

Cartoons

Dr Roy Douglas, University of Surrey, author of four illustrated studies of cartoons, explores the entertainment and challenge cartoons present the History student

THERE ARE BRITISH PRINTS going back to Tudor times which could fairly be called cartoons. A well-known woodcut reflects on the English breach with Rome. It shows Henry VIII trampling the Pope, and receiving a copy of the English Bible. Cartoons of a modern kind appear in profusion in the 1730s. Since then, the supply has not ceased; but cartoonists' techniques have varied greatly from age to age.

One of the attractive features of cartoons is that they are often funny, yet even very serious and tragic incidents can sometimes be appreciated best in a humorous context.

The first illustration, a German cartoon of 1895 entitled 'The sick cow' is an example. It was drawn during a period of Turkish atrocities against the Armenian subjects of the Ottoman Empire. The cartoonist, however, was not considering the atrocities themselves but the behaviour of the Great Powers who were deciding what to do about the 'cow', Armenia.

The Turk, who has brought a milking-pail, is upset because he can no longer milk the cow. This suggests that Turkey's only interest in the matter is to secure revenue from Armenia. The Russian has brought a butchering-knife, and evidently contemplates cutting up the unfortunate animal when it dies. This implies that Russia hopes that Turkish rule would soon collapse, so that she could 'carve up' Armenia for herself. Lord Salisbury, the British representative, hopes to cure the cow by injecting 'reforms' with a great syringe. He evidently considers that the Turks could be prevailed upon to reform their rule in Armenia, and it is not necessary to drive them out altogether. The Frenchman is trying to kick the cow into life. Finally, an Armenian priest sprays it with holy water, trying the efficacy of religion.

Cartoons and Their Context

Cartoons cast considerable light on the tastes of the time. A famous British cartoon of 1740, entitled 'Idol worship' represents the rear view of an enormous man, his buttocks bared, bestriding the entrance to the Exchequer, the Treasury and the Admiralty. A young man is kissing the exposed buttocks. Contemporaries would have had no doubt that the giant figure was meant to be Sir Robert Walpole, even though his face is invisible, and the message of the cartoon is clearly that promotion in the State demanded humiliating obeisance to the first 'Prime Minister'.

This cartoon says much about eighteenth century politics. It also reminds us of the changes in taste which have taken place. A cartoon of that kind might well be drawn today about a modern politician; but it would have been unthinkable for a reputable British cartoonist to draw anything similar during most of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Public taste would have been shocked, and very likely the cartoon-



— Die kranke Kuh. —

ist or his publisher would have been prosecuted.

It is often possible to collect cartoons from different sources which provide radically different angles on a situation, and may remind us of points of view which are seldom remembered today. At the end of 1916, and the very beginning of 1917, some influential people - largely, but not exclusively, in Germany and Austria-Hungary - suggested that there should be peace negotiations. A French cartoon showed a dead soldier arising from his grave, declaring, 'Peace like that! No, never!' A Japanese cartoon showed the German Emperor as a street pedlar who has obviously asked too high a price of the Allies initially, urging them to negotiate with him. When it became clear that the Allies would reject the idea of a negotiated peace altogether, a German cartoon showed representatives of the leading Allied countries as undertakers, burying 'the German angel of peace'.

Sometimes, however, an individual cartoonist changes his own mind. In mid-1940, the French army was collapsing before the German onslaught, and the aged Marshal Pétain sought an armistice from the enemy. On 20 June, a London newspaper featured a cartoon showing Pétain as a venerable, but dignified, figure, forced at the point of pistols held by Hitler and Mussolini to accept 'Peace Terms'. Five days later, the same newspaper showed another cartoon by the same artist, with Pétain as a senile father-of-the-bride, compelling a gagged, bound and obviously reluctant



The cartoon published in 1919 which expressed a foreboding for the future

France to wed 'Hitlerini'. Pétain's attitude had not changed, but the cartoonist's view evidently had.

