

Introduction

Will Rogers' America

THE STORY BEGINS IN CONTRADICTION AND ends in tragedy. On November 4, 1879 William Penn Adair Rogers, the famous American humorist, entertainer, writer, and movie star, was born near present-day Claremore, Oklahoma, at an uneasy juncture of past and future, power and impotence, aspiration and nostalgia. The discordant aspects of his youthful position were striking. The son of a prominent Cherokee Indian family, he grew up as an outsider contending with the authority and expectations of a White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant establishment that dominated American life. Ensclosed in a cowboy culture of horses and cattle, rifles and roping in great open spaces, he emerged at a moment when expansion into the great American West was giving way to a rapidly urbanizing society teeming with immigrants, factories, investment capital, and unfamiliar economic and political influences. A boy taught to honor Victorian traditions of hard work and moral uplift, he was drawn to enticing new ideals of consumer prosperity and commercial entertainment. Tutored in an old-fashioned success creed postulating that character and productivity paved the road to success, he gravitated toward a newfangled ideology insisting that personal charisma and charm led to upward mobility and prosperity. In all of these ways, the youngster from the great plains came to maturity poised uneasily between America's vanishing rural society in the late nineteenth century and its emerging order of urban mass culture in the early twentieth.

Fifty-six years later, Will Rogers perished in an airplane crash on August 15, 1935, while flying in the wilds of Alaska with Wiley Post, the famous pilot and a close friend. News of his demise shocked the American public and prompted an outpouring of grief from the highest to the lowest. John Nance Garner, the hard-drinking, no-nonsense Vice President from Texas, adjourned the U.S. Senate and when approached by a reporter, replied with obvious emotion, "I just can't talk about it." President Franklin Roosevelt publicly lamented the loss of "a very old

friend of mine, a friend of every man, woman, and child in the United States.” Newspapers throughout the country filled their pages with mournful stories, editorials, and memorials regarding the beloved entertainer, with the *New York Times* devoting four full pages to Rogers’ life, death, accomplishments, and legacy the weekend after the crash. Ordinary Americans were stunned. Reports appeared of people all over the country sitting down, speechless with shock and tears welling in their eyes, upon hearing of the calamitous event. Some 50,000 people passed by Rogers’ coffin at Forest Lawn Memorial Park cemetery in Glendale, California, just outside Los Angeles, on the day of his funeral (at least an equal number were waiting to do so when time ran out) while tens of thousands more filled the Hollywood Bowl for a memorial service. A Chicago newspaper editorial spoke for many when it said of the plain-spoken Oklahoman, “he exercised an influence on public sentiment perhaps greater than any political leader. He was the most widely read humorist on and off the screen and one of the very few who made intelligent comments on public affairs and issues. His homely philosophy had a tremendous influence on the public mind He came nearer to expressing the thoughts of the common man than anyone.” The novelist Clarence Kelland put it simply: “Will [Rogers] was the head man of all the public figures of the day.”¹

So we are left to ponder crucial questions. What transpired in the intervening decades that carried Rogers from an early life entangled in two worlds to the status of wildly popular folk hero whose untimely death contained the stuff of national tragedy? Why did a vast audience cutting across geographical, class, gender, and ethnic lines respond so keenly to his endeavors as a vaudevillian, journalist, radio host, movie star, political critic, and humorous commentator on the foibles of American life? Put simply, what made Americans come to love him so? Part of the answer lay in an astonishing range of activity that saw him navigating nearly every tributary of popular culture in early twentieth-century America. He seemed to enter the public eye from every direction at once.

Rogers’ dazzling rise to fame and influence began in the early 1900s when he traveled the country with various shows as a cowboy entertainer specializing in riding and roping tricks. He then became a mainstay on the vaudeville circuit before catapulting onto the national stage in 1916 when he joined the *Ziegfeld Follies* in New York. For the rest of his life he never left that stage; indeed, he dominated it. Rogers steadily boosted his public profile by injecting ever larger doses of comic commentary on American values and proclivities into his show while twirling his rope. Capturing the public imagination with his amusing, homespun observations on the tendencies of the age, he drew comparisons to Benjamin Franklin and Mark Twain. One wag dubbed him “The Poet Lariat.” In the late 1910s he became a prominent silent film actor and made fifty movies in

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that genre. A decade later, with his distinctive drawl and verbal wit making him a natural, Rogers completed twenty feature films with the advent of “talkies” and became a major Hollywood star. Throughout this period, he traveled the country as a wildly popular lecturer. He wrote a weekly newspaper column, “The Weekly Article,” starting in 1922, and then a shorter daily piece, “The Daily Telegram,” from 1926 to 1935, both of which were syndicated nationally in some 300 newspapers. He wrote regularly on current affairs for the *Saturday Evening Post*, the *American*, and other magazines. Rogers gathered these popular journalistic writings and published several well-received volumes of collected wisdom on the American scene. His enormous public audience earned him a weekly radio broadcast, *The Gulf Headliners*, that featured his laconic, rambling thoughts on American life, some drawn from his writings and some ad-libbed.

