INTRODUCTION

History as Performance History

What does acuity to dramaturgy bring to the study of history, and vice versa?

This close examination of two generations of a nineteenth-century British family shows how people from modest backgrounds, with little formal education, could have a great impact on the implementation of liberal policy in Britain. This was achieved through a particular kind of cultural knowledge. Letters and diaries, private and professional correspondence, journalism, lecture transcripts, pamphlets, tracts, and other ephemeral publications demonstrate precocious and consistent use of observation and critique of performances. (Here, performance is broadly defined, encompassing the spectrum from opera to orations; platform speaking to pantomimes; technical demonstrations to parades and rallies; and quotidian acts of attestation and empathy.) They utilised this habit of scrutinising performance to improve the efficacy of reform work on behalf of the key liberal tenets of the late Georgian and Victorian period, inclusive of domestic and foreign, legislative and extra-parliamentary change. Their activity and discourse, tracked over time, shows growing perceptivity, sophistication, and variety. Insights consolidated into tactics that gradually changed the world and persist until today in impetus, impact, and form. Through the optic of this family, history *is* performance history.

Given that so many nineteenth-century populations suffered under liberalism's imperial and capitalist manifestations, a 'progress narrative' of political theory yoked to performance is unjustifiable. Nevertheless, among liberals there were also trenchant critics of colonisation, rapacious enslavement and labour practices, and the consequences of open markets, and thus liberalism warrants attention as a history of advocacy that engaged rhetorics of reform. Together with their national and international networks of collaborators, the reformers central to this book sustained numerous single-issue campaigns, starting with the abolition of slavery in British Caribbean colonies during the early 1830s. Linking the liberal causes of

abolition and human rights to free trade as the key to British prosperity and international amity, and championing universal suffrage and parliamentary reform (reorganisation of seats and voting methods, and separation of church and state), they began agitating through *meetings*, *lectures*, and *debates* in halls and the open air, then broadened to *bazaars* and *trade fairs*. In the 1840s, the Anti-Corn Law League (ACLL, advocates of a free market, notably repeal of tariffs on imported grain) and the Reform League (champions of expanded male suffrage) extensively *petitioned* as a performance tactic. Just as vociferous participation at meetings performatively indicated public opinion, petitions performed political dramaturgy: beginning with each individual's act to *affix a signature or mark*, petitions grew into bulky documents that were *exhibited* at meetings, *paraded* through the streets, and ceremoniously *delivered* to Parliament. Theatrical flair was inherent to how each phase of a petition's creation and deployment transpired. With the emergence of coordinated *letter-writing campaigns*, a new repertoire for liberal reform emerged that extended the act of affixing a signature to composing a document (a durational act of conscience); this was followed by small-group in-person *depositions* and *lobbying*, then participation in *mass meetings* where arguments were tested, points of view enacted, and both individual and public resolve reaffirmed. These tactical performances utilised the dramaturgical tools of 'timing, surprise, strong visuals, compelling characters, dynamic tension, specificity, discipline, and rehearsal' to optimise outcomes.[1] Leadership came from prominent organisers such as John Bright, Richard Cobden, Lord Brougham, and Edmond Beales, bolstered by the influential liberal theorists John Stuart Mill, John Elliott Cairnes, and Herbert Spencer. Working alongside them were the chief figures of this book: George Thompson, his daughter Amelia Chesson, and her husband, Frederick Chesson. Their acts consolidated into a legible repertoire manipulated by dedicated reformers as well as the wider public and maintained to the present day. Though there was no unifying concept for it at the time, the umbrella term for what they did is now called activism.

Activism is a set of techniques, and like all human endeavours these techniques have a history. Reform, protest, and agitation are populist tactics dating back to the 1400s to the 1700s. During the nineteenth century, lobbying and demonstrating were added to the English lexicon. Such acts promoted the conception and dissemination of alternative ways of knowing by advocating for those whose lives under capitalism and/or colonialism were precarious and whose ability to register politically was (at best) notional. In addition to national issues, activism aimed to counter some