Cartoonists occasionally show amazing prophetic skill. The second illustration is an example. In May 1919, the Treaty of Versailles had been drawn up by the Allies, but had not yet been signed. The cartoon shows the principal Allied leaders emerging from the Palace of Versailles. One remarks to the others, 'Curious! I seem to hear a child weeping!' Behind a pillar is a little boy, and over his head are the words '1940 Class' - that is, people who would be of military age in 1940.

But a cartoonist's assessment may be wildly wrong. A *Punch* cartoon which appeared on 15 March 1939 showed John Bull, wearing a tin hat, and obviously prepared for anything, waking up as the nightmare 'War Scare' escaped from the window. That was the very day on which Hitler sent his armies into Prague, and convinced nearly everybody that war was inevitable in the near future.

Assessing Cartoons as Sources

Cartoons force us to ask the sort of questions that historians should always ask about their sources. To whom was the cartoon addressed? Was it, for example, addressed to people of a particular nation, or social class, or political outlook? What effect was the cartoonist trying to produce? What does the cartoon tell us about the likely views of the addressees, and their general assumptions, *before* they saw the cartoon? When we study a cartoon closely, we can often learn a great deal about the society for which it was drawn, as well as the incident about which it comments. The student who flicks through a few pages of cartoons because he sees them (rightly!) as good fun, can pick up a lot of historical understanding in the process.

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Student Skills' Texts Reviewed

Tailor Made?

TEACHING AND LEARNING HISTORY by John Young and John Garrard. Department of History, University of Salford, Salford M5 4WT. Approx. 20 pp. each. 1994, reprinted 1995, 1996. £1.00. Discounts for large orders.

This series which includes 'How to Write Essays', 'How to Read and Take Notes' and 'How to Revise and Take Exams' is aimed at A Level students. 'How to Write Essays' contains plenty of examples, useful commentaries and explores a selection of methods, as does 'How to Read and Take Notes'. The range of methods means that a student should find easily a method that suits him/her best. I found, for example, the section on 'How to Skip Read' gave an interesting slant on the issue.

If there is a weakness it is that the booklets state the obvious too frequently. Anyone with half an eye on gaining a mid-to-higher History A Level grade should know, already, what is written in 'How to Revise and Take Exams', while 'How to Write Essays' has a patronising tone in places. Nevertheless, the good intentions clearly neutralise this. On balance, therefore, I think that these booklets could serve as an ideal *introduction* to an A Level course because they indicate clearly the targets and methods for students.

Joseph Wilkinson (Undergraduate, First Year)

Crowded Market?

HOW TO IMPROVE YOUR MEMORY by Robert Leach. 96 pp. HOW TO STUDY EFFECTIVELY by Richard Freeman and John Meed. 80 pp. Learning Skills series. Collins Educational, 1993. £8.35 each.

There has been no shortage of study skills books for a few decades and in the contemporary changing educational culture for A Level they are as useful as they ever were. The Learning Skills series, published in association with the National Extension College, are not directed solely to History students. Robert Leach's book considers several types of memory including those inapplicable to History study, such as how to remember faces and formulae, but it presents a range of interesting ideas. It is a text that could interest Tutors who wish to develop bespoke guides for their students. *How to Study Effectively* covers well-trodden territory, indeed Richard Freeman has written other books with similar titles, and contains little to excite. The series' large typesize and presentation, which seems more appropriate to a young age group, is not attractive.

One-way Street?

USING COMPUTERS IN HISTORY: A PRACTICAL GUIDE by M.J. Lewis and Roger Lloyd-Jones. Routledge, 1996. xiii + 248 pp. Index. £14.99 pbk.

A modern PC has more capacity than the computer which guided the first landing on the moon. As the impact of this facility filters to A Level work the use of computers, in connection with databases, already a part of many tertiary History courses, will probably increase. Routledge have published a wizard guide, beautifully produced, with a wealth of illustrations (over 120 figures and 20 tables). There are other texts, for example, by Evan Mawdsley and Thomas Munck (1993) and Daniel Greenstein (1994) but this guide, which uses the widely available Microsoft Windows *Excel* and *Access* programs as examples, is leader of the pack - by several lengths. And it costs only £14.99. How do they do that?

Gilbert Pleuger