

Defining John Bull: Political Caricature and National Identity in Late Georgian England

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The period between 1760 and 1820 was the golden age of British pictorial satire. But only in the last 20 years have the artists and their work attracted serious study in their own right. Rather than being seen as attractive but essentially incidental illustrations for the study of British society and politics, political and social caricatures are now analysed in depth as both a reflection of, and sometimes a formative influence upon, public opinion. Increasingly their propagandist role as tools in the hands of national government or opposition is recognised. The creators of what are often highly sophisticated and intricate images are now regarded as serious artists, and the importance of their place in the political and social world of the time recognised.

The setting up of a national centre in Britain for the study of cartoons and caricature at the University of Kent at Canterbury (see <http://library.kent.ac.uk/cartoons> [2]) and the major James Gillray exhibition at the Tate Gallery in 2001 (see <http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/gillray/> [3]) have set the agenda, while Diana Donald's *The Age of Caricature: Satirical Prints in the Reign of George III* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996) is currently the seminal text. So Tamara Hunt's new study is timely and welcome as a detailed exploration of the political prints and their importance in the British polity of the late eighteenth century.

Her study also builds on recent research into the growth of national and regional identities, especially Linda

Colley's *Britons* (London and New Haven; Yale University Press, 1992). In British caricature this is nowhere more clearly seen than in visual representations of Britannia, John Bull and the British lion alongside the use of symbols like the cap of liberty or the scales of justice. The representation of historical figures such as Charles I and Oliver Cromwell, and events like Magna Carta, the Revolution of 1688 and the Bill of Rights provide the context. In exploring these connections, the author has drawn upon the extensive collections of British caricatures in the British Museum and the Public Record Office, and the Library of Congress and the Henry E. Huntington Library in the USA. Together these provide the most comprehensive coverage available of a source material, the full extent of which is unknown.

There are seven chapters dealing thematically with the prints in a broad but overlapping chronological sequence. In this context the study's title is rather misleading, since only three of them deal centrally with John Bull and national identity. Other chapters look at political and constitutional developments between 1760 and 1788, and then, under the heading 'Dissenters, Levellers and Revolutionaries' events between 1776 and 1793. A chapter on the monarchy ranges over the whole of George III's reign up to 1820. This study is really an overarching study of the place of political caricature in the politics of George's reign, but in consequence it lacks a clear focus overall. The overlapping of the chapters sometimes leads to repetition and awkward cross-referencing. For example, Gillray's *Voluptuary* and *Temperance* prints of 1792, usually taken as a pair contrasting the excesses of the Prince of Wales with the frugality of his parents, are discussed individually in separate chapters.

There is also an ambivalence about national identity which needs clarification. There is no clear distinction in the text between what is British and what is English. John Bull is treated as complementary to Britannia, but as the book's title suggests is an essentially English creation, whose counterpart in Scotland was the tartan-clad Sawney Scot. No doubt these figures shared many attitudes towards government, and joined in national resistance to Revolutionary France and Napoleon, but they were nevertheless separate icons.

Nevertheless, the chapters on Britannia, John Bull and the emergence of national identity are much the best, with a good deal of valuable analysis and pertinent comment. The image of Britannia was one of the oldest of national icons, which had become standardised by the eighteenth century, with her classical garb, helmet, spear, and shield bearing the arms of Britain. In George III's reign she was depicted as being victimized by the king's corrupt ministers, notably a Bute or a North, as well as by radical reformers and national enemies. Less convincing here is the ascription of a softening Britannia image, one more feminine and maternal, to the canvassing activities of the Duchess of Devonshire and her 'Bakewell tarts' in the Westminster election of 1784, and their copious representation in the prints. An alternative explanation could be the change in style adopted by many artists in the early 1780s, notably Sayers and Gillray, away from a largely symbolic type of representation to one that was more life-like, albeit with exaggerated features. The image of Charles James Fox is perhaps the best example. In his early life depicted as a fox, his image by 1784 was the familiar stocky one with a mop of black hair and bushy eyebrows. This change was true also of Britannia. In Gillray's *Britannia's Assassination* of May 1782 (BM 5987) the new Rockingham Whigs (with an animal Fox) force their way into power and decapitate Britannia, who is in traditional pose, despite losing her shield. By March 1784 in Rowlandson's *Britannia Roused* (BM 6403), a very human and animated Britannia, with breasts bared, hurls Fox and North into oblivion.

