

The Making of a Speech.

THE ORATORICAL ART AS VIEWED BY MR. CHAMBERLAIN, SIR HENRY FOWLER, LORD KIMBERLEY, SIR CHARLES DILKE, MR. ASQUITH, LORD PEEL, THE EX-SPEAKER, MR. J. W. LOWTHER, THE DEPUTY-SPEAKER, EARL SPENCER, THE BISHOP OF RIPON, AND DR. CLIFFORD.

BY FREDERICK DOLMAN.

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“**T**HE orator is born, not made.” To the universality of belief in this familiar platitude is largely due, I believe, the vast amount of poor speaking with which public bodies, from the House of Commons on an “off night” to the local cricket club at its annual dinner, are constantly afflicted. A few irrepressible speakers probably cherish the illusion that they are born orators, and most of the others, from the careless indifference with which they give utterance to their thoughts, seem to argue the hopelessness of any contest with the decree of Nature. But the experience of men who win distinction on the platform goes far to prove that, whilst the divine fire of a Gladstone or a Chatham is the gift of the gods, the art of eloquence is to be acquired, like other arts, by severe effort and strenuous labour. At least, that is the conclusion which has been forced upon my mind by inquiries I have been making among a number of representative men at the Senate and in the pulpit, my two leading questions being somewhat as follows:—

“What is your own method in the making of a speech?”

“Speaking from experience, what advice would you give to a novice who sought your aid in the art of public speaking?”

Mr. Chamberlain happens to have discussed the subject with some fulness in an address he gave to the Birmingham and Edgbaston Debating Society on the occasion of its jubilee a few years ago, and to this address he referred me when I put these questions to him. The Secretary of State for the Colonies mentioned that he joined the society in 1854, when eighteen years of age,

and continued a member till 1863, during which period he always took an active part in the debates. Mr. Chamberlain’s first speech was delivered on the night of his election to the society, in opposition to a resolution, “That the character and conduct of Oliver Cromwell do not entitle him to the admiration of posterity.”

“No good argument,” Mr. Chamberlain declared at the outset, “was ever perfectly rendered without serious labour, and if it be the fact, as I believe it is, as we have been told by a great French writer, that true eloquence consists in saying all that is proper and nothing more—it is the latter part of the

condition which is most difficult, and more time will be taken in pruning away redundancies, in abandoning all that is not pertinent to the subject, than in preparing the language which is actually to be used. . . .

“I imagine that the experience of all of us will suggest instances in which even good speakers would have spoken better if they had adopted a little more compression. That means trouble, that means pain.”

In Mr. Chamberlain’s opinion John Bright was the greatest orator

of his generation, and, having regard to the personal association which existed between them for many years, there is much interest in the account which he gives of Bright’s method:—

“Bright took infinite pains in the preparation of his speeches, giving even as much as a week or more to the elaboration of his thoughts; and he told me in regard to his method that his object was in the first place to grasp himself clearly the central idea and main principle that he wished to impress upon his hearers, then to state it in the simplest terms he could find, and, while avoiding



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every superfluous word, every unnecessary argument, to reinforce the text by such illustrations and arguments as suggested themselves to his mind, 'and so,' he said, 'I hope that when I sit down my listeners will have understood and will retain the main thing, the main idea, that has been the object of my discourse.'

"Well," continued Mr. Chamberlain, "it is not all of us who can draw the bow of Ulysses. We cannot hope to imitate Mr. Bright in his highest flights, but we may all follow his example in grudging no labour and no time in order to make clear to others the truth as it appears to us."

One or two of Mr. Chamberlain's fellow-members of the Birmingham and Edgbaston Debating Society have placed on record their impressions of the right honourable gentleman's early oratory. At first, it seems, Mr. Chamberlain "learned his speeches by heart and somewhat painfully; his delivery, though always clear, was at first laboured."

"It was impossible," writes Mr. C. N. Mathew, who was hon. secretary of the society during part of the time of Mr. Chamberlain's membership, "not to be interested, edified, and often amused by the intelligence, point, and smartness of his speech. At the same time there was, especially in the earlier days of his career, a certain setness and formality of style that suggested that his speeches were anything but the inspiration of the moment, but had been made beforehand, and were being read off—the result of painstaking study, care, and elaboration." On one occasion, it is stated, Mr. Chamberlain actually broke down in proposing a toast at a semi-public dinner, and resumed his seat without finishing his speech. On the whole, therefore, Mr. Chamberlain's own experience goes to support his view as to eloquence—in its less exacting sense—being the result of persevering effort rather than of inherent talent.

