
LAST TRY
BY
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READ BEFORE
THE CHICAGO LITERARY CLUB
AT
THE CLIFF DEWELLERS CLUB
ON
2 FEBRUARY 1998

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Desmond Macky was an old man when I first met him at an antique show in Dublin. He was very Irish but somehow quite British. He could tell you stories of the old Anglo-Irish elite and of getting drunk with Brendan Behan.

When I met him he was an elegant little man with a goatee, a shabby suit and a brood brimmed hat. He would take the bus in from Bray carrying a plastic bag full of prints. Over drinks at the Shebourne, he would tell you a story and sell you a print.

The prints "Lord" Macky specialized in were late 19th century Irish and English political cartoons and caricatures. Most of the prints dealt with obscure and unpleasant subjects. Many had been originally published as color supplements on poor quality paper.

Why did I want these prints? Why would any one want them?

When I was young, Chicago supported four major daily newspapers. In the morning you could choose the *Tribune* or the *Sun-Times* and then in the afternoon, the *American* and the *Daily News* were available.

My father was a news junky and choose all four.

Each of the four Chicago papers employed at least one political cartoonist who produced a daily political cartoon. The *Tribune* usually printed cartoons on the front page while the other papers printed them on their editorial pages. Each morning and evening these cartoons were a point of discussion. Each morning and evening I learned something about politics and something about art. I learned to love a very ungentlemenly art form and its use as a political weapon.

This interest in the political cartoon may never have turned into a collecting interest if my father had not visited Ralph Newman's book shop. There Ralph gave him an original John McCutcheon drawing. My father, in turn, gave me that McCutcheon cartoon.

Ralph's gift to my father and in turn my father's gift to me has lead to more than a third of a century of wasteful spending.

At first I developed my collection at little or no cost. Political cartoonists had little understanding of the value of their own original drawings and dealers even less. One could write most cartoonists and get an original drawing free. While dealers put low prices on most older original drawings. And, in one case, I actually purchased "cartoon posters" that turned out to be pen and ink drawings.

My collection now is quite out of hand. It includes drawings, paintings, prints, posters, postcards, sculpture, buttons, dolls, canes, books and even computer disks. Items in my collection come from the US, Canada, Japan, China, Germany, Russia, Ireland, England, Yugoslavia, France, Scotland and Vietnam as well as several other countries. The collection includes everything from 18th Century English copper engravings to a tacky little item that may have ^{BEEN} published this morning. It has become a never ending quest.

In Renaissance Italy the word "caricature" was first used to honor and describe the work of Annibale Caracci, a late 16th Century Bolognese naturalistic

draughtsman. Caracci became the first noted caricaturist of a line that reached its height with the “cartoons” of the early 18th Century English artist, William Hogarth. Artists, like Caracci and Hogarth, were not political cartoonists but helped create the art form that, with a higher level of freedom, would become the political cartoon.

Freedom House would have considered late 18th Century England a “partly free” state. And in that state the first great political cartoons were created. Of the men who created these cartoons, by far the greatest was a man named, James Gillray

Gillray helped define this new art form and our image of his time. We see men like Napoleon, Pitt and Fox through his cartoons. He was a great artist, a loyal Englishman and something of a bigot. In his later years¹⁴ he went insane and killed himself.

Gillray and his commentaries produced their fine, often hand colored prints, for a small political elite either based in or frequent visitors to London. The artists were often in the pay of the government or those who wished to become the government. Their works, although available to the general public, were aimed at

the small political elite that could control Parliament. Members of that governing elite would buy or rent portfolios of these cartoons for an evening's entertainment.

Many of the anti-government cartoons made their way to America. There they often had a stronger effect than in the Mother Country. Originals and crude copies were distributed together with the works of those who now called themselves Americans. Among those early American cartoonists were the names of Paul Revere and Ben Franklin.

Franklin's "Join or Die" was to become a Revolutionary flag. While Paul Revere's "Boston in Distress" and "The Able Doctor" would help galvanize the support of the American colonies for the Revolution. And his anti-Catholic cartoon "Mitered Minuet" helped insure that the Revolution would not find support in Catholic Canada.

Yet most of Revere's works were copies re-engraved from prints that first appeared in England or Ireland. And Franklin's great cartoon was a crude work more idea than art.

The Founding Fathers and cartoonists of the new American Republic understood the power and importance of a free press. And, in the first amendment to their second Constitution, they firmly established freedom of the press and a future for the American cartoon.

Unfortunately, effective copyright laws took a bit longer to establish.

