

Margaret Thatcher: Complete Public Statements 1945-1990

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'The Oratory of Triumph'

The preface and introduction to the four-volume, 3,300-page collection of the complete parliamentary speeches of Sir Robert Peel declare Peel's speeches to be 'the political mirror of the eventful age in which he lived', 'the sermons of the political mind', and 'in themselves HISTORY'.⁽¹⁾ The 1853 publication of the 697 speeches contained in these volumes erected a monumental headstone for the ex-premier following his accidental death three years earlier. Although not the last such publishing project attempted, this would be the last realized effort to encapsulate and commemorate a great political career through a comprehensive collection of speeches for over a century.

No previous prime minister had ever been memorialized to this extent - although this may in part reflect the editor's claim that 'No man was ever more faithfully reported than Sir Robert Peel' ⁽²⁾. In 1806, following his death earlier that year, a four-volume collection of 147 of the Younger Pitt's parliamentary speeches was issued.⁽³⁾ As John Ehrman has noted, however, this collection leaves out nearly all of Pitt's budget speeches ⁽⁴⁾ significant omissions to be sure. Although not a prime minister, Pitt's great political and oratorical rival, Charles James Fox, who also died in 1806, was commemorated in 1815 with a six-volume collection of 456 of his parliamentary speeches.⁽⁵⁾ Given the state of parliamentary reporting at the time, it is safe to assume that some of the limitations described by Ehrman for Pitt's speeches operate here too.

These volumes contained an interesting variation: not only did they reproduce 103 parliamentary speeches, but also eleven of 'his principal speeches at Liverpool [elections], and on various other public occasions'.⁽⁶⁾ This was hardly the full extent of Canning's extra-parliamentary speech-making. During the 1812 general election, for instance, he is reported to have made 160 speeches in Liverpool.⁽⁷⁾ Even so, by including a sampling of Canning's public orations, the editor acknowledged the fact that significant statements and the eloquence of leading statesmen were not confined to the Houses of Parliament. In contrast, although both Fox and Peel made important speeches outside the Commons, their collected speeches are strictly parliamentary.

After Canning, the career of no other nineteenth-century prime minister or leading politician - not Palmerston, not Russell, not Disraeli, not Bright, not Gladstone, not Chamberlain, not Salisbury - was marked by a complete collection of speeches. Instead, volumes of selected speeches became the vogue. The causes underlying this shift in the practices of commemorative publishing have not been investigated. Perhaps the market for such collections became adverse, although there is evidence to suggest that reading speeches was a popular activity with at least some Victorians. George Eliot, for example, included the reading aloud of speeches by Bright among her evening literary pastimes.⁽⁸⁾ It may also be that the scale of Victorian speech-making made comprehensive collections impractical for publishers and editors. A third hypothesis, by no means incompatible with the first two, is that the large biographies to which the Victorians were partial effectively supplanted the memorializing functions of comprehensive speech collections.

The cult of Gladstone was strong enough to set in motion a planned ten-volume edition of his speeches, but the project fell into abeyance after the publication of only two volumes.⁽⁹⁾ In Gladstone's case we can at least see what the scale of such an undertaking could potentially involve. In 1916, the Gladstone archivist Arthur Tilney Bassett compiled an index of Gladstone's speech-making that counted a total of 2,208 speeches. Of this total, Gladstone delivered 1,796 in the House of Commons - that is, over two-and-a-half times the number in Peel's collected speeches covering a parliamentary career around one-and-a-half times longer than Peel's - and 412 outside of Parliament.⁽¹⁰⁾ Gladstone being Gladstone, it can also be assumed that a significant number of these speeches were very lengthy. Even ten volumes would not have been sufficient to reproduce his full output.

