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The Punch Brotherhood: Table Talk and Print Culture in Mid-Victorian London

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The centrality of *Punch* to the study of Victorian politics and culture is well-established. There are a number of books and articles on the history and influence of the magazine, not least Richard Altick's 1997 study of its first ten years.⁽¹⁾ But, as Leary argues, most existing works ignore the circumstances of production, accepting *Punch*'s seemingly monolithic editorial voice while ignoring the very different personalities and concerns of individual editors and artists. This study attempts a new and difficult task in trying to reconstruct the 'pervasive medium of oral culture' (p. 1) that formed and focused the later print sources. Discussion of the working methods of *Punch*'s writers, a collective of highly visible and vocal contributors, acts as a case study within which the intersections of oral and print culture might be examined. In this endeavour Leary has been singularly fortunate in having at his disposal a manuscript diary of verbatim records of *Punch* dinner meetings, meetings that also acted as an editorial sounding board during which decisions regarding ideas for illustrations and issue emphases were debated. The diary, written by Henry Silver, covers a 12-year period, between 1858 and 1870, and together with other documents (letters, published and unpublished memoirs) it allows Leary to analyse the dynamic between idea and realisation within the confines of the pages of *Punch*. This is not another history of the magazine; the rivalries and personalities of *Punch* celebrities are known already to most scholars of 19th-century print culture: Mark Lemon, Mayhew, Thackeray, Leech and Tenniel are all familiar names. What does concern Leary is the web of talk,

friendship, and ambition that surrounded the magazine and that contributed to the formation of a unique 'business enterprise and ... working community' (p. 6) for the first 50 years of *Punch's* existence.

What Leary calls 'table-talk and the development of a collective sense of identity' forms the subject-matter of the first chapter. A combination of talented writers and artists under the benevolent leadership of Mark Lemon led to what Leary terms a 'refashioned political iconography' presented to a public that had become slightly embarrassed by the visual and verbal excesses of the previous generation. The financial security that followed salaried appointments 'along with favourable responses to frequent requests for personal loans' was provided by Bradbury and Evans and went far to eliminate the uncertainty and stress usually associated with writers for the periodical press. Most important for Leary's thesis is the spirit of cooperation evident in what became a 'functional brotherhood of workers' (p. 13) under Lemon. The group saw themselves as exclusive, committed to their enterprise, and speaking with a united, respectable voice to the middle-class reader. The weekly dinner meeting 'by invitation only' was essential to the fostering of this sense of exclusivity; one of the more surprising revelations of Silver's records of these meetings, however, is the extent to which talk at the dinners often degenerated into retelling of schoolboy pranks and sexual exploits. The workings of a 'male domestic sphere,' and the 'sanctioned misbehaviour' (p. 28) evident in Silver's diary is at odds with the magazine's public persona. Leary reminds the reader that one of the reasons 'universally noted' behind the success of the magazine in the 1840s was 'the rigid exclusion from its pages of the personal invective and bawdy humour that had characterized much of the comic press of the time' (p. 39). He suggests, then, that the *Punch* weekly dinners acted as a safety valve; excess energy was worked out before the business of catering to the middle-class sensibilities of the imagined reader was begun, though the shifting boundaries of acceptable versus unacceptable content were also acknowledged. The chief object of the dinner was discussion of the subject of the so-called 'Large Cut,' the full-page woodcut drawn by Leech, and later by Tenniel, that set the tone for each issue. Leary contends, in his second chapter, that ultimate deconstruction of the illustration, and therefore of any individual issue of the magazine, demands an understanding of the various contexts in which it was placed: conversational, textual, topical, visual, and analogical matters 'create a framework of allusion in which the cut achieves its commentary' (p. 45). The extent to which the gossip (literary, financial, sexual) picked up by *Punch* colleagues at other clubs and dinners was re-told and used as the structure for the next issue has gone unnoticed until now; it is only through the existence of such verbatim reports as Silver's diary that that missing piece in the mechanics of periodical production can be presented, though it should be noted that we get relatively little in the way of direct quotations from the diary. Leary says at one point that publication of the entire text had been mooted by others, but that much of the diary was considered of little interest to the general reader. Nevertheless, Silver's musings on the gossip picked up and related to the table find their way into Leary's argument about the web of information that made up London's literary world. The well-known story of Dickens's break with Bradbury and Evans over his attempts to stifle public information about his separation from his wife is reworked here in terms of its impact on *Punch* personnel. Thackeray's engineering of the expulsion of a friend of Dickens from the Garrick club is similarly examined for its effect on both the magazine and its publishers. Swinburne's sexual proclivities are given a good deal of attention, largely in relation to *Punch's* writers' attempts to dissociate themselves from G. A. Sala and his Bohemian crowd. Leary notes that 'Lemon's concern about 'it's being known' that Bohemians had no hand in *Punch* points to his awareness of the way in which the still largely oral transmission of the identities and affiliations of the *Punch* staff shaped the magazine's reputation within the literary marketplace' (pp. 77-8). All of these case studies are useful in demonstrating the central tenet of Leary's argument, and all point out the losing battle that such magazines as *Punch* waged against 'personal journalism,' choosing to adhere to the old system of anonymity that attempted to present a single editorial voice to the reader, even while acknowledging the fame of individual members of the *Punch* collective.