The difference between Britannia as a representation of the official British state, and John Bull of the long-suffering British people, is not sufficiently emphasised. The image of John Bull, rare in the early eighteenth century, gradually became more popular as a symbol of the British people when monarchical power could be seen to decline in the 1780s, giving way to a growing 'democracy'. By the 1790s Britannia had become a helpless female, aloof and no longer involved in political affairs, but she still remained an important symbol in prints as a representation of the state.

John Bull first appeared in 1712, and like other figures was portrayed mostly in animal form, as a bull or sometimes a bulldog, until around 1784, when he too took on human form as a downtrodden and helpless member of the disfranchised masses, suffering under heavy taxation and the burdens of government expenditure. Later, during the war against revolutionary France, he developed into a figure who could also

represent the interests and aspirations of the middle classes. He became the national symbol of loyalty to king and country, and of resistance to French aggression. He was the ordinary man in the street, who would fight Napoleon with his bare hands, if necessary. By the 1800s he was a more assertive figure in domestic politics as well, prepared to criticise the royal family and the government, giving those outside the traditional political process a voice.

Alongside John Bull ran the traditional concept of the rights of Englishmen: based on the idea of the free-born Britons, the legitimate heirs of Magna Carta and the Bill of Rights, fighting against high prices, unfair taxation and repressive legislation, often under the banner of Liberty. The use of these images is here effectively traced throughout the period, demonstrating the strength of feeling over the effects of wartime taxation, the property tax of 1815, and the repressive legislation of both Pitt in the 1790s and Lord Liverpool between 1816-20. However, the contention that caricatures directed against taxation began in the 1780s cannot be sustained, for there were certainly a number of prints attacking Walpole's excise tax in 1733; and such prints were by the 1780s part of an honourable tradition among the satirists and the country gentlemen in parliament.

After an introduction on the production and circulation of prints, the two early chapters covering political developments up to 1793 are largely descriptive and chronological. There is much useful detail, but the early political background is shaky, and the main issues not very clearly identified or explored in depth. John Wilkes's career is well covered, but the issues of general warrants and the Middlesex Elections are not fully explained. Strangely, Hogarth's famous portrait of a very shifty, cross-eyed Wilkes, although mentioned is not illustrated, yet it represents a major change in the style of caricature in its exaggeration of actual physical features.

The long struggle between George III and the Whig opposition, led first by Rockingham and then Fox, which culminated in the stormy politics of the period 1782-4, is also largely ignored. Yet this was a major constitutional struggle over the preservation or restriction of royal prerogative, and it largely dominated the caricaturists' output. The Fox-North coalition of 1783 and the election that followed in 1784 were the subject of over 450 caricatures, more than in any other comparable year. Many were part of a coordinated government campaign and almost all were anti-coalition. Fox remarked that they had done more damage to him than parliament or the press, and was in no doubt that they were largely responsible for the coalition's downfall. This is a serious omission. On the other hand the over-lengthy account of the Dissenters campaign for greater toleration in the 1780s, which precedes the discussion of the relevant prints, seems over-indulgent. There is good coverage of the French revolution, clearly illustrating the change in symbolism used to depict the parliamentary opposition. Thus the use of English antecedents (Cromwell, Guy Fawkes, Jack Cade) to put the Foxites in context changes after 1791, to one where they take on the image of foreign enemies (Parisian *sans culottes*) who threaten John Bull with their revolutionary ideas and intent.

A further chapter is devoted to the representation of the monarchy - its majesty and morality. By the late 1780s there was a shift away from attacking the king's political activities, to criticising his moral standards as an increasingly aloof head of state. The king and queen were models of domesticity and personal virtue, but caricaturists focused on their lack of dignity, general dowdiness and parsimony. 'Farmer George' was the simple country bumpkin, and not at all what people expected from their monarch. On the other hand, the scandalous behaviour of other royals was an obvious target. At first, political satire largely ignored the marital exploits of George III's brothers, the dukes of Cumberland and Gloucester, in the 1770s, although these troubles did occasion the Royal Marriages Act of 1772. Henceforward the king's consent was required for the marriage of any of George II's descendants, an obstacle that was to cause difficulties for the Prince of Wales in the 1780s.