The twentieth century has produced only one true successor to the great speech collections of the early nineteenth century: the 'complete speeches' of Winston Churchill, edited by Robert Rhodes James and published in eight thick volumes in 1974.⁽¹¹⁾ In this respect, the cult of Churchill (or at least its financial resources) proved greater than the cult of Gladstone. Significantly, like Thatcher and far more than Gladstone, Churchill was very popular with Americans and therefore there was a far larger market than for the speeches of most British prime ministers. Weighing in at around 8,600 pages, the Churchill collection reproduces a total of 2,360 speeches - 1,040 delivered in the Commons, and 1,320 delivered outside of Parliament or as broadcasts. But even this massive compendium does not - perhaps could not - include absolutely *every* public utterance and broadcast made by Churchill.

Now, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, we have the next great example of a British statesperson's collected speeches, but also something more. *Margaret Thatcher: Complete Public Statements, 1945-1990*, is a massive quantitative and technological leap beyond all such efforts that have come before. Compared to Peel's 697 speeches, and Churchill's 2,360, Thatcher's *Complete Public Statements* contains 7,564 records - over three times the number in Churchill's *Complete Speeches*, while covering only two-thirds the number of years. Of the 7,564 public statements, 605 (eight per cent) are non-oral: letters, articles, written statements and messages. (For ease of calculation, I have not included in these and subsequent figures seven missing or partially complete statements on an accompanying errata diskette.)

The collection includes a record of every public statement Thatcher made from the young conservative's platform speech campaigning for Churchill in June 1945 to her resignation as Prime Minister on November 28, 1990. There are around 400 occasions for which the editors could locate no text or report of what was said. Regrettably, copyright issues have prevented eighteen statements - almost all of them interviews with the American Broadcasting Corporation - from being included in this documentary compendium clearly designed for scholarly research. As a bonus, however, the collection contains a selection of 120 major statements from 1990 up to October 1998. 'The total word count', writes the editor in the accompanying User Handbook, 'is around 14 million, the equivalent of 30,000 pages, or 50 stout volumes.'

As these figures alone indicate, Thatcher's *Public Statements* is an impressive feat of historical engineering. But before turning to the properties of this significant scholarly resource, I want briefly to draw upon its contents and look at Thatcher's speech-making in longer historical perspective. Elsewhere, I have used Bassett's index of Gladstone's speeches and Churchill's *Complete Speeches* as the basis for a quantitative

comparison of the two prime ministers' oratorical careers.⁽¹²⁾ Even without the kind of painstaking assessment of each individual speech undertaken by Christopher Collins and his editorial team, my broad analysis nevertheless yielded a number of revealing comparisons between the two oratorical giants. One such comparison had to do with the split between parliamentary and extra-parliamentary speech-making: four-fifths of Gladstone's speeches, but just over one-half of Churchill's were delivered in the Commons.

A user of Thatcher's *Complete Public Statements* can quickly find that the collection contains a total of 1,714 utterances in the House of Commons, and 2,015 extra-parliamentary speeches, not including television or radio broadcasts, and various other kinds of statements. On the surface, this looks close to the Churchillian pattern, but a finer-grained take is readily facilitated by the apparatus of this CD-ROM. Of the Commons utterances, only 224 are full-fledged speeches. Given Thatcher's well-deserved reputation as a debater, it should come as no surprise that the greatest number of records for Commons utterances - 1,160 - are for Parliamentary Questions. Ninety-three Commons utterances are described as 'interventions', which consist largely of Thatcher indicating her dissent from the speech of another member. Thus, Thatcher's speech-making was considerably more oriented toward the extra-parliamentary than Churchill's and, when compared to Gladstone's pattern, reflects the great changes in the nature of British political culture from the 1830s to the 1990s.

While the techniques of politics changed considerably over this period, so did the technologies - from the combination of press, railway, and telegraph in Gladstone's time to television in Thatcher's. Despite his enduring fame in this respect, Churchill's *Collected Speeches* indicates that his use of the wireless formed but a small part of his oratorical output - although this was in part a function of restrictions on broadcasting political speeches. Thatcher, by contrast, was hardly a reluctant broadcaster. Indeed, she well understood the vital importance of appearing in people's living rooms as often as possible. Her *Complete Public Statements* provides records of 821 television appearances and 450 radio appearances. Significantly, however, broadcast speeches make up a very small proportion of both categories. Thatcher's TV and radio appearances were overwhelmingly in the more intimate form of interviews. Another sign of changing times is the prevalence of the press conference. Rhodes James includes only a handful of press conferences in the Churchill collection. Doubtless many were omitted, but it is unlikely that even a fuller account of Churchill's utterances would approach anything like the 440 press conferences included in the Thatcher collection.