Chapter five outlines the growing influence of Shirley Brooks on the dinner meetings of *Punch*, using material from both Silver's diary and those diaries of Brooks himself. The case of Brooks is worth pursuing; his funeral (in 1874) was attended by all of the literary luminaries of the day, and he was identified as one of the greatest editors of the magazine, and yet he is almost unknown today. Leary traces Brooks' opinions in the decisions made during those meetings; his opposition to political reform, 'his contempt for the poor?', his

defense of Governor Eyre, are all evident in the pages and illustrations of *Punch* (p. 120). Leary maintains that the growing conservatism of the magazine, frequently ascribed to the aging profile of its editors, is in fact largely the result of Brooks' prominence in talk, and therefore in the editorial stance of the material produced during the 1860s. The assumption is that his influence on *Punch* has disappeared from the historical record due to its being located in conversations, in letters, and in behind-the-scenes attempts to alter public opinion about friends (or rivals) through the insertion of 'notices of one kind or another' in various long-forgotten journals (p. 124). The force of Brooks' personality is recovered through perusal of private recordings like those of Silver, and Leary makes much of the literary capital Brooks amassed. Though there are similar nods elsewhere in the book in the direction of Bourdieu, Leary does not theorize his evidence, and misses, I think, an opportunity to show the usefulness of theory to book history.

The last chapter takes the reader rather farther away from the daily workings of the magazine, tracing the rise of Bradbury and Evans as printer-publishers. However, the emphasis on the sort of financial stability the company provided the writers of *Punch*, allowing the editors to hire staff writers and thus freeing individuals from hack work, does ultimately bring us back to the matter at hand and repeats parts of the argument made elsewhere in the book. In fact, the episodic nature of the text is both a strength and a weakness. Since some episodes are connected, a certain amount of repetition of material is inevitable, and it is assumed, I think, that the reader will dip in and out of it at will. In the case of Bradbury and Evans, it is clear that the firm's ability to underwrite the various financial crises of *Punch*'s staff was crucial to the survival of the magazine. All of this is brought to light through the transcription of letters and diary entries outlining the small (and sometimes enormous) sums requested of the firm. The business affairs of Bradbury and Evans are offered as a last comment on the argument of the book as a whole. The personal relationship that the firm had built up with *Punch* authors formed the mainstay and contributed to the longevity of the magazine. But the same deliberate cultivation of close friendship with those who were technically employees could also become a liability, as when Bradbury and Evans's relationship with Dickens soured and he took his books elsewhere to be printed.

One of the great delights of this book is its chattiness – a chattiness that extends to the forest of footnotes adorning almost every page. They offer a parallel, more intimate portrait of the men and issues discussed in the text: how much did Shirley Brooks make in a year? Where were the *Punch* offices located? Who knew that Henry Bradbury printed banknotes? The amount of information contained in the notes might easily make up another volume on the magazine. Leary's study is not definitive, and does not claim to be so, but it does point out new avenues of inquiry to be followed, and it replicates in its emphasis on talk the loud, witty atmosphere that must have been part of the weekly *Punch* dinner meetings. As such, it recaptures both the sound of the voices of the magazine's men and the complicated series of events that influenced the visual and textual editorial choices made by them.

Notes

1. Richard Altick, *Punch: The Lively Youth of a British Institution, 1841-1851* (Columbus, OH, 1999). [Back to \(1\)](#)

The author has responded that 'Dr. Tilley's summaries of my book's arguments are so fair and astute, and her criticisms so just, that I have no comment to make other than to thank her for such a generous review.'

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