At first few cartoonists took advantage of this new freedom. Most better early American political cartoons were single sheet copper engravings like their English models. England had a large number of skilled craftsmen able to produce these cartoons as well as a large wealthy elite willing to buy them. The American cartoonists did not have the means of production to fit their market.

Andy Jackson and the development of lithography would create the first great outpouring of fine cartoons. Based on the relative number of cartoons in the Library of Congress's collection, most of the better quality cartoons were purchased by Jackson's enemies. Jackson policies, especially his attack on the Bank of the United States, had made him many enemies among those who had the money to buy cartoons. Cartoons were still mostly single sheet prints and still relatively expensive.

The Library of Congress's print collection traces the development of the Nation and the American cartoon. One can see the first anti-foreigner cartoons attacking the Irish and their religion. But more importantly, one can see the attacks on the Irish national leader, Daniel O'Connell, over his attack on American slavery. Much more of American history is pictured in these cartoons but the most important issue comes down to one issue—slavery.

The illustrated newspaper, or what we now call the magazine, developed as the issue of slavery came to a head. By the time the Civil War began conditions were ripe for our first great cartoonists. The first two of note were both born in Germany. From the North came Thomas Nast, a professional artist and anti-Catholic bigot. And from the South came Adalbert Volck, a dentist who believed in slavery.

Nast was born in Landau, Germany in 1840. At the age of six his mother brought him to New York. He studied art there with Theodore Kaufmann and at the National Academy of Design. By fifteen, *Leslie's Weekly* was paying him four

dollars a week to sketch fires, riots and wrecks. *The New York Illustrated News* sent him to England in 1859 to cover a prize fight. By 1860 he was in Italy covering Garibaldi's Army for the *Illustrated London News*.

When the Civil War began Nast returned to New York. Although only twenty year old he was already an experienced professional. At first he worked for *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* and then, beginning in 1862, for *Harper's Weekly*. He rarely went into the field and spent most of the war engraving battle scenes based on rough sketches of others. His name became well known for these works, his cartoons and for his strong support of the war effort. Lincoln was to call him "our best recruiting sergeant".

His post war work was marked by strong loyalty to the Republican Party and good government. Although in 1884 he split with the party over the issue of the civil service and James G. Blaine. He was even paid by the Democratic Party to draw cartoons in support of Cleveland's presidential campaign.

The height of his career was marked by the words of William Marcy Tweed. "Stop them damn pictures. I don't care so much what the papers write about me. My constituents can't read. But, damn it, they can see pictures."

Yet many of the cartoons attacking the machine of this Protestant Irish Democratic leader were tatted by anti-Irish racism and anti-Catholic bigotry.

As his wealth and prestige grew Nast illustrated books and dreamed of owning his own newspaper. He invested all his money with trusted professionals and reinvested all his dividends. Unfortunately his trusted advisors were the firm of Grant and Ward. The firm was fronted by a great general and run by a crook. He lost all his money and some of his trust in mankind.

The loss of his money was in some ways a blessing since it prevented him from leaving *Harper's Weekly*. His work for this "Journal of Civilization" had made Nast famous and it is considered his best. But in 1887 he abandoned his platform and began to disappear as a national figure.

"In quitting *Harper's Weekly*, Nast lost his forum. In losing him, *Harper's Weekly* lost its political importance." Their market and fortunes had been one. Their enemies feared their power. And their friends respected them. In many way we see the national figures of their time through their eyes.

The acknowledged “Father of the American Cartoon” was once again trying to become the great American investor. No longer willing to trust his money to others he purchased his own western land, had his son trained as assayer and sent him off to manage his mine. And as his investment began to fail he borrowed money to try to save it.

He sold what he could and mortgaged his home to pay living expenses. He went on a lecture tour to make money. And in 1889-90 he began working as a cartoonist for lesser publications like *Time*, *Once A Week* and the Chicago based, *America*.

In 1891, he came to Chicago to judge the *Inter-Ocean* prize for the best emblematic drawing of the city. And while in Chicago, he drew a few cartoons for the *Chicago Inter-Ocean*.

The 1902 catalogue of the Union League Club’s art collection lists a now lost drawing by Nast that must date from this period. What happened to that drawing?

An article from an old issue of the club's magazine may supply the answer. It told of the redecoration of a room that had been wall papered with prints. A photo shows a Currier and Ives cartoon print being removed from the wall. That print ended up in the garbage and perhaps was joined by an important pen and ink drawing.