of the most deleterious practices of nineteenth-century globalisation – land appropriation, human trafficking, and territorial warfare exacerbated by imperialism, 'colour prejudice', sexism, and jingoism – on behalf of those with limited or no power (the enslaved, exploited, and low-waged or unemployed, peoples at risk of extinction, and women, who could not elect their parliamentary or local representatives). Complementing the backroom performative tactics of persuading men of power to implement liberal ideas, *marches*, *rallies*, and *mass meetings* were public shows of conviction that enabled peoples experiencing precarity to also 'do' activism in new ways. Cooperatives and trades unions added to the repertoire, and innovators including the suffragettes and Mahatma Gandhi showed how to leverage *personal sacrifices* such as hunger strikes and *coordinated acts* such as the 1930 Salt March to accrue power for the powerless. After 1950, as *occupations* began to be emphasised, forms of *personal testimonial* that involved privation, self-restraint, or even immolation – allied with the new modes of *performance art* such as entertaining *zaps* – augmented the repertoire to focus more explicitly on performing. Our contemporary concept of activism draws on the entire legacy, including the use of polemical rhetoric and personal (usually bodily) *demonstrations of solidarity and commitment to a cause*. Across the world, women, the poor, and marginalised and disenfranchised minorities and majorities draw upon Victorian tactics. Once this repertoire gained the unifying name of activism, it became a playbook used with equal aptitude by progressivists and their foes alike.[2]

Analysing performances' dramaturgy – spatial arrangements, casting of roles, authorisation of speech, oratorical techniques, styles of movement, conventions of behaviour, and audience reactions – shows how nineteenth-century activists connected performative forms to critical content. Studying this exceeds mere rhetorical analysis to encompass an examination of the totality of the mise-en-scène of any event. Across the continuum of theatre and the performances of nineteenth-century life, the makers, observers, and interpreters of events understood how mise-en-scène drew upon social intelligence to consolidate performative modes as a constitutive facet of reform politics.

By the end of the Georgian period, antitheatricalism held sway only among a tiny minority of religious fanatics. For everyone else in Britain, and increasingly for spheres of British influence around the globe, theatre was constitutive of and indispensable to public life. Liberalisation, secularisation, and Romanticism cleared away lingering pejorative connotations about the theatre being predicated on deception in favour of it being a technology for inquisitive interpellation of the contours of

contemporaneous social life, scientific discovery, cultures distant in time and place, and the joie de vivre of playful fantasy. Theatre and theatrical entertainments thrived as mass media throughout Britain, growing in exponents, spawning new subgenres, and absorbing new topics. Both the popularity and the multifarious forms demonstrate theatre's centrality to nineteenth-century life. Theatre and performance entrained, and reflected, norms for how people calibrated empathy – as well as sanctioned standing-aside – to negotiate their lives (and contrived representations of lives like theirs) to connect across difference and determine responsibilities within real or imagined communities. This made performance an indispensable political tool of dissensus – distinctly experiencing a sensorial experience and its signified meaning – as well as a ubiquitous part of the cultural landscape.[3]

Activists appealed to their auditors' better selves not merely on ideological, moral, or theological grounds but also on the basis of how well performances registered. As persuasion prompted action, *performing* facilitated *reforming*, whether the objective was to convince a Member of Parliament (whom one might not be allowed to elect) to vote a particular way, to reach out to fellow workers and women to demand rights they theretofore had not known, or to forge a new aesthetic to express emerging sensibilities. Citizenship movements focused on gaining full rights overlapped with post-citizen movements (taken up by people already integrated into the social fabric by criteria such as race, gender, and class) to advocate for protections and benefits for others.[4] Performance is the increment and the communicative affordance wielded in mises-en-scène and accumulated as the repertoires to advance these politics. This book demonstrates how this was done in small committee rooms, in vast halls, and even across oceans. Whenever discursive description was translated into vivid accounts of envisioned actions, it was *performed* via language, bodies, and spaces to enable spectators, auditors, and readers to enhance their symbolic, subtextual, cognitive, and affective understanding accordingly.[5]