This amazing flurry of activity made Will Rogers one of the most famous men in America, a figure whose influence ranged from the ordinary folks who adored him to the highest echelon of social and political leaders who recognized his impact. In 1918, Theodore Roosevelt declared, “This man Rogers has such a keen insight into the American panorama and the American people that I feel he is bound, in the course of time, to be a potent force in the political life of the nation.” Rogers stayed at the White House in 1925 as an overnight guest of Republican president Calvin Coolidge and attended a private dinner in the same residence with Democrat president Franklin Roosevelt and wife Eleanor nearly a decade later. In July 19, 1926 Rogers graced the cover of *Time* magazine. He hobnobbed with the likes of Charles Lindbergh, Samuel Goldwyn, William Jennings Bryan, and Henry Ford. Rogers’ appeal to a mass audience was astonishing. He attracted millions of radio listeners while his books, such as the *Illiterate Digest* and *Letters of a Self-Made Diplomat to His President*, sold briskly. His tremendous draw as a movie star made him the top box-office attraction in 1934 – he beat out Clark Gable, Joan Crawford, and Mae West for the honor – and one of the highest-paid actors in Hollywood. Rogers was everywhere, it seemed, and most people saw him as a national treasure. Damon Runyon, the famous writer and journalist, called him “America’s most complete human document.”²

At the heart of Rogers’ popular appeal lay a unique talent for expressing what ordinary people were thinking. With a bevy of trademark mannerisms – chomping on gum, pushing his hat forward while scratching the back of his head in a perplexed manner, offering homespun homilies in a slightly stammering drawl accompanied by an infectious grin – he approached his audience as equals. In the popular imagination he appeared as a wise, witty, Lincolnesque, cracker-barrel philosopher who both amused and educated his neighbors as they sat around a woodstove in a village general store on a snowy winter afternoon. Rogers traded on a lack of pretension, beginning his commentaries with the

modest disclaimer, “All I know is what I read in the papers,” before going on to demonstrate quite the opposite. He offered a shrewd, but gentle, skewering of political topics (“I don’t belong to any organized political faith; I’m a Democrat”), social issues (many Americans will vote in favor of Prohibition, “That is, everybody that is sober enough to stagger to the polls will”), contemporary manners (“We used to think going to see women play golf would be like going to see men crochet”), and morals (the growing popularity of divorce produced “lawyers that can cut you loose from an octopus”). Even when cracking wise, his droll comments displayed a generous sensibility, as in the famous statement he wished to be carved on his gravestone: “I never met a man I didn’t like.” The talented Oklahoman charmed the country as a symbol of common people, common sense, and common decency.³

Then there were his unique personal qualities. Throughout his engagement with nearly every new form of modern entertainment and communication, Rogers’ colorful personality – a combination of wry humor, cowboy practicality, good fellowship, and skepticism of pretense and pomposity – shone through brightly. As people sensed, these characteristics were authentic, a reflection of a man who was exactly what he seemed. Yet the private man was more complicated. Like many people with a finely honed comic sense, such as Mark Twain, Rogers harbored a rather bleak, often absurd, and occasionally angry view of the world. But he mostly kept that to himself. Moreover, as his national stature and legend grew, Rogers became trapped to a certain extent by his own creation. As his friend, the writer Homer Croy, shrewdly noted, “He built himself up till he became, both on and off stage, the Will Rogers the public knew. The older he grew, and the more successful he became, the more he played this character.” As a result, a few critics denounced Rogers as a panderer to the banalities of a commercialized folk culture, or merely a comic in search of laughs with no evident deeper wisdom. But the vast majority of Americans disagreed and treasured his insights. They loved the witty, plain-spoken, homespun philosopher whose grammatical lapses and inventive spelling mirrored their own.⁴

So while the facts of Rogers’ ascent to the status as “the most beloved man in America” are evident, the reasons for it are much less so. Earlier and worthy treatments of his life have focused on the captivating personality and colorful endeavors of this unusual, gifted man to explain his appeal. While not ignoring these factors, this biography takes a different tack by digging deeper to uncover the cultural and social wellsprings of his tremendous popularity and influence. It examines not only what he made, but what was made of him. Rogers’ life, after all, was not only fascinating but historically significant. This exploration, like the trajectory of his life, begins with the contradictions he embodied as a youth, then scrutinizes his struggle to resolve them as he matured, and ends as he is struck

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down at the height of his triumph. It focuses on the way in which he, like many of his fellow Americans, confronted the massive historical transformation of his age – weathering its dislocations, sometimes lamenting its cost, but ultimately promoting its new possibilities.

