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BOOK REVIEW

Henry J. Miller. A Nation of Petitioners: Petitions and Petitioning in the United Kingdom, 1780–1918

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The long nineteenth century was a subscriptional century, Henry Miller convincingly establishes in *A Nation of Petitioners: Petitions and Petitioning in the United Kingdom, 1780–1918*. The most widely used subscriptional form—the petition—has been curiously overlooked by historians. It is revealed here as a "linchpin for a wider repertoire of popular politics," action, and agency that shaped the dynamic, performative, interactive, and fundamentally contested political culture of the modern United Kingdom (3–5, 106, 180–88). Miller's book has welcome implications not only for how we understand the history of politics in this period but also for how we conceive of and do political history.

Miller arranges the book into three thematic parts, which make a concerted effort to cover the four nations. Offering a comprehensive statistical overview, the first, "Petitions," illustrates the utility to historians of big data, with chapters on the volume of and trends in petitions; the heterogenous issues they addressed; and the authorities to whom these ritualized, written, signed requests were directed. Parts two and three accessibly blend the quantitative and qualitative. The chapters in "Petitioners" examine: the evolution of and debates over the permissive, open right to petition; how collective identities were catalyzed and challenged by petitioning; and the fluid, diverse "petitioning communities" shaped by such activity. In "Petitioning," the chapters explore how the practices and experiences of petitioning energized local politics; the effects of mass petitioning campaigns, often helmed by single-issue associations seeking to mobilize and demonstrate popular pressure and opinion; the representative claim-making of and complex interactions between petitioners and authorities; and the reinvention of petitionary models and forms.

From the wealth of material meticulously presented and analyzed by Miller, there are three major takeaways. The first is the colossal scale of petitioning in the United Kingdom between 1780 and 1918, which was "historically unprecedented" compared to earlier periods and other polities. Over one million public petitions were received by the House of Commons, containing nearly 165 million signatures, and addressing almost 34,000 topics. Miller identifies three chronological phases that reveal not the rise and fall, but the "emergence, institutionalisation and displacement" of petitioning. First, from a low numerical base and petitions being used principally for redressing private or sectional interests, a growth in organized campaigning from the late eighteenth century spurred an "explosion" in petitioning. Second, following a "breakthrough" in the 1820s the volume of petitions peaked in the 1840s, but remained high and relatively stable into the 1880s, as did signature numbers—thanks largely to transformative mobilization drives, which also resulted in political, humanitarian, and especially religious and social causes becoming the predominant topics. Last, although the early twentieth century saw a drop in petitions and issues and perceptions

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of decline, petitioning "mutated into new, less well-recorded forms" as petitioners sought out alternative authorities and prioritized visual and spatial spectacle over parliamentary procedure—revealing the practice's flexibility and continued vibrancy (2, 27–31, 40–52, 60–69, 203–6, 253–62).

Second, this book enriches our understanding of nineteenth-century political culture. Miller contends that petitions and petitioning occupied a "central place" within it, opening up "new spaces for politics" and enabling and embedding "political participation, representation, organisation, expression, and mobilization." This was a political "ecosystem" not dependent on possession of the vote or the sporadic election cycle—a politics of name-signing rather than ballot-marking—and was one that connected the "formal" and "informal" (3, 20, 49). Crucial to this—and to explaining why people petitioned—were the stages of the extra-parliamentary petitioning practice and process, which facilitated an interactive politics, and arguably held greater significance than a petition's typically anticlimactic reception. Petitions did a lot of political work: they were laid for signature in, and helped to define and contest, public places, they were read aloud at meetings, and had a distinctive material culture; canvassing was a means of raising public consciousness and of generating "networks of activity." Petitions brought people together, drawing them into political activity: because it was held up as an historic liberty and thus generally escaped curtailment, petitioning could legitimize associationism and assembly, while petitions endorsed at public meetings assumed a legitimacy of their own (120, 187–90, 211–24). Miller also reveals that, in their "demotic, inclusive" self-descriptions, petitioners appealed to and claimed to represent "a wider collectivity"—the authenticity of which was frequently disputed, further spurring political behavior—while, in presenting petitions, MPs claimed to represent petitioners' interests. Often these descriptions, most notably "inhabitants," implied "a strong connection to place." Political constituencies were not only forged by politicians and parties. Petitioning communities were also "connected horizontally" to those making similar requests elsewhere and "vertically" to the national political structures to which they appealed, the representativeness of which they could question and rival, particularly at moments of political tension (132–38, 176, 231–32, 276–80).

Third, *A Nation of Petitioners* offers a path out of the historiographical cul-de-sac in which an enduring fixation on the "New Political History" and its associated turns has left historians of nineteenth-century British politics. Miller challenges major narratives, especially that of the taming of popular politics (which has been subject to shifting chronologies)—although he asserts its vibrancy and participatory quality, perhaps the overriding impression is one of a politics of contestation, and this is where the nuance lies. Petitions and petitioning were a site, a microcosm, and a reflection of political struggles. Yet, if we are to move past a re-treading of these debates, we need "a new way of understanding political culture beyond languages and ideas." This can be achieved by "studying practices, or what people did" (4, 277), an idea also being explored by historians such as Katrina Navickas, Mary O'Connor, and Richard Huzzey, Miller's collaborator on several petitioning projects. This is about practices of politics and practices in politics. Miller shows that petitioning was one such practice, as was representation. By implication, this means thinking about who did it, how they did it, why they did it, to what and whom they did it, and where they did it—and likewise, what politics itself did. The benefits and shortcomings of a possible practical turn will no doubt be intensely debated, and Miller could further elaborate on his vision. Miller also rightly stresses that historians must disentangle "political culture" from electoral culture but could have more fully interrogated their boundaries and overlaps. There remains the issue of how far, even by seeking out the practical and non-electoral, we continue to privilege the politics of activists—petitioning could be an almost quotidian political action, but it also required much political labor, and we also need to ask why people did *not* sign petitions.

Miller reveals not just the vitality of political life but of the field of study itself. *A Nation of Petitioners* will be a must-read cornerstone of the long overdue nineteenth-century political history revival.

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