

Rough Sketches: Political Commentary Through Cartoons

James Marten

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Review

ROUGH SKETCHES

Political commentary through cartoons

Marten, James

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Smith, Kristen M. *The Lines are Drawn: Political Cartoons of the Civil War.* Hill Street Press, ISBN 1892514060

Political cartoons have the power to illustrate the historical period to which they belong. For many baby-boomers, the political turmoil of the early 1970s can be visualized by recalling *Doonesbury's* portrayal of the brick wall appearing around the Nixon White House. Editor Kristen M. Smith, a journalist and cartoonist, has compiled more than 130 cartoon samples that cover the gamut of political partisanship with caricatures of politicians and generals and depictions of draft dodgers, war profiteers, army recruiters, and Northern Copperheads.

Some of the drawings are crude; others include distracting, crowded dialogue balloons. Dreadful puns may be lost on contemporary readers, but a few of the pieces sparkle with clever incisiveness. For example, an 1860 Currier & Ives lithograph captioned "The Nigger' in the Woodpile" features Horace Greeley assuring a voter that the Republican Party "has no connection with the Abolition party," while a beardless Abraham Lincoln clings to the top of a pyramid of split rails (labeled "Republican Platform") as a grinning black man peers out from within.

Although **The Lines Are Drawn** provides a useful sampling, several problems undermine its effectiveness. The editor's selection criteria are never adequately explained. The inclusion of examples from the Confederacy is an admirable attempt at balance, but only A.J. Volck's cartoons measure up to the standards set by Northern artists. The organization of the book is logical, but lacks focus. Subjects like race, dissent, and politics are mentioned without being explained, and the chronological format isolates cartoons that may have been more thoroughly understood in topical sections.

This lack of contextual focus carries over into the explanatory paragraphs, which often provide useful, if basic, information but rarely connect one cartoon to another. Some seem misinterpreted. For instance, a confusing scene on page 127 showing U.S. Grant destroying a golden idol as financiers kneel before it is somehow explained as a reference to Grant overturning his predecessors' timid military strategy, and on page 144 a one-legged white veteran shaking hands with a one-legged black veteran over the caption "A Man Knows A Man" is surprisingly identified as a former Confederate.

Political cartoons can be potent avenues of research for historians, as many of the examples in this volume prove. William F. Thompson showed how to incorporate history with artistry in *The Image of War*, a minor classic about the sketch artists traveling with the Union armies. A truly useful study of wartime cartoons would take similar care in establishing contexts and explaining the images that can tell us so much about this era of crisis.

James Marten is associate professor of history at Marquette University and author of Texas Divided: Loyalty and Dissent in the Lone Star State, 1856-1874 and The Children's Civil War.