Rogers' life spanned the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first few of the twentieth, a period marked by one of the greatest transformations in American history. As a host of historians have detailed, the years from 1880 to 1930 encompassed a great shift away from the rural republic and toward a modern order defined by urban settlement, consumerism, mass culture, bureaucracy, and the corporate state. This transformation triggered enormous enthusiasm and aspiration, but an equal portion of anxiety, as Americans faced a vast array of unsettling changes in their lives. Rogers instinctively grasped the complexity of this historical situation and approached it with great deftness, aiming in his humorous commentary to both explore the possibilities of newfangled values and defuse the fears that accompanied them.⁵

In particular, Will Rogers' life and career were caught up in four developments central to this great wave of change in the United States. First, he represented, directly and vividly, a startling shift in the frame of the American experience, what famed historian Frederick Jackson Turner first called in 1893 "the closing of the frontier." With the settlement of the last open territories by 1900, the United States ended its more than two centuries of westward expansion and turned away from the dynamic that had shaped so many of its institutions and values since the colonial period. Influence and innovation now lay in rapidly expanding cities and the vibrant industrial economy that sustained them. Born in the "Oklahoma Territory," then the last remaining continental region to be so designated before moving on to statehood, Rogers seemed to step out of the nation's past and into its future. Outfitted in rustic clothes and delivering his jibes in a rural drawl, he presented a comforting, nostalgic image of the cowboy, a figure already disappearing into the history books amidst a booming society of urban noise and crowds, smoke-belching factories and pattering Model T's. With verbal agility and endearing wit, Rogers tiptoed along the fault line between veneration for the days-gone-by of the frontier and appreciation for modern urban dynamism. By joking about the tension he relaxed it, as when he quipped about Americans' new love affair with the automobile, "Everybody is rushing to go somewhere, where they have no business, so they can hurry back to the place where they never should have left."⁶

Second, Rogers negotiated a great change in the values of mainstream America in the late 1800s and early 1900s. This era witnessed the gradual disappearance of an old-fashioned Victorian mindset that dated back to the early nineteenth century, a stringent creed that had emphasized character formation,

hard work, and emotional self-restraint as the keys to a happy and productive life. Rebellious against his father's demands that he settle into a stable, traditional career in ranching or business, a restless young Rogers abandoned the cultural tradition that informed it. He aimed for a different kind of life, vowing, "I am going to learn things that will enable me to make my living in the world without making it by day labor." Rogers first felt the pull of riding and roping contests because of his great skills riding a horse and tossing a lariat. From there it was but a short step into profitable new roles – showman, popular writer, movie actor, radio personality – that represented grand new vistas of pleasure for early twentieth-century Americans. In this modern culture, and in the economy of abundance that supported it, people valued sparkling personality over virtuous character, enjoyment over labor, self-fulfillment over self-control. To this end, Rogers mustered his enormous resources of rural charm and humor and deployed them across the entertainment landscape, in the process poking fun at a stuffy Victorian ethos and embracing a fresh culture of consumer gratification that was coming to characterize modern American life. In 1920, for instance, the Advertising Club of Los Angeles invited the Oklahoma entertainer to participate in a lighthearted debate on the relative virtues of cowboys and preachers with a popular Baptist minister who held services in a large theater. Noting how old-fashioned religion had accommodated to a modern pleasure paradigm, Rogers joked about his opponent and his hosts: "He is the only preacher that ever knew enough to not have a church but to preach in a Moving Picture Theatre, and to show you how foxy he is, he leaves the billing up there of the Picture that is playing there during the week I doubt my side will get a fair showing here as I know that Advertising and preaching [now] have much in common."⁷

Third, Rogers personified the rapidly swelling importance of celebrity in a new American culture of entertainment and media saturation. Around the dawn of the twentieth century, a great wave of new institutions devoted to leisure began to inundate the United States: amusement parks such as Coney Island, music and dance clubs devoted to ragtime and then jazz, vaudeville shows, and eventually radio and Hollywood films. Right alongside appeared a massive expansion of newspapers and slick-paper magazines that transformed print communication with the support of advertising, the same endeavor that fueled the new consumer economy. Like Theodore Roosevelt in politics and D. W. Griffith in filmmaking, Rogers grasped the essence of mass culture in the early 1900s and sensed its enormous powers of publicity and image-making. He assumed the central role in this new milieu: the celebrity. This new public figure, constantly on parade, attracted and kept attention through the mechanisms of the media and, blurring the line between public and private life, created an illusion of intimacy with a popular audience. Rogers quickly mastered such maneuvers. Appearing on the