By aggregating insights from discourse analysis and dramaturgical analysis, inclusive of live and mediated forms of communicative repertoire, this study explains how and why tactics combined, tropes recurred, and recombinant elements evolved into new tactics that persisted as repertoires. Within repertoires, skills of vocalisation, physicalisation, and rhetorical deployment facilitated what was understood. Liberal activists and the general public shared this knowledge. Across two generations, the Thompson-Chesson family illustrates how individuals from modest backgrounds grasped and contributed to this systemic understanding. Their

specific careers are unique to them, yet *Liberal Lives and Activist Repertoires: Political Performance and Victorian Social Reform* demonstrates how others – including African Americans fleeing enslavement by embarking on the British lecture circuit, Bengalis forging institutions for mutual training and empowerment, Black and mixed-race Jamaicans protesting economic disadvantage and extra-judicial murder, newly enfranchised British voters gathered at the hustings, women protesting state-sanctioned gynaecological assaults, and activists who decried the conjoined atrocities of massacres and cultural genocides in Australia, North America, the Transvaal, and the Balkans – also understood and manipulated the affordances of performance within critique.

During the early phases of George Thompson's career, international activism necessitated international travel, as when he undertook journeys to the United States and India or when delegates from the United States, the Caribbean, and Sierra Leone came to London for the 1840 Anti-Slavery Convention or the 1846 Evangelical Alliance. This is the first period in human history when (outside conquest or diplomacy) international connections were sought in order to radically revise understandings of a connected community of humanity. To an important extent, this newly invented tradition of travel-based networking is linked to other activisms: the in-person testimonial-based lectures of freedom-seeking African Americans who sought refuge and support in Europe – Moses Grandy (1786?–1843?), William Wells Brown (1814?–84), John S. Jacobs (1815?–73), Frederick Douglass (1818–95), William Craft (1824–1900), and Ellen Craft (1826–91) – and the petitioning and lobbying tactics of Indians such as Raja Rammohun Roy (1772/74–1833) and Dwarkanath Tagore (1794–1846), who ventured to Britain in order to promote liberalisation of foreign policy and advance business enterprises.

Steamships and efficient postal networks linked activist communities, yet for the next generation of activists, efficiency and efficacy were exponentially advanced by two revolutions in communication: cheap newspapers and globalised telegraphy. During the 1830s and 1840s, reporters at meetings took down speeches verbatim, including speakers' inflections and auditors' reactions, and published them in newspapers. Other newspapers reprinted the accounts, amplifying their effect to other cities, nations, and colonies. Thus, what were essentially performance scripts swiftly circulated and facilitated 'intentionality and purpose', what Homi Bhabha credits as 'the signs of agency' that 'emerge from [a] "time-lag"'.[6] Thompson invested in two newspapers that respectively advanced Anglo-Indian issues and the Peace Movement for exactly this reason. During the

mid-1850s, after repeal of the Stamp Acts substantially reduced the costs of daily newspapers in Britain, the modern idea of a press corps developed, with journalists travelling far beyond their municipal ambits to report on events first hand. William Howard Russell (1820–1907), who sent dispatches back from the Crimean War, is the most famous example, however Frederick Chesson (who mainly covered the politics beat) and Amelia Chesson (who joined the press corps as a book, theatre, and music critic) contributed too. Concurrently, postal systems increasingly interconnected the British Empire, and letters allowed eyewitnesses to share information about all facets of human life. As secretary to the Aborigines' Protection Society (APS) from the mid-1850s to 1888, Frederick Chesson was the receiving point – centralised in London but with a global compass – for epistolary information that he used to inform reformist lobbying efforts and journalism. Thus connected to events worldwide, the Thompson-Chesson family functioned as a 'multiplier effect' even when at home.[7] They utilised epistolary accounts of transgressions and newspaper reports of abuses to forge a cogent concept of human rights, expressed in speeches (Thompson) and journalism (Thompson and both Chessons), outreach to Members of Parliament (MPs) and cabinet ministers (Frederick Chesson), connections with activists abroad (Thompson and Frederick Chesson), and leadership of successive reform campaigns (Thompson and both Chessons). Additionally, from the 1860s, transcontinental telegraphy increased the speed of the transmission of news as well as the responsivity to concerns expressed by and to the many arms of colonial administration. Together, these communication media and technologies were feedback loops for liberal reform, incrementally pursued and enhanced by performative means. By the period of the 1860s to the 1880s (the heyday of the Chessons' careers), much of what had necessitated person-to-person transmission in the early 1830s (at the outset of Thompson's career) could be done remotely and sometimes with great rapidity. Yet meetings (amplified by printed accounts) remained the lynchpin of reform work, constitutive of performance and bolstered by performance know-how, to interrelate activism of all kinds.

