

PREFACE

To “stump” is to “go about making political speeches” in support of “candidate” or “cause,” to “campaign or canvass,” to “speak informally” as part of a political campaign. The verb is dated from 1838 in one notable dictionary, and the earlier noun, “stump speech,” from 1820. But the precise origins of the practice remain somewhat unclear. *The Oxford English Dictionary* includes a use of “stump oratory” from 1811 and records John Quincy Adams’s distaste for the delivery of “party insinuation” from “the top of a stump” in 1808. Other texts reference speech making from the base of a tree nearly one hundred years before.¹

At first strongly associated with the frontier states of the American Republic—especially Kentucky and Tennessee—the practice was eventually accepted across the continent. By the middle years of the nineteenth century, stump speaking was widely considered to be “peculiarly” or “essentially” a kind of “American institution.” The *Charleston Patriot* dubbed it a “power in the Republic,” to rank alongside Pulpit, Bar, and Senate. Popular lecturers appraised the stump as “one of the institutions of the land.”²

But the stump did not remain “peculiarly” American. As a symbol of rough and ambitious frontier eloquence, often exaggerated versions of “stump oratory” crossed the Atlantic in newspapers and comic fiction. Agitators and minstrel players—apparent embodiments of the American way—made the journey, too. In the rude and demotic vigor of these performances, democracy’s opponents in Britain perceived the outlines of a bustling, tempestuous, and turbulent future. Scottish essayist Thomas Carlyle even composed a pamphlet dedicated

to *The Stump Orator*, 1850, which identified this species of “public haranguer” with “universal suffrage,” “tavern dinners” and “Kentucky stumps,” mourning its “ugly” and “perilous” influence on a society threatened with “crisis” and “annihilation.”³

From the 1850s, “the stump” was increasingly linked with the agitators of the British world—what had earlier been called “waggon-oratory” or demagoguery. There, however, the practice of “stumping” for elective office developed more slowly than in the United States. Hustings speeches by candidates were generalized into more dispersed oratory tours only from the 1870s; given the radical associations of “the stump,” this was at first considered a highly controversial course. The stumping candidate was thought to threaten the customs of British politics and the culture of aristocratic service, redolent of the beer and peanuts of Tammany Hall or the bloody excesses of Jacobin France. Only at the very end of the nineteenth century did British candidates of all kinds unashamedly take to the stump. Even today, Samuel Johnson’s dictionary records that this “now common” word is still felt to be “somewhat undignified” to the British ear.⁴

But whatever the linguistic traces of earlier controversies, it is the extent and completeness of change that impresses most fully: the space of one hundred years witnessed a profound alteration in the practice and meaning of democratic speech. In the first decades of the nineteenth century, “stump speaking” was identified on the fringes of the American frontier; by the beginning of the twentieth century, it was applied and mostly accepted across the North American continent and the British world, too. Like its more famous cousins—the mass political party and the social movement—the “stump oration” was eventually installed as a defining feature of Anglo-American political life.

The rise of stump speaking forms a fascinating and important episode in the history of nineteenth-century politics. In the diffusion of campaign oratory, the battle for elective office was reshaped: more aggressive and direct, less restrained and opaque. In repeated arguments over the meaning and significance of “stump oratory,” the culture of public life became the object of recurrent contemplation: the dangers of demagoguery, the possibilities of contentious debate. As Americans and Britons took to the stump, so the contours of politics took on a more familiar, recognizably modern form.

And yet, despite the apparent importance of “the stump,” no previous historian has sought to tell the story of its rise. This book is the first to systematically examine the career of “stump oratory.” It aims to trace its origins, diffusion, remaking, and acceptance; to excavate its radical meaning; to establish its historical significance. The book is an act of rediscovery. It is also a historical argument for the importance of “the stump.”

A history of this kind might have been written in many ways. To fully capture the transformations and the significance of stump speaking, I have adopted a particular approach to the past: a performative, culturalist, transnational, and biographical perspective. This combination of methods may be unfamiliar to some readers, but it underpins my argument for the import of “stumping,” and it therefore merits a brief explanation and a defense.

A “performative” approach to stump oratory rests on the notion that political behavior works in ways akin to drama and that the concepts used to analyze drama might also be applied to the political domain. The method was notably ventured in the scholarship of sociologist Erving Goffman and anthropologist Victor Turner some five decades ago. It has been extended and refined in recent studies of gender, terrorism, liberalism, and nonviolence. Indeed, a large number of historians have begun to adopt the dramaturgical method, and one writer has even identified a “performative turn” within the discipline. Historians of nineteenth-century politics number among those who have experimented with the approach, including in recent studies of the hustings.⁵

Understanding “stump oratory” from this perspective, the historian is concerned not simply with what politicians say but also with the ways in which they say it: the modulation of voice, the animation of gestures, the choice of language, the exchanges with auditors and with rivals. Attending to these issues, the performance of a public speech can be understood as a dramatic episode: the assertion of claims and identities, the interaction of players, the conventional resolution in dominance or concord, the less frequent refusal to accept defeat. Studying the stump oration in these terms, the delivery of campaign speeches offers a privileged vantage for scrutinizing the relationships between electors and candidates, the subaltern and the elite. Challenges to power sometimes appear more starkly. In this way, the contribution of stump oratory to democratic change can be more fully understood.