The Prince of Wales, with his string of affairs, his illegal marriage to Mrs Fitzherbert and permanent indebtedness, received most attention, but some of Gillray's most savage and telling satire was reserved for the king's younger sons, the dukes of York and Clarence. *The Devil to Pay* of 1791 (BM 7908) shows Clarence in bed asleep with his mistress, having 'forded the Jordan', while *Fashionable Contrasts* (1792: BM 8058), with devastating simplicity and innuendo, reveals the duke of York's large feet and shoes face down

on top of his tiny duchess's dainty feet and exquisite footwear. Neither print is referred to by Hunt. Although contemporary coverage of the Regency years, with its contrasting pictures of royal extravagance and nationwide depression, and of the trials of the regent's wife, Princess Caroline, receives admirably extensive attention, the chapter's overall impression is one of a rather breathless race through the royal escapades of George III's reign.

In the end this volume has tried to cover too much; the golden age of caricature is a vast canvas, with literally thousands of prints. It also betrays its origins as an academic dissertation, especially with its 90 pages of dense footnotes. There is a great deal of detail, much of it useful and interesting for students and researchers, but it would have been better to have concentrated on the themes of John Bull and national identity, where the author has something to contribute to the debate.

There are some errors of fact. John Dunning's famous resolution in April 1780 sought to reduce 'the *influence* of the crown' not its '*power*'.(cf. p. 50). It was an attack on the crown's use of patronage to secure parliamentary majorities, and it was this, rather than parliamentary reform that was the initial and primary focus of the county petitioning campaign of 1779-80. In June 1782 Fox, Shelburne and Richmond were not in opposition but were government ministers in the second Rockingham administration (cf. p. 72). The *Hibernia* print is wrongly ascribed to 1785, when it clearly refers to the Fox-North coalition of 1783 (cf. p. 129). In 1808 Pitt had not 'died several years earlier', but rather only two years previously (cf. p. 143), and his memory was very much alive in the ministries of 1807-12, which were composed of his colleagues. These errors are not in themselves important, but they undermine confidence in Hunt's depiction of the broader political scene.

More serious in a general survey of the prints is the absence of any discussion of the artists - the illustrations for the most part are unattributed - or their careers and the changes in style adopted in the course of 60 years. There is no attempt to establish the artists' political and social standpoints, and whether they were sponsored or employed by governments or oppositions. James Sayers, who almost single-handedly brought down Fox in 1783, was a committed supporter of Pitt, whereas Gillray worked primarily for money. Without this sort of information, the caricatures are treated mainly at face value; the illustration captions are usually descriptive, and often repeated in the text. 131 prints are reproduced in black and white, a broad and helpful selection, although many are reproduced too small for any detailed appreciation.

Finally, despite the useful introduction setting the prints in the context of their production, sale and audience, there is no assessment of their impact upon contemporary politics or the public. This is undoubtedly a difficult area in which to be decisive; we rarely know how many copies of a print were made, let alone circulated and seen. But there is some evidence to suggest that pictorial caricature struck home more often than might be thought. Fox certainly felt that his treatment in the prints between 1782 and 1784 influenced public opinion against him, contributing to the rout of his candidates in the 1784 election. Napoleon, though amused at times, did all he could to restrict their circulation in France. Together with political pamphlets and a growing press, the body of satire in this period reached considerable proportions, and there is a valid comparison to be made with modern times, with our world of propaganda and spin, of *Private Eye* and television satire. Modern cartoonists frequently acknowledge their debt to Gillray and his fellow artists. Then, as now, 'victims' of their satire often kept extensive collections of their own cartoons. They were an important part of the fabric of politics and society, and deserve to be studied as such. In the final analysis, despite a wealth of verbal and pictorial illustration, this volume does not advance the debate a great deal.

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