our living.

> Le frondi onde s'infronda tutto l'orto
> Dei Ortolano Eterno, am' io contanto
> Quanto de Lui in lor de bene è porto —[8]

then St. Paul's 'Henceforth know I no man after the flesh[9] — and Dante again

> In la sua volontade è nostra pace:
> Ella é quel mare al qual tutto si muove.[10]

She responds at once — it seems as if in her heart there were no strongholds to cast down.

> Gladstone and Catherine were married in a double wedding with her sister Mary and George Lyttelton on July 25, 1839. They had eight children, one of whom died in childhood. Gladstone went on to be Prime Minister four times, for a total of about twelve years. Catherine was very active in a variety of charitable enterprises, founding convalescent home, orphanages, soup kitchens and so on. She died at the age of 88.

Notes on sources

Primary sources:
The correspondence of William Gladstone, held at Gladstone's Library, Hawarden, North Wales.

- Draft of letter from William Gladstone to Sir Thomas Farquhar, August 25. 1835
  `https://gladstoneslibrarydigital.starter3ua.preservica.com/portal/en-US/asset/sdb%3AIO%7C8620b5b6-5f09-4454-b49c-4d04aa68d03a?keyword=Proposal&keyword=to&keyword=Caroline&keyword=Farquhar`

[8] "The leaves that leaf all over the Eternal Gardener's garden, I love in measure of the good that he has lavished on them" — Dante, *Paradiso,* 36:65.

[9] 2nd Corinthians 5:16

[10] In His Will lies our peace: it is the sea towards which all moves. *Paradiso,* 3:26.

- Letter from Lady Sybella Farquhar to William Gladstone, August 27, 1835 https://gladstoneslibrarydigital.starter3ua.preservica.com/portal/en-US/asset/sdb%3AIO%7C363d2dc9-d2ac-405b-a8a9-8b2122df18bd?keyword=Proposal&keyword=to&keyword=Caroline&keyword=Farquhar
- Letter from Lady Sybella Farquhar to William Gladstone, June 3, 1836 https://gladstoneslibrarydigital.starter3ua.preservica.com/portal/en-US/asset/sdb%3AIO%7Ce6f47e7f-63c7-4294-b138-de2dc99c5460?keyword=lady&keyword=sybella&keyword=farquhar

These are included here with the gracious permission of Gladstone's Library.

The Gladstone Diaries, vol. 2. ed. M.R.D. Foot. Oxford University Press, 1968.

Secondary sources:

Marion Diamond, "Gladstone in Love,", *Historians are Past Caring Blog*, May 14, 2018.

Philip Magnus, *Gladstone: A Biography.* E.P. Dutton. 1954

Joyce Marlow, *The Oak and the Ivy: An Intimate Biography of William and Catherine Gladstone.* Doubleday & Co., 1977.

Acknowledgements

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