A culturalist approach to the topic directs attention to the ways in which stump oratory became the object of representation: poetry, paintings, satirical fiction, minstrelsy. It also invites the historian to examine the changing ways in which stump oratory was defined or imagined and the sometimes impassioned commentary that it provoked.

Pursuing a cultural history, I give close attention to the meanings ascribed to public action, and I do not seek to fix or define the essential boundaries of stump oratory in advance. Across this volume, I attempt to rediscover the places where the performance of stump oratory was first discerned, to track its migration, to identify moments of metamorphosis, and to trace the different ways in which the action of stumping was apprehended and understood. This means that the book is not simply a study of electioneering speech. It

is also an examination of the meanings attributed to the stump and of the cultural conflicts that they could produce.

It is also a history that spans regions, nations, and transnational exchanges. “Stump oratory” was named on the American frontier and was at first very strongly associated with the states of the Republic’s Southwest. Its status as a frontier practice shaped the reception and meaning of the performance; it took several decades before stump speaking was accepted in America’s Northeast. Once it had been confirmed as a national habit, however, the “American” identity of “the stump” in turn influenced political developments in other parts of the world. The passage of stories and orators outward from the United States helped establish the outlines of stump speaking within the British Empire; the vicissitudes of the Republic conveyed the method’s possibilities as well as its dangers. As a result, when British subjects took to the stump, this move was quite explicitly understood as the adoption of “American” methods. The rise of campaign oratory was also an example of the Americanization of political techniques.

The apparent strangeness and radicalism of the performance outside the United States—and its strongly national association—reflected divergent political contexts. Britain was a constitutional monarchy, in which the power of the sovereign had been constrained by the rise of Parliament. In a bicameral system, governments rested on their capacity to command a majority on the floor of the lower house. Parliament rather than the people lay at the center of politics, and the right to elect representatives remained highly restricted. Voting was at first the sole preserve of a landed elite, and the Reform Act of 1832 shared the privilege of the suffrage with only the most prosperous members of a rising middle class. Even after a subsequent Reform Act in 1867, Britain was far from a mass democracy: only one-third of adult males were eligible to vote, and no woman possessed that right.

Australia was colonized by Great Britain from 1788 and at first administered by officials and appointments made from London. However, the major colonies in the southeast of the continent were granted “responsible government” from the 1850s, and local parliaments on the British model henceforth made laws on principal matters. The new colonial constitutions or reforms soon afterward extended greater rights of participation: property qualifications were abolished for voting and representation, and Australia pioneered the secret ballot. But although some British observers thought the people of the antipodes were rather more “American” than “English,” political structures and assumptions remained highly attuned to British traditions. Those who flirted with apparently “American” principles or methods risked opprobrium.

The United States was a republic. Forged in a revolution that declared the self-evident truth of human equality, its political order gave greater scope

for self-rule. Elections in the United States were frequent for local, state, and national offices. There was no king, but rather a president. Race and gender were confirmed as principles of exclusion, but over the first half of the nineteenth century, nearly all white men were free to participate. Mass parties commanded popular affection and organized the struggle for power. For observers as much as citizens, “nation” and “democracy” seemed increasingly intertwined.

As a transnational investigation, this book examines the export of stump speaking across these three very different contexts. Refusing the once customary “national” framework for political history, and aiming to enhance understanding of those relationships and movements that crossed national boundaries, I contemplate the circulation of a political performance from the United States to the British world. As its most distinguished practitioners have emphasized, such a transnational approach does not necessarily imply a neglect of the “nation,” and neither does it reject the possibility of comparisons between nations. Rather, it attempts to “denaturalize” the nation, foregrounding the ways in which its boundaries, institutions, and traditions have been shaped by external as well as internal forces.⁶ Across this volume, I blend attention to “transnational” and “national,” reconstructing a previously undocumented traffic between nations, while also exploring how local circumstances could influence how, when, and why stump oratory might be adopted. In the book’s Conclusion, I systematically exploit the possibilities of such comparisons: examining the United States, Britain, and Australia alongside one another so as to better understand the historical processes that drove oratorical and political change.

Finally, this book is also organized around the careers of a handful of important individuals. Such a narrative arrangement does not, of course, imply that the history of stump speaking can be reduced to a procession of great orators or that the transformative power of stumping can be understood solely as the product of personal talent or will. As we shall see, an apparent capacity for speech making was only rarely a mark of individual genius and was more often a collective product: schooled in comradely tutelage and partisan contest, promoted by institutions and press agents, acclaimed by supporters sometimes beyond its worth.