In March 1892 Nast received an offer of work, money and a "free rein" from the *New York Gazette*. This was an offer he could not refuse but one he should have. Soon he was the journal's chief creditor and then its owner. He renamed the journal *Nast's Weekly*, re-mortgaged his home, made his son publisher and proceeded to loose more money.

Nast was a terrible businessman but once again a loyal Republican. The party needed his loyalty in 1892. So the managers of Harrison's presidential campaign guaranteed the journal a circulation of one hundred thousand copies. But this only delayed the inevitable and in 1893 Nast's dream died.

Once again Nast was unemployed and in debt. He was a figure of the past who had outlived his time. He went to Europe and painted a few pictures. He came home and did little.

In 1902 Teddy Roosevelt felt sorry for the old man and offered him a patronage job. It wasn't a great job but he needed the money. And after some hesitation he agreed to serve as American Consul to Guayaquil, Ecuador where he died in 1903.

Nast's original drawings are by far the most valued older American cartoons and he remains the only name most dealers know. He supported many a just and unjust cause. He created the Republican elephant, the Tammany tiger and our image of Santa Claus. He also produced many anti-Catholic cartoons and helped popularize the English cartoonist's monkey like Irish man.

Adalbert Volck was a dentist who worked secretly in Union controlled Baltimore on his "Confederate War Etchings" and signed his work V. Blada. His single sheet cartoons were then secretly printed and distributed. Few saw his work and fewer remember or honor his name. Yet these twenty-nine cartoons defending the past are some of America's best and most racist cartoons.

In 1868 Volck published his thirtieth and last cartoon, "The American Cyclops". And in 1912, a dentist named Volck died.

After the Civil War, political cartoons appearing in magazines like *Harper's*, *Puck* and *The Judge* became a major part of the American political scene. And, as these magazines began to die out, political cartoons became a regular feature of the major daily newspapers. The power and importance of the American newspaper and cartoonist became forever intertwined.

Many great cartoonists would follow Nast and Volck. Few remember the names of Keppler, Gillam, Wade, Morgan, Frost, Hamilton or Beard. A few more might remember McCutcheon, Davenport, Cushing, Opper, Gross, Ireland or Gropper. Yet these were the great political cartoonists in the years between Tweed and Hitler.

By far the most interesting of these artists was a man born in 1866 named, Art Young. His work first appeared in the *Chicago Inter-Ocean* during the Columbian Exposition. He then moved to New York and led a maverick career of a mainly free lance artist.

While working for Socialist Max Eastman's *The Masses* Young produced some of his finest and most controversial works. In 1913 he was to be sued by the Associated Press for libel. In 1918 he was charged by the Justice Department with "conspiracy" to "interfering with enlistment".

He was guilty but got off.

His style was to become as rebellious as his politics. At first his work looked much like that of Nast but soon he developed a distinctive style that was to be his alone. Unlike most of his contemporaries, one can identify Young's later work without a signature. In a time of many great cartoonists his causes and art stood out. He was not always right but he was always good.

In the more than half century since World War II many fine cartoons have been produced. Men like Bill Mauldin, Herblock and other have added to the proud history of this art form. Yet the quality and importance of the American cartoon has declined as their medium, the newspaper, has declined.

Chicago's four major daily newspapers of my youth are now only two. It is not unusual to find an American city with only one major newspaper. *The Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today* and *New York Times* are becoming our national newspapers.

Every year we have fewer major newspapers, employing fewer artists and printing fewer political cartoons.

Newspapers themselves are becoming a technology of the past, much like the copper engraving. The few attempts that have been made to use the political cartoon on TV have all failed. Perhaps the Internet will create a new medium and market for this art form. Or we may see a day when a small political elite buys or rents collections of cartoons on DVD for an evening's entertainment. This could preserving the art form but reduce its access to the general public and importance.

When copper engravings were being rented in London the Irish artist, James Barry, said of the political cartoon. "Better, better far, there had been no art, than thus to pervert and employ it to purposes so base, and so subversive of

everything interesting to society.” Cartoons remain subversive, unfair, evil and just.

The growth of freedom was necessary for the birth of this art form. Yet some of the “best” cartoons have been created by bigots, fellow travelers and party hacks. Cartoons helped create the image of the Mick, Nigger and Kike as well as the Absentee Landlord, Klansman and Nazi. They are weapons that can be used to fight or support evil.

While I was writing this paper a friend told me to never write anything you don't use again and again. So parts of this paper have already been published in the Caxton Club's *Caxtonian*. And part will be used again. This is not my last try.