Apart from studies of the women's suffrage movement, women are rarely the agential protagonists in studies of liberalism. They warrant being recentred: not just as the childbearers and homemakers who were, as Emma Rothschild puts it, 'a site for a moralised order that could balance market forces', but as full participants in liberal politics whose contributions fundamentally upset differentiation of household and public sites and concerns over domestic and foreign welfare.[8] Close study of the

contributions of Amelia Chesson and other women in her circles who were networked across familial and social spheres shows reformers recreating together, enhancing bonds, jointly attending performances, and linking networks that campaigned on a myriad of issues. Orthodoxy about the Habermasian divide between bourgeois and governmental publics fails to reflect how Amelia Chesson came to be a multifaceted critic and activist, write performance reviews, attend political meetings, serve on the Women's Suffrage Committee during the 1870s, and collaborate with her father, mother, sister, and husband on domestic and transnational campaigns. Her unsung efforts show that there was no definitive divide between homes and workplaces, no truly separate spheres for women and men, and no retreat from the performance of politics. Recuperating her history is not the integration of someone marginal into a centre, for though women like Amelia Chesson could be kept out of some corridors of power, this did not constrain her knowledge or her understanding, her ability to innovate or her perseverance to engage. How she and her family spent their time doing various kinds of things (speaking, writing, editing, organising, and advocating contiguously with engaging in social life, leisure, and private time) shows the collapse of the administrative and regulatory concerns of the governmental public sphere fully into family and social life. There is no objective line between 'the private and public, the civil and the familial', as Bhabha puts it, and through 'performative discourse' community 'enacts the impossibility of drawing an objective line between the two'.[9] For committed activists, public life (steeped in consciousness about the dramaturgy of performance) dominated experience *and* permeated private interactions.

Thompson and the Chessons were vibrant, complex human beings who dedicated themselves to reform, almost exclusively outside what is called public service. For a brief period, George Thompson was an MP, but while in office he conducted himself with little alteration from before. As the family members were citizens of Britain, their imaginations, erudition, and actions embraced the globe, touching on the challenges present on every inhabited continent and the question of what was wrought by trafficking people and goods between regions and nations. Thompson and the Chessons stand apart from many of their compatriots for their prescient abilities to envision how to intervene in globalised markets (Chapter 2), protest the deleterious effects of colonialism (Chapter 3), name genocides and their imperialist and racialised causes (Chapter 4), and perceive and call out intersectional racism and sexism (Chapter 5). At the same time, the entire family stands in for how people in their circles consistently

analysed performance and utilised these insights to become more effective advocates. There is much to admire in them, even if history judges the outcomes of the turn to liberal principles with a jaundiced eye. Working with the theory available to them and the tactics they engineered, they were indefatigable advocates for greater equity, self-determination, and the imperative to care.

Chapter 1 outlines the liberal causes and indicative approaches undertaken by the three principal figures, and argues for the primacy of how dramaturgy was recognised and manipulated. The next chapter analyses George Thompson's career as a lecturer and debater, with techniques grounded in the campaign to repeal slavery in the West Indies and Thompson's subsequent role in creating a transatlantic abolitionist movement. While the basic contours of these facets of Thompson's career have been lightly addressed elsewhere, neither his efforts on behalf of free trade (especially his call to change Britain's economic and administrative approaches to India and the United States) nor his instrumentality in encouraging a rising class of Indian reformers have been systematically studied. This comes together vividly through his embedded activism at meetings of the proprietors of the East India Company (The Company) in London as well as his eyewitness account of the survivors of the siege of Lucknow arriving in Calcutta, both scathing indictments of British misrule.