Nonetheless, if stump oratory was never a purely individual performance, then it is also true that the form and meaning of the stump speech pivoted around the career of a relatively small number of notable orators: Davy Crockett, Henry Clay, Charles Gavan Duffy, Graham Berry, and William Gladstone, among some other, lesser, lights. In remarkable appearances, these and other practitioners became widely known; in the cultivation of distinctive styles, they embodied new possibilities of democratic eloquence; in the

achievement of political celebrity, they became models, for good or ill, of what the stump speech might be. To consider these orators in some detail is not necessarily to celebrate a canon of great men but rather to explore how oratorical reputation and example helped shape subsequent practice.⁷ It is in a careful study of how major stumping careers were made, sustained, remembered, and exploited that we might best recapture the complex rhythms of political change.

Dramaturgical, culturalist, transnational, and biographical, the book departs from the procedures and frameworks of much earlier political history. *On the Stump* follows a temporality and historical dynamic that will be unfamiliar to many students of nineteenth-century politics. Readers should be warned of these departures from convention in the pages to come.

First, the book differs in temporality. Traditional political history was organized around the nation, considering the reigns of kings, prime ministers, and presidents; challengers have suggested an alternative periodization, structured around national “party systems”—moments of sustained contest between Federalist and Republican, Democrat and Whig, Liberal and Tory, and so on. Seeking to track the history of stump oratory, I have organized this study according to quite different principles. The narrative divides into three separate parts.

Initially, I consider the beginnings of the practice, its close association with the American frontier, and its gradual rise to prominence through the thrilling and controversial careers of Colonel Davy Crockett and Senator Henry Clay. Second, I trace the diffusion and transformation of stump oratory within the United States, a process advanced by its use in party struggles that reached a new intensity from the fifth decade of the nineteenth century. Finally, I narrate how developments in the United States shaped the British world, influencing British understandings of both radical and partisan speech, inspiring agitational performance, and framing the growth of a more vigorous and open practice of electioneering. The volume closes by establishing the ways in which stump oratory was eventually accepted across the Anglo-American world and by more systematically considering its influence on the character of modern politics.

The book’s concern with political performance also offers a comparatively novel approach to the examination of political change. Earlier studies of performance have emphasized the relatively fluid and relational character of social identities, challenging the more familiar understanding of such social categories as gender and race as rigid or fixed. They have further confirmed that performances change, for the apparent repetition of an action invariably implies some degree of reinterpretation, reinvention, and instability. If behaviors and events are “performances,” then this means that they are ineluctably

re-presented or remade. This, in turn, is thought to open up the possibility that they might be deliberately reoriented and transformed.⁸

These insights also apply to the political domain. In the performance of the stump speech, a distinctive understanding of the political order was enacted. In the diffusion and refashioning of the stump speech, new political identities were asserted, and new claims were made. The history of the stump is therefore the source of distinctive insights into the unfolding of politics in the nineteenth century. Through the close examination of a political performance, the book also offers a novel perspective on the process of democratic change.

Although this historical study has no direct precedents, I am nonetheless able to draw upon generations of important scholarship. There is a rich body of research on the nature of nineteenth-century elections in the United States and Britain, and the best of this work often acknowledges the role of the stump speech. We have many excellent histories of such subjects as the presidential campaigns, the political parties, the suffrage, the act of voting, election rituals, electoral fraud, the hustings, and the platform.⁹ Much of this work informs my own study of the stump speech, but no previous scholar has granted this performance his or her primary attention. None has traced the stump speech beyond the electoral contest, considering its impact on cultural debates. For the student of modern electoral politics, stump oratory features most often as a subordinate aspect of some other history.

Likewise, fragments of this story have been told before in fine studies of the development of oratory in modern Britain and America. Important work in this field has explored a range of overlapping topics: the connections between revolution and public speech, the rise of radical oratory, conflicts over the meaning and form of language, the emergence of a “democratic eloquence,” the connections between oratory and the culture of public life. But electoral persuasion (described by one scholar as “notorious” for its “literary insignificance”) has understandably received only limited attention in works of these kinds; canonical texts, literary compositions, and celebrated rhetoricians have occupied a more central place.¹⁰ In consequence, the rhetorical forms of the stumper have not yet been closely examined; no extant study has sought to systematically interrogate the complex history of the rhetoric of the stump.

Finally, several earlier scholars have previously examined the influence of the United States on British political discussion and practice. The tradition reaches back at least to the 1950s, and it has recently been energized in studies of the revolutionary years, the early Republic, and of even broader spans. Little of this work closely examines the period between the Revolution and the Civil War, however, and none of it attempts to examine the experience of the Australian colonies alongside the “Mother country.”¹¹

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Modern democracy has been shaped by many forces, and stump oratory is only one aspect of its complicated history. I do not wish to deny the import of other factors or to proclaim a new orthodoxy regarding the politics of the past. Rather, I aim merely to recover the history of the stump speech and to consider its usually overlooked role in the forging of political change. By recapturing the historical significance of the stump, this book aspires to better understand the unfolding of the great democratic adventure. I hope, thereby, to nurture and to extend it.