As a resource for scholarship, Thatcher's *Complete Public Statements* has been well thought through by the editorial team and well executed by the software designers. Even without the benefit of the helpful - and, as far as such things go, lucid - User Handbook, the organization and functionality of the database's access features are relatively easy to apprehend. In addition to full keyword searching (with the searched-for terms nicely highlighted), the search interface permits the user to 'filter' the search a number of ways including by the theme (e.g. conservatism, trade unions, arts) or grouped themes (e.g. economy, foreign policy, autobiographical) of the statement, by the type of statement (e.g. parliamentary speech, TV interview, written statement), and even by day of the week. All of these search specifications can be used in combination. Where several themes are addressed in a single statement, this is clearly marked.

The collection is accompanied by an extensive index that permits searches by name, journalist, and source. The name index search is particularly useful because it allows users to locate references to individuals even when the text of the statement only refers to them by title (e.g. 'Chancellor of the Exchequer'). One can not, however, go from the titles to the names. Further, there is a chronology of significant political and personal events that can be viewed separately, or integrated with the list of statements. The high degree of editorial attention to detail is also evidenced by the fact that parliamentary speeches have the *Hansard* column number indicated.

In addition to all this helpful apparatus, the editors have exercised their editorial judgement to help users wade through the mass of material. Each record and each item of the chronology has been categorized in one of four grades of importance from 'seminal' to 'trivial' (and users can 'filter' searches accordingly). Given the many avenues and the facility of searching, this categorization shows a somewhat heavy editorial hand. The 240 'seminal' statements are seen as those that might constitute a substantial printed volume. (The most

recent print collection of this kind contained 59 speeches(13)). While creating a collection within a collection of this kind is all well and good, it is debatable whether all the statements labeled 'seminal' are genuinely and enduringly of the first importance. A number of statements in this category have far greater biographical than political significance. Does Thatcher's 1949 Dartford election speech really belong alongside her Bruges speech of 1988? Half the total statements are categorized as of 'major' importance defined as 'significant in their day', while over a third are 'minor' statements of a generally impromptu nature. It is telling, either of Thatcher or the editors, that the statements classified as "trivial" are principally regional or local in character. The serious scholar will likely ignore the editors' taxonomy. Fortunately, users may create their own classifications through a 'bookmark' function.

Doubtless, a scholar using this resource in a sustained manner for research would discover some further inconveniences or limitations, but it is difficult to find much fault during a few extended 'test drives'. As one who has worked extensively and laboriously with speeches as historical sources, I found the power, flexibility, scope, and excellent documentation of the Thatcher collection a great pleasure. Although it is common for the electorate to view the public statements of its officials with cynicism (or on occasion slavish credulity), for historians speeches and other forms of public communication are essential records that both encapsulate ideas fixed in time and can be subjected to scholarly interpretation. In this light, perhaps the greatest virtue of so extensive and accessible a collection as Thatcher's *Complete Public Statements* is that one can pick out themes, concepts, and issues in her public career so thoroughly and comprehensively that it is possible to identify, or control for tactical adaptations of the moment. Besides simply adding more speeches, in what ways could a future iteration of this collection be improved or extended? The obvious answer, as new technologies permit, is sound and vision - the audio and video of the speeches where they exist. In the current format, however, it could be of great use to scholars if the collection also included a selection of major critical responses, both pro and con, to at least to the most significant or controversial statements. Another useful addition would be an index of the places where the statements were delivered.