I had a brief conversation with Sir Charles

Dilke one night at the House of Commons, in the ranks of whose debaters he has for long held a foremost place.

"My earliest experience," said Sir Charles, "was obtained at the Cambridge Union. I spoke with some frequency and became President. The Cambridge Union at that time favoured a business-like style of speech as compared with the more oratorical manner of the Oxford Union, and this fact had its influence, I suppose, on my own training. A 'Freshman' who attempted anything like rhetorical flourish was apt to be laughed at.

A speech full of facts and 'points' rather than phrases was best listened to, and this naturally led one to prepare the subject more than the speech—by which I mean getting up the facts and arguments carefully and leaving the language to take care of itself."

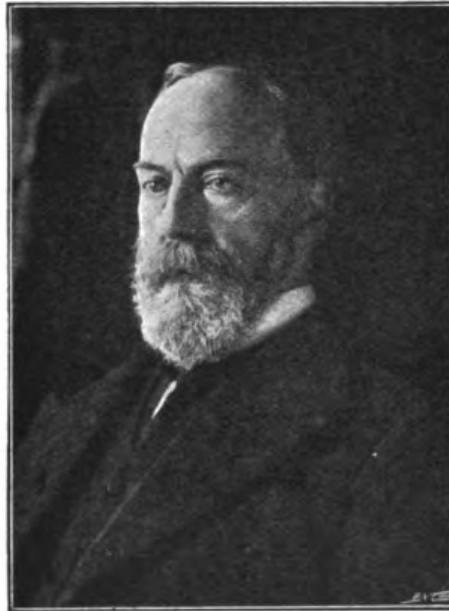
"And has your method always been the same?"

"Yes; after going round the world I went at once into Parliament. But although I had never felt nervous when speaking at Cambridge I was for some years very much afraid of the House of Commons, and never faced my

audience without mental distress. But I gradually overcame this feeling and persevered in my old Cambridge method, carefully getting up every subject and preparing fairly full notes, but notes which were entirely concerned with the matter and not the manner of my speech."

"But I suppose a telling phrase in a political speech—such a phrase as goes all over the country—is scarcely ever impromptu?"

"Ah, I wonder! Lord Beaconsfield, who was the greatest of phrase-makers in his time, used to quote Bolingbroke and Burke in the earlier part of his career, and later in life used to quote himself. Some of the best phrases one hears in the House of Commons don't go over the country. Major Rasch, for instance, often says remarkably good things, but they don't give him fame. When bimetallism was under discussion he



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summed up the whole economic philosophy of the question in two or three words. 'Mr. Speaker,' said Major Rasch, 'what is bi-metallism? You take a shilling and call it eighteenpence.' The *bon mot* was excellent, but it did not catch on. As a rule, the famous phrase owes almost everything to the voice. Some of John Bright's most successful phrases would have sounded commonplace from a speaker with a less musical and expressive voice."

"But from your rule as to preparation, Sir Charles, would you not make an exception in favour of the peroration?"

"If you have got a very effective beginning and end, so much the better, of course. But nothing is more deplorable than to hear a man, towards the end of his speech, break off into a passage which he has obviously learned by heart—the transition from the spontaneous to the automatic is very painful. On the other hand, the difficulty in making an end is, as you say, a common trouble with inexperienced speakers, and to avoid these false finishes it is certainly well to have a concluding point fixed in your mind."

By way of commentary upon Sir Charles Dilke's conversation some interesting references to his career are to be found in Mr. H. W. Lucy's "Diary of Two Parliaments." For some time after he entered the House of Commons in 1868 Dilke, we are told, "was about as bad a speaker as one would find among an average score of members." In 1877, on the other hand, Mr. Lucy describes him as "one of the most effective speakers in the House."

The Right Hon. Sir Henry Fowler, M.P., who is a distinguished solicitor as well as an ex-Secretary of State, was kind enough to spare half an hour of his busy day to a discussion of this subject.

"Where did you graduate as a speaker?" I first asked Sir Henry, who has been described by a friendly opponent as a statesman who "never spoke without being master of his subject, and, though it was often complicated, he made it clear."