Two successive chapters take up phases of Frederick Chesson's career in conjunction with developments in mass communication. This brings Chesson into scholarly focus for the very first time. Witnessing a man taken into custody under the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 radicalised Chesson, and by the age of eighteen he had already built relationships that enabled his future career as an organiser, journalist, and social critic. He leveraged passion and energy with carefully honed and operationalised knowledge about performance. Like others of his time, Chesson understood that Victorian performance (theatre, circus, music hall, street entertainments, ethnographic displays, etc.) repurposed and recirculated social rites, political events, archaeological heritage, and scientific discovery in ways instrumental to mid-Victorians' *Bildung*. Chesson's diaries demonstrate how his own *Bildung* – maturation within conscious and unconscious practices of self-cultivation constitutive of active citizenship – built upon his critical practices of consuming performance, as well as reading, to become an activist. Diverging from Thompson's stunt activism against the British East India Company and the Free Church of Scotland, Chesson and his allies utilised placarding to protest against imperialist war, allying this populist activism to speechifying and mass meetings. Over a longer period,

with subtler rhetoric, he spearheaded lobbying to disband the monopoly of the Hudson's Bay Company, a chartered corporation that held in its thrall the fate of Indigenous peoples who dwelt on 11.7 million square kilometres (4.5 million square miles) of North America. Chesson's work typifies the capacity to activate the British public's empathy across great distances and rhetoricise cultural difference on behalf of subject peoples throughout Britain's vast empire.

Chapter 4 documents how Chesson's journalism on the laying of the first transoceanic cable demonstrates his understanding of telegraphy's capacity for distant yet rapid communication. This development revolutionised journalism as well as commerce, and thus bore on how politics were monitored and reported by men such as Chesson in newspapers, public meetings, and cabinet ministers' offices. Through the medium of newspapers, each of which uniquely embodied a politically inflected persona and 'combative pens', the work of advocating for emancipated African Americans as well as tortured and murdered Jamaicans occurred on one side of the temporal threshold of the telegraphic revolution, while addressing genocides in Bulgaria and the western Balkans occurred on the other. In all cases, the full repertoire of liberal activism was deployed and documented by Chesson and his colleagues.

While the first four chapters draw on a plethora of evidence from newspapers, pamphlets, letters, and speeches (almost all examined for the first time), as well as Frederick Chesson's diaries, the final chapter embraces a historiographic and evidentiary challenge of a different kind. Whereas her father gave thousands of speeches and her husband likely wrote upwards of seven million words of unsigned journalism plus voluminous correspondence, Amelia Chesson has left few overt traces. The fact that she is the first documentable female theatre and music critic for the daily press was hitherto unknown. Research based on diaries, other manuscripts, and newspapers has surfaced her career both as a professional evaluator of social and aesthetic performance and as an activist in a succession of campaigns. Whereas it could be argued that she was constrained by her gender, in fact she made strategic alliances with African American abolitionists, utilising innovative and subtle performative tactics that rely upon affordances of racialisation and gender. And whereas it could be argued that her periodic absences from performative writing and public activism made her a dabbler and dilettante, manuscript sources show that these absences were the result of her numerous pregnancies and a cycle of childbearing and nursing interspersed with cyclical liberation from reproductive labour. As a result, the book concludes with a radical view both of who utilised performance

in relation to activism and of how this was possible for different kinds of individuals and in transformative ways. This challenges our understanding of what it means to dwell in the midst of spectacle, to embrace the social and intimate spheres and yet mobilise on behalf of others who seek more than mere survival.

Notes

1 Bogad, L.M. *Tactical Performance: The Theory and Practice of Serious Play*. London: Routledge, 2016: 45.
2 See Boyd, Andrew and Oswald Mitchell, eds. *Beautiful Trouble: A Toolbox for the Revolution*. New York: O/R Books, 2012; and Sharp, Gene, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*. Boston: Porter Sargent, 1973.
3 Rancière, Jacques. *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*. New York: Continuum, 2010: 134–51.
4 Jasper, James M. *The Art of Moral Protest: Culture, Biography, and Creativity in Social Movements*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997: 6–7.
5 Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2nd ed. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014: 194.
6 Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. Hoboken, NJ: Taylor & Francis, 2012: 284.
7 Hall, Catherine. *Macaulay and Son: Architects of Imperial Britain*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012: 2.
8 Rothschild, Emma. *The Inner Life of Empires: An Eighteenth-Century History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011: xxi.
9 Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 330. See also Dillon, Elizabeth Maddock. *The Gender of Freedom: Fictions of Liberalism and the Literary Public Sphere*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004.