As, in the main, a collection of speeches, Thatcher's *Complete Public Statements* is especially interesting because it has nothing to do with the grand tradition of British political eloquence. Certainly Thatcher has earned her place in history. Unlike Pitt, Fox, Canning, Peel, and Churchill, however, she was not a particularly distinguished orator. As a collection, therefore, Thatcher's *Complete Public Statements* is far more about ideology and personality. In addition to its value as a resource for serious scholarship, this collection will no doubt provide many hours of edification for the Iron Lady's fans - like the enthusiastic reader from Milton Keynes who, in an amazon.com customer review of the recent book of Thatcher's collected speeches, described 'the greatest Prime Minister ever!' as the 'Supreme Goddess and head of the Thatcherite faith'(14)

Putting aside Thatcher's historical (if not oratorical) importance and cult following, this CD-ROM is particularly appropriate in another sense. Thatcher was not only the first British prime minister to have a scientific education, but also the first to make full use of late twentieth-century media technology. In her memoir *The Downing Street Years*, for example, she recalls her discovery of the Autocue (teleprompter), the laser and video pyrotechnics of her campaign rallies, and her deep interest in television coverage.(15) Further, although she was initially resistant to the idea, Thatcher was prime minister when regular televising of Commons debates began in 1989.

Even though she was not an orator for the ages, are Thatcher's statements, as was claimed of Peel's, history in themselves? Despite the fact that she was deposed in a palace coup and banished to the political wilderness, and although there seems little chance of her making a late, Gladstonian comeback (even if her peerage could soon cease to be an obstacle), it is now common to observe that British politics was enduringly transformed by her reign. In this way she resembles Peel. Although he sundered his party, was (like Thatcher) effectively broken by a speech from his own side of the House, and spent the remaining four years of his truncated life far from power surrounded by a small group of political adherents, by the time he left office Peel had laid the ground for the mid-Victorian Liberal consensus. The Thatcher years, too, have become the basis of a new political consensus exemplified best, as many like to point out, by New Labour.

In this sense, then, one can say of Thatcher's speeches what the editor of Peel's speeches wrote in his introduction: 'Peel's oratory, however, may, in spite of every opposition, be called the oratory of triumph; and his speeches are, in reality, little more than the milestones of so many victories.'[\(16\)](#)

Notes

1. The Speeches of the Right Honourable Sir Robert Peel, Bart., Delivered in the House of Commons (4 vols., 1853), i. v, 1, 3.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. The Speeches of ... Peel, i. 2. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. The Speeches of the Right Honourable William Pitt in the House of Commons (4 vols., 1806).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. J. Ehrman, *The Younger Pitt: The Years of Acclaim* (1969), 671.[Back to \(4\)](#) ed. R. Thierry (6 vols., 1828), vi. 319.[Back to \(6\)](#)
5. The Speeches of the Right Honourable Charles James Fox in the House of Commons (6 vols., 1815). [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. The Speeches of the Right Honourable George Canning, with a Memoir of His Life,
7. J. Parry, *The Rise and Fall of Liberal Government in Victorian Britain* (New Haven, 1993), 40.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. See The George Eliot Letters, ed. G. S. Haight (7 vols., New Haven, 1954-5), v. 6, 12. [Back to \(8\)](#)
9. The Speeches and Public Addresses of the Right Hon. W. E. Gladstone, with Notes and Introductions, ed. A. W. Hutton and H. J. Cohen (1892-94), ix-x.[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. Gladstone's Speeches: Descriptive Index and Bibliography, ed. A. Tilney Bassett (1916), 6-90.[Back to \(10\)](#)
11. Winston S. Churchill: His Complete Speeches, 1897-1963, ed. R. Rhodes James (8 vols., New York, 1974).[Back to \(11\)](#)
12. J. S. Meisel, 'Words by the Numbers: A Quantitative Analysis and Comparison of the Oratorical Careers of William Ewart Gladstone and Winston Spencer Churchill,' *Historical Research* (forthcoming, 2000).[Back to \(12\)](#)
13. The Collected Speeches of Margaret Thatcher, ed. Robin Harris (1997).[Back to \(13\)](#)
14. (May 31, 2000).[Back to \(14\)](#)
15. Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (1993), 258, 286-7, 580.[Back to \(15\)](#)
16. The Speeches of ... Peel, i. 3.[Back to \(16\)](#)

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