"At the Law Students' Debating Society, which I regularly attended during the years I was studying law in London. This society, which meets at the Law Institution in Chancery Lane, used to have debates—and still has, I believe—on general subjects as well as on questions of law. This was all the training

I had, but it was valuable training because of the friendly criticism the members gave each other."

"And you were frequently speaking from that time forward?"

"Well, on returning to Wolverhampton I took an active interest in local life. Then, until I was elected to the House of Commons in 1880, I was frequently taking part in public meetings on free education and other political questions that were not then so popular as they afterwards became."

"Would you qualify in any way your opinion of debating societies, Sir Henry, as training grounds?"

"Well, I suppose there is some danger, as you have just sug-

gested, of such societies encouraging speaking for speaking's sake. But this should not be much if the critical spirit on the part of the members furnishes healthy restraint. I am sure that since these societies became prevalent there has been a decided improvement in the general average of public speaking, although there is still, of course, a great deal of empty wordiness."

"Do you think this improvement corresponds to an improvement in the House of Commons?"

"Well, during the twenty years I have been a member there has been a considerable change in the House of Commons' style. The



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business-like style is now most in favour; men care little for the rounded periods which pleased their fathers, and appreciate most the speeches which show most knowledge of the subject. The average of debating power is certainly higher, I should say. On the other hand, many more members read—or practically read—their speeches. At one time the House was much less lenient to this practice, and a story is told of a Lancashire member who, in using extremely full notes, was assailed with ironical cries of ‘Read, read.’ ‘I am reading,’ the poor man innocently replied.”

Speaking of his own method, Sir Henry gave me to understand that it varied with the occasion. He never spared trouble in preparation of a subject, but sometimes his notes for an hour’s speech would not occupy more than one sheet of letter-paper; at other times they would fill many.

“I find it advisable to have full notes,” the right honourable gentleman added,

“when dealing with figures, as in a Budget debate, or when speaking with a sense of exceptional responsibility, as in the debate which took place when I was at the India Office on the Indian Cotton Duties. Even with the best preparation and the most carefully prepared notes there is always some danger of saying something which you did not intend to say, or of omitting something which you did intend to say. I suppose there is no public speaker who has not sometimes used the wrong word because the right one was not forthcoming at the moment. This is one of the worst tribulations of the platform, particularly if a speaker is called over the coals for something which he really did not intend to say.”

To attempt to speak from memory was a

course to be recommended only to those who had an exceptional faculty in this respect. “Bright’s ‘purple patches,’ as they were called,” remarked Sir Henry, in reminiscent mood, “were committed to memory, but as a rule he spoke from notes on small square cards. Lord Randolph Churchill used to write some of his speeches, but I recollect his telling me that he was able to remember them by writing them out once. As a rule, the strain on a memorizer is too great; there is always the possibility of a disastrous breakdown. This nervous strain seriously injured Dr. Punshon, the great preacher, I believe. Mr. Gladstone, with extraordinarily ample flow of language, never spoke in this way; he would prepare a sheaf of notes for a big speech, but in point of fact little or no use would be made of them. But, of course, the genius of oratory stands by itself, independent of method or rule. The real debater also, it seems to me, is born, and not made; an instinct for debate,

such as Mr. Balfour, Mr. Chamberlain, and Mr. Asquith possess, cannot be acquired. A statesman who has this instinct very strongly once told me that he could not enjoy a sermon; he was always thinking, ‘What is the reply to this fellow?’

“But for the average man I should say that the best advice as to public speaking was this: Prepare your points and arguments well, but leave to the inspiration of the moment the language in which they are to be clothed.”



LORD PEEL.

Lord Peel, the ex-Speaker, sent me a brief reply, but as will be seen from its terms gave an instructive clue as to the opinions which, with his exceptional experience of the House of Commons, he personally holds on the subject.

“I have no ‘method,’” writes Lord Peel,

"which I think it would be advantageous to send you. I recollect, however, a little book by—I think—the Bishop of Ripon which I cannot help saying would be useful in conveying advice and hints on the subject."

