

Bourke Cockran: a model for Winston Churchill's Wartime Oratory

A question that has been asked over and over down the centuries is, "Are great speakers born with an innate gift for oratory or is it a skill they develop through study and experience?" It is probably not the first time you have heard this question and the answer often is often either an emphatic 'yes' or 'no'. However, the evidence seems to suggest a more elusive answer in that many other variables are involved such as attitude, training, family and even luck. An example to illustrate this is the role that a New York Congressman played in the development of Winston Churchill's oratorical style, which came to its full fruition, as we all know, during the Second World War.

Undoubtedly Winston Churchill's wartime oratory had a great influence on the events of the Second World War. Even today his style is still studied as a model of crisis oratory. When one looks at the speeches of such personalities as Bush and Blair at the time of the Iraqi War or Giuliani, just after 9/11, this observation tends to run truer on each reading. The Churchillian factor has become, as one author put it, the lingua franca for a great many of our leaders whether in politics or business. But who was this person that impressed Churchill so much?

Roy Jenkins in his biography of Winston Churchill tells us that it was William Bourke Cockran, a US Congressman from New York. Some 37 years after meeting Bourke Cockran for the first time in 1905 Churchill wrote, "*I must record the strong impression this remarkable man made upon my untutored mind. I have never seen his like, or in some respects, his equal.*"¹ According to the speech writer, James Humes, Bourke Cockran was a role model not only for Winston Churchill but also for such personalities as Presidents Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Wilson and Taft as well.²

Adlai Stevenson, a former governor of Illinois and a two time presidential hopeful, once asked an ageing Churchill in the post war years where he had learned his

¹Roy Jenkins, p. 843

² James Humes, , p.24

extraordinary oratorical style. According to the author, Michael McMEnamin, Churchill replied, *'It was an American statesman who inspired me and taught me how to use every note of the human voice like an organ.'* To the amazement of Stevenson, Churchill then proceeded to quote huge chunks of Bourke Cochran's speeches of 60 years before. *'He was my model,'* Churchill said, *'I learned from him how to hold thousands in thrall'.* He credited Cockran as *"his first political mentor and the chief role model for his own success as an orator"*.

But who was this William Bourke Cockran? According to the New York Herald, he was *"a tall, impressive looking young man with a well shaped massive head and a handsome intellectual face, large blue eyes with heavy drooping eyelids and gifted with a peculiarly delightful and melodious voice."*³ An English parliamentarian, Lord Ripan, wrote, *"When I was a young man we used to regard Carlyle as the great conversationalist of his time. Well, I heard Carlyle and Gladstone many times and I am quite convinced that in wit, wisdom and elegance of expression neither of them approached the American statesman, Bourke Cockran"*.⁴

Bourke Cockran was born in Ballysodare near Ballinacarrow, Co. Sligo, on the Western coast of Ireland in 1854. We know that he received a classical education in Ireland at St. Jarath's College, Galway and in France at the Institut Des Petit Freres de Marie in Lille. He could repeat lengthy passages from Virgil and Horace in the original which had the beneficial result not only in terms of his classical education but in developing his extraordinary memory. He had, according to his biographer, Ambrose Kennedy, a logical mind and was the master of accurate and clear speech.

After emigrating from Ireland to the United States, Bourke Cockran spent a short time as a schoolmaster teaching Latin and Greek at St. Teresa's Academy and an even shorter time as a principal at a public school in Westchester County, NY. But this foray into education lasted as long as it took him to do the Bar examination. As soon as he was admitted to the New York bar in 1876, just five years after arriving in the US, he set himself up in a law practice and entered New York City politics.

³ Reported in McMEnamin, p.29

⁴ McGurrin, p.76

Bourke Cockran was a patrician by nature and followed in the oratorical tradition of Daniel O’Connell and many of the Irish Party at Westminster.⁵ Indeed, had Irish barristers been paid a little better, he might very well have ended up at the Irish Bar and possibly as a parliamentarian at Westminster. He was, like many of them, articulate, educated, confident in himself, and steeped in the classics. His success in New York was well known. Soon he began to attract some very well known clients like Thomas Edison and Joseph Pulitzer, and, of course, *The New York World*. By the time he was forty he owned ‘The Cedars’ at Sand Point, a large estate on Long Island, and earned over 100,000 dollar a year (which today is probably over 3 million dollars a year) from his law practice. He played a leading role in both the legal and political worlds of the City.

But soon he came to a watershed in his political career: should he support his party and accept the dictates of the Tammany Hall bosses or should he follow his own principles and accept the consequences of not being trusted? Bourke Cockran decided on the latter, knowing full well that the Democratic Party bosses would never really fully accept or trust him. Consistency for him meant being consistent with his principles rather than with party demands; this was something Churchill learned from him.

Within a short period of entering the political scene, Bourke Cockran made his mark and came to dominate the Democratic National Conventions. He stole the spotlight at no fewer than three Democratic Conventions; a feat that has never been repeated to this day. But his conflict with Tammany Hall continued. In 1892 he opposed the Tammany Hall nominee for the presidency, Grover Cleveland. As a Congressman for New York, he quarreled over and over with the Tammany leaders and even supported the Republicans on issues where they agreed: his offence was putting principles ahead of party loyalty. The Tammany Hall boss, Richard Croker, took great exception to this. It meant Bourke Cockran would never really reach the heights of his political ambitions.

