

THE POLITICAL CARTOON AND THE HISTORY STUDENT

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The political cartoon has become a part of modern history examining in South Africa but one suspects often with little or no training of the pupil. External examiners have accepted the cartoon as a valuable tool for testing historical understanding, but many teachers appear to ignore both the cartoon as a teaching tool and the need to train pupils in cartoon analysis.

Until the pupils are taught how to handle the cartoon as a tool which can help them to develop their insight and understanding of a period of history, little can be achieved by putting them in the examinations. In looking for reasons why pupils are seldom adequately trained in the handling of cartoons as historical evidence various points come to light. Firstly many teachers are not themselves confident in their own ability to use cartoons as historical evidence which often leads them to cynicism about their value. Secondly there is little guidance in textbooks as to what a cartoon really is, to the essence of a cartoon. The third reason (which textbooks are trying to overcome) is a dearth of suitable cartoons to use to train pupils in their analysis.

David Low, who dominated British cartoons for much of the inter-war period, defined the cartoon as "an illustration of political or social idea, served up sometimes in caricatural draughtsmanship, sometimes not"¹ In his *Cartoon History of 20th Century England*, *Daily Sketches*, Martin Walker says that the essence of cartoon humour lies in the placing of familiar respected figures in an environment which both illuminates and interprets them. It is thus concerned with bringing together and reconciling disparate elements. The modern cartoon is also a product of the new printing technology and growing speed of communications. At first the cartoons in England, where Francis Curruthers Gould was the first staff cartoonist on a daily paper in 1888, reflected Victorian complacency. Caricature was often a part of this as can be seen by John Bull and others.

"A good cartoon is fifty per cent suggestion, clothed with half-ideas to be completed with the unconscious co-operation of the person who looks at it."² It depends for part of its success on the fact that it is a comment on an event within a continuous process of debate between cartoonist and reader. The reader expects certain responses to events and this is part of the reason for buying that newspaper. It also means that certain symbols can be developed which may be new and obscure to the uninitiated but which are often more stimulating than the old symbols. Many of the older symbols have lost their meaning—The Bulldog is no longer symbolic of Britain, as the nation no longer has the same strengths. Other symbols such as the Russian Bear are, however, still valid although generally countries are represented symbolically by the features of their national leaders today.

Walker sees three stylistic traditions in the British political cartoon: The classicist with large dominating figures; the

grotesque with distorted and deformed figures; and the populist. This is the most familiar to us for we can identify with its figures and feelings. It lacks the awe of the classicist as well as the cruelty of the grotesque. It reminds us that we are all in the same boat and reinforces this idea by the use of regular characters. Giles with his complete family and Bob Conolly with his little man are good examples of this.

"The cartoonist reflects the common preoccupations of the common man".³ In doing this they both reflect the feelings of the period and help to create these feelings. The cartoonist is especially powerful in creating the popular image of a politician where they are more influential than either television or radio. The use of exaggeration and contrasts of scale to drive home points join with the use of symbols and universally understood stereotypes to repeat and reinforce prejudice. The cartoonist provides examples such as Low's Colonel Blimp of the power of the press to create myths and our readiness to accept these myths.

A cartoon is a puzzle, the success of which depends on the reader unconsciously picking up the pieces in the correct sequence to a climax when the whole idea is revealed. Figures are posed carefully with an awareness of body language and the nuances attached to the angle of an arm or tilt of a head are important. The puzzle is easiest to solve if the event is familiar and here the history student often comes unstuck.

In teaching pupils to look at cartoons more analytically, it helps to start with the familiar. For a week take the first five or ten minutes of each period to discuss the cartoon in the previous day's newspaper. Once the pupils see the nuances in these cartoons of familiar events, look out for cartoons to use in revision exercises in class. Only once they are familiar with techniques should cartoons be used in a test situation. A bright class can later also be challenged by giving them a cartoon as an introduction to a new section. Cartoon history is stimulating and enjoyable as well as a useful source of social and political comment. It is especially valuable in that it reveals much of the concerns of the Common Man.

NOTES

1. Quoted in *David Low* p. 127 from Low's *Ye Madde Designer*.
2. *David Low* p. 129 quoting *Newspaper World* 28 July 1949.
3. *Daily Sketches* p. 20

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