The book whose value Lord Peel thus endorses is entitled "Lectures on Preaching." As the name implies, Dr. Boyd Carpenter addresses himself through the work to pulpit aspirants, but, according to the high authority of the ex-Speaker, the Bishop's advice is equally applicable to platform aspirants, and I therefore give one or two illustrative extracts:—

"Clear language—language, that is, which carries its own meaning straight, and without starting side-puzzles in the minds of your hearers—is the first condition of fitness of language. From this it will follow that what is simple and natural is best. The ambition of grand, high-sounding words is a poor ambition, and, like most mean ambitions, it defeats itself. Let us avoid the example of the clergyman who counselled the boys to whom he was preaching on the subject of mirth or cheerfulness: 'Let your mirth be as the estival electricity, lambent but innocuous.'

"Talk English and not Johnsonese. Let your thought govern your language, and not your language your thought; and for this purpose give your thought its natural expression. Do not let your minnows talk like whales. Is your thought simple? Be content with simple words. Is your thought noble? Then simple language most nobly expresses it. If you use lofty and dignified language let it be because the thought itself insensibly lifts your style to a loftier range. The cultivation of word-worship is the decay of thought. The ambition of word-painting is a small one and must thwart true eloquence; for if

your thought be not eloquent your words will only mock them."

By his eloquence both on the platform and in the pulpit the Bishop of Ripon is pre-eminent in the Church of England, and I am very glad, therefore, that on reference to him his lordship was good enough to summarize, from the particular standpoint of this article, his philosophy of speech-making:—

"I would say to anyone who has to speak—think, think, think, and think again, till you have separated the essential from the accidental matter of your subject, and till you can clearly see what needs to be said. Think, think, think again of the people, that you may be able to say what needs to be said in the way which they can understand. And after all preparation think, think, think again till you are in the possession of the thing

you mean and wish to say. Words are but counters, and the power that can use them best is a clear perception of what you need to say, animated by an earnest wish to say it.

"I can add really little to this," continued the Bishop, "except this word—Reverence. No man will be a help to his brother man who does not reverence him as well as the message he seeks to pass on to him. For all speakers this is needful; for the religious teacher more than all."

Dr. Clifford, who is probably the most influential speaker among Nonconformist divines, was kind enough to give me a very careful account of his own methods:—

My method is (1) to master my facts and my line of reasoning as far as possible.

(2) Write out what I wish to say as fully as time permits.

(3) Rewrite or—as the Germans say—rework the subject.



THE LORD BISHOP OF RIPON.

(4) "Boil down" so as to get the briefest analysis of what is to be said.

(5) Resist the temptation to rely upon the written phrase and leave the mind to act with all possible freedom and spontaneity.

(6) Make clear to myself the precise character of the result I wish to achieve and then bend all my energies in that direction.

In the form of advice Dr. Clifford tabulated further information as to the way in which his platform powers had been gained:—

(1) Never forget distinctness of articulation. This is a primary consideration in effective utterance.

(2) To get a vocabulary read the best literature and mark all *elect* terms; terms that give distinction to a sentence and lift it out of the rut of a wearisome commonness.

(3) To secure self-command become self-oblivious by charging the entire mind—the emotional not less than the reflective part—with the subject and with the purpose of the speech.

(4) Incessant and undespairing work is all in all.



DR. CLIFFORD.

From these statements it would seem that few public speakers can find their work more arduous and exacting than the well-known minister of Westbourne Park Chapel. Yet how little this is suspected probably by the large audience whom Dr. Clifford moves to indignation or laughter with apparently equal ease!

The Right Hon. H. H. Asquith replied to my interrogation with the remark: "I suspect that in the matter of public speaking every man is, and ought to be, a law to himself." Holding this somewhat exceptional opinion, Mr. Asquith, who had his