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vaudeville stage, the movie screen, and over the radio waves, and trailed by newspapermen, photographers, wire-service reporters, and newsreel cameras wherever he went, he kept his image before a national audience and his finger on the public pulse. Rogers was one of the earliest, and greatest, celebrities created by America's modern mass culture. He loved the role, even as he demonstrated an awareness of its shallowness and brittleness. As he once observed wryly, his early days in the "show business" world of western-themed circuses and vaudeville meant "I was ruined for life as far as actual employment was concerned."⁸

Fourth, Rogers formulated his principles and shaped his career according to a deeply felt spirit of populism. He venerated the common man and made the standards, judgements, and status of ordinary folks a lodestar for everything he did. They were his people, and he joked about his instinctive connection to them: "You can't make any commoner appeal than I can." In a 1925 column, he declared, famously, his faith in America's "Big Honest Majority." The typical average citizen, Rogers insisted, "is not a 100 per cent American. He is not any organization, either uplift or downfall . . . [but] an Animal that has been going along, believing in right, doing right, tending to his own business, letting the other fellows alone . . . [H]e is just NORMAL." Rogers' populist regard for common people colored nearly everything he wrote and said, as when he sympathized with the barely educated, admitting, "I'm not sure what syntax means. But it must be bad because it's got 'sin' and 'tax' in it." Such sentiments reached a climax during the Great Depression of the 1930s. The near collapse of the economic and social system triggered an outpouring of affection for the common man who had been devastated by events, ranging from Carl Sandburg's epic poem, *The People, Yes*, to Norman Rockwell's sentimental rendering of small-town life on the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post* to John Steinbeck's novel, *Grapes of Wrath*. Will Rogers stood at the front of this populist line. He advised the newly elected Franklin D. Roosevelt by telegram to rely on ordinary citizens and be wary of elites: "The illiterate ones will all work, you will have no trouble with them. But it's the smart ones that will drive you nutty, for they have been taught in school that they are to live off the others." More sardonically, he noted that politicians usually misappropriated money because they "didnt know that money trickled up. Give it to the people at the bottom and the people at the top will have it before night anyhow. But it will at least have passed through the poor fellow's hands." Rogers once claimed, in a respite from his usual comic mode, that he was exploring "the American soul." For him, clearly, that elusive quality lay in the virtues and aspirations of "just plain folks."⁹

Thus Will Rogers strode front and center stage as an influential figure who both reflected and promoted these important trends – the end of the frontier, the

new culture of personality and self-fulfillment, the emergence of celebrity, and the influence of populism – in the making of modern American life. But it was the *nature* of this role that proved crucial: he acted as a historical mediator, easing Americans into the future even as he honored many of the values and institutions of the past. Rogers appeared as a reassuring figure with one foot anchored in tradition and the other in modern innovation, a man whose gentle humor and down-home wisdom helped guide his fellow citizens through a wrenching period of historical change. Perhaps his best biographer once suggested that the Oklahoman was a “beneficiary of circumstances” whose talents happened to fit the demands and opportunities of a new age. This argument shortchanges Rogers. Perhaps more than any other public figure in the early 1900s, he instinctively grasped the historical changes overturning a familiar world. Projecting his own sense of social displacement – the rural Indian cowboy traversing the media highways of an urban mass culture – onto a national screen, he deployed his humor and keen powers of observation to make sense of this transforming atmosphere. His fellow Americans, while listening to him pan the sins and praise the virtues of both the past and the present, gained the comforting thought that maybe things were not so different after all. Will Rogers, in other words, was not so much a “beneficiary of circumstance” as an active agent: a brilliant observer, translator, and negotiator of historical change.¹⁰

So while Will Rogers told jokes, he wasn't a jokester. Far from it. This complex, shrewd, self-effacing man played a serious role in helping Americans accommodate to modern life. He expressed many of his fellow citizens' yearnings and reservations, hopes and anxieties about the journey from a largely rural society of individualism, character, and emotional restraint to a largely urban society of bureaucratic organization, personality, and self-fulfillment. In the process, he left behind a series of incongruous but indelible images: the cowboy in chaps and wide-brimmed hat, twirling his lariat before urban vaudeville audiences; the village philosopher enchanting his listeners with a rustic style and old-fashioned wisdom as he was broadcast coast-to-coast on the radio; the man with the common touch performing “the country boy goes to the city” in movies that made him one of Hollywood's biggest draws. But playing on that ambiguity was actually his secret. By making them laugh even as he made them think, by honoring the past even as he embraced the future, Will Rogers helped ease his fellow Americans into the modern world. And they loved him for it.