The big test of Bourke Cochran’s stand on principle was the Judge Daly affair. Judge Daly was up for reelection to the Supreme Court of New York but Richard Croker opposed it on the grounds that Tammany Hall had elected Judge Daly in the first place

⁵ Kelly, Mary C. “The Shamrock and the Liley ...”, p.

and felt they had a right to expect proper consideration in return, but this was not forthcoming as Daly believed in the independence of the judiciary. Croker, who controlled all Democratic Party nominations for the House or the Senate, also wanted to extend his control to the judiciary and set out to make Judge Daly an example.⁶ Bourke Cockran opposed him openly and claimed that Croker had gone too far. Open warfare occurred. Croker then took his revenge by opposing Bourke Cockran for any nomination, which in effect closed many doors for him to a wider political career. One author described him as *"Fearless, magnificent, king of orators, his public career lasted for 40 stormy years."* He towered majestically over all opponents in his defense of the independence of the judiciary.

But it is not Bourke Cockran the politician that interests us here, but his legacy as an orator. What Bourke Cockran bequeathed to Churchill was that communication was not just rhetorical skills. He appreciated the role of non-verbal communication. The Congressman used his pleasant and thundering voice and his physical persona to get his message over. He spoke in heroic and rolling phrases much like the rhetoric of many of the old Irish party at Westminster. Churchill asked his advice on how he could learn to spellbind an audience of thousands, to which Cockran replied *'speak as if you were an organ, use strong words and enunciate clearly in wave-like rhythm'*. The young Churchill was later to develop this ability and used it effectively during those difficult days of the Second World War.

Cockran always emphasized rhythm as an important element of rhetoric which Churchill was later to become famous for. For example, Churchill picked up Cockran's advice on developing a conversational style in order to reach each listener individually and even personally. This was not exactly the traditional Ciceronian style but a more intimate version of it. Another piece of advice was how to use his persona to the best advantage. Thomas Montalbo, the author of *Winston Churchill: a Study in Oratory*, described Bourke Cockran's persona as *"a remarkable man . . . with an enormous head, gleaming eyes and flexible countenance."* Bourke Cockran had used his physical make-

⁶ Ambrose Kennedy, p.28

up brilliantly in order to spell-bound his audiences and used classical and historical allusions with a rich vocabulary. Indeed, we all remember seeing photos of a Winston Churchill standing defiantly with his cigar and the 'V' sign. This sent a strong message of self confidence to his audiences.

An example of Bourke Cochran's style and rolling rhythm can be seen from an extract of his speech to the Liberal Club in London, July 15, 1903. *"As I speak, men are tending flocks on Australian fields and shearing wool which will clothe you during the coming winter. On western lands, men are reaping grain to supply your daily bread. In mines deep underground, men are swinging pickaxes and shovels to wrest from the bosom of the Earth the ores essential to the efficiency of your industry. Under tropical skies, hands are gathering, from bending boughs, luscious fruits which in a few days will be offered for your consumption in the streets of London."* This rolling prose style spoken with a rhythmic and deep baritone voice was the hallmark of Bourke Cochran's style.

Praise came from his political opponents also. Henry Cabot Lodge, one of the grandees of the Republican Party, described Bourke Cochran's address to the Congress in August 1919 as *'one of the greatest speeches ever delivered inside the walls of Congress'*. Not only did Churchill admire Bourke Cochran's oratory, but also the way he spoke in conversation. Roy Jenkins in his biography quotes Churchill as saying *"...his conversation, in point, in pith, in rotundity, in antithesis and comprehension exceeded anything I have heard."*⁷

Of course, there were other influences also. The contents of Churchill's speech was not only greatly influenced by Churchill's attachment to the English language but also by Gibbon's *'Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire'* and by the works of the great English historian, Thomas Macaulay, as well. We can see this in all his wartime speeches. This grandiose view of history also influenced him as a writer and echoes through the pages of his better known publications: *'Marlborough: his life and times'* and *'A History of the English-speaking People'*. Indeed, Churchill won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1953 not for his work as a historian but for his mastery of language. President Kennedy

⁷ McGurrin, p.238

acknowledged this mastery in his speech in April 1963 when he famously said, “*He (Churchill) mobilized the English language and sent it into battle*”.

Since the Second World War, politicians, business people and others who want to exercise influence have faithfully tried to emulate Churchill’s style. Others lace their speeches with Churchill quotes. But all his oratory had a beginning with the man who has long been forgotten, William Bourke Cockran. Many leaders of the 20th Century, such as Margaret Thatcher who purposely emulated Churchill’s style, really owe much of their success to Churchill’s mentor, William Bourke Cockran.

Michael McMenamin wrote “... *Cockran was a man who could light up a room just by entering it; a widely read intellectual and a student of economics and politics; a close advisor to two presidents; a man fluent in many languages; a politician with good friends in both parties; an orator who towered over others in the golden age of oratory; a man who could draw Senators and supreme Court Justices alike to hear him speak in the House of Representatives; and above all, a nationally known public figure who placed principle above politics and who walked away from power more than once rather than betray his beliefs.*”⁸

William Bourke Cockran died in Washington, D.C., on March 1, 1923. He is buried in Gate of Heaven Cemetery, Hawthorne, New York.

References

1. Ambrose Kennedy, *American Orator: Bourke Cockran, his life and times*, Bruce Humphries, 1948
2. Michael McMenamin, “*Untold story of young Winston and his American mentor*”, Enigma Books, 2009
3. Michael McMenamin, & Curt J. Zoller, *Becoming Winston Churchill*, Green World publishing, 2007
4. Kelly, Mary C. “*The Shamrock and the Liley*”, New York, Lang, 2007
5. James Humes, *Confessions of a White House Speech Writer*, Regency publications, 1997
6. James McGurrin, *Bourke Cockran: a free lance in American Politics*, Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1948
7. Roy Jenkins, *Churchill*, Macmillan, 2001

⁸ McMenamin, & Zoller, p. 245