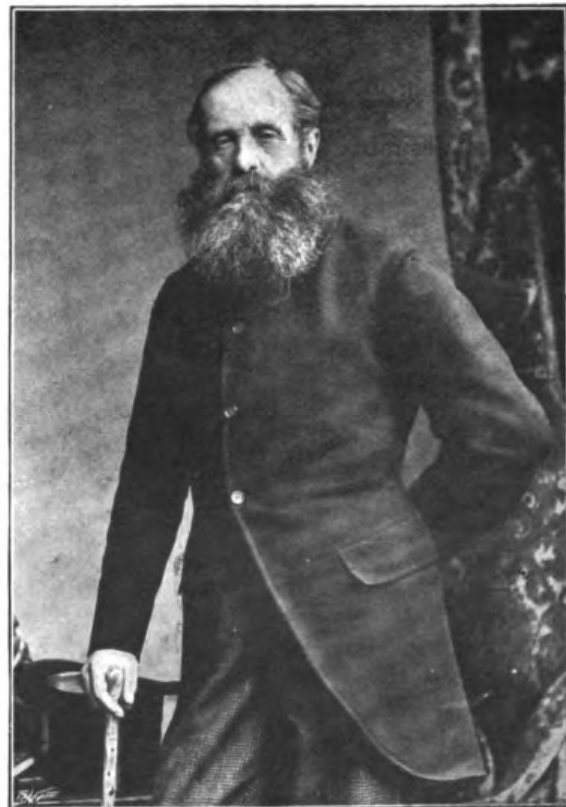


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own training in oratory at the Oxford Union, had, of course, nothing to say in the way of advice or information as to method.

Earl Spencer was precluded from complying with my desire by a depreciative estimate of his own powers in the Senate or on the platform, with which few of those who have heard him would be found to agree.

"I have no pretensions as a speaker," his lordship writes to me, "to justify my giving



EARL SPENCER.

Original from
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

advice to those who want to learn how to speak.

"I can make my meaning and intention clear, but beyond that I cannot aspire to be a speaker to imitate."

In the same spirit the Right Hon. J. W. Lowther, who now occupies the position of Deputy-Speaker of the House of Commons, whom I next consulted, disclaimed the title of orator and the presumption of giving advice as to the method of becoming an orator, an orator being born and not made.

"Nevertheless," Mr. Lowther said, however, "one can become a fluent and agreeable speaker by dint of practice. He should begin young, never lose an opportunity of saying a few words in public, carefully prepare the matter and form of his speech, cultivate conciseness, keep a stock of good stories in hand from which to draw as occasion requires, give special attention to the head and tail of his speech, and arrange his subject in logical or chronological order.

"It is desirable at first to speak from pretty full notes; these should gradually be cut down to a few headings, until they can finally be dispensed

with. Brevity is, above all, the greatest desideratum. The audience should be left hungry with a desire for more, and not surfeited with a sense of repletion.

"Variety of style," concluded Mr. Lowther, "is an accomplishment to be added later. Voice production is also a matter which requires special attention. Action, in the sense of gesticulation, should be sparsely used, but when used it should be bold and sweeping."



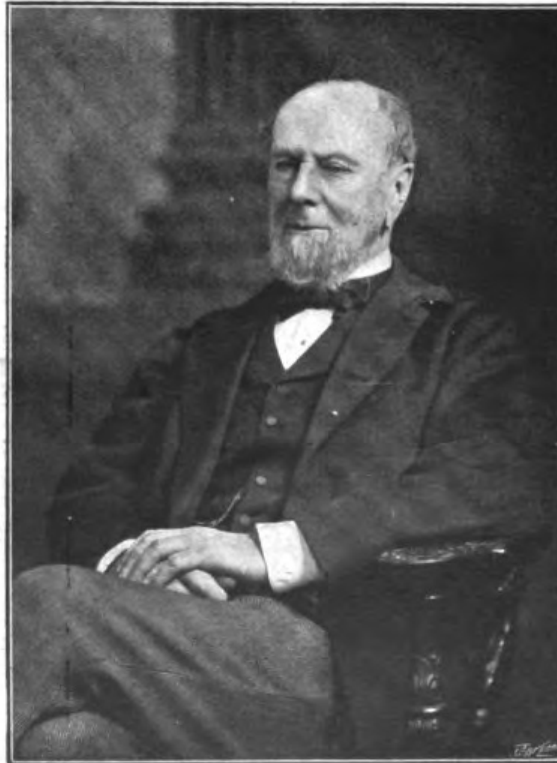
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Lord Kimberley was kind enough to interest himself in the subject when convalescent at Falmouth after his long illness of last winter. The Leader of the Opposition in the House of Lords, however, confined himself to a statement of his own

method; he would not venture upon advice to others.

"I never write a speech," his lordship told me. "If it is a long and important one I make a few very brief notes.

"Otherwise I make no notes. I speak practically without any previous preparation, trusting to my general knowledge of the subject. My method is the one which a (now) long experience has shown me suits me best."



LORD KIMBERLEY.