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Feature Essay

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Paine, Albert Bigelow *REDISCOVERING CIVIL WAR CLASSICS: Thomas Nast: His Period and His Pictures*. The Macmillan Company,

Swinging a Sabre Dipped in Ink

American artist's political parries and thrusts retold

Did Van Gogh, Degas, Daumier, and Dore sketch the American Civil War? Of course not. But in the satirical and sentimental sketches and paintings of the war by Thomas Nast one sees resemblances because, as art historians have pointed out, according to Harpweek website, Nast's hand may have guided theirs.

That is only one of the many reasons why a rediscovery, in the context of the Civil War, of Nast's art is eminently worthwhile. In view of the fact that he is famous for Civil War cartoons and drawings, it is a surprise to see that in his most heavily illustrated biography only about 48 pages are devoted to Nast's activities and sketches. Nast was best known for a cartoon series, including the famous Tammany Tiger, that helped bring down the Boss Tweed Ring, New York City's corrupt Tammany Hall political machine. Stop them damned picturesà. My constituents can't read. But, damn it, they can see pictures. The Spanish authorities used a Nast cartoon to identify fugitive Tweed in 1876.

Nast created the G.O.P. elephant and made the Democrats' donkey famous, and, lest we forget, he was the first to portray Santa Claus as we know him today. He left Harper's Weekly finally in 1886 to work in oil and do more book illustrations (Nast and Nasby had been a dynamite team). But most important is the fact that his political cartoons, from the Reconstruction years to the election of McKinley, his acidic intellect and his unique hand and eye, inspired the new generation of political cartoonists in daily presses all over the country.

Can you picture this photograph of Nast himself as an old man in 1902: black eyes brightly shining out of heavy, wrinkled lids, smiling mouth lifting the

flaring moustache above the pointed chin beard? Worth the price of the book—only a few copies of which are for sale on the web, including the now out-of-print 1969 re-issue. A year from this November will mark a century since the publication of the 583 page biography of the greatest American political cartoonist (1840-1902), with its nearly 450 illustrations and photographs. It is high time someone rediscovered and reprinted Bigelow's biography. Massachusetts native, novelist, poet, travel writer, critic, close friend, and biographer of Mark Twain, Albert Bigelow Paine saw Nast as a man of six parts: The Rover, The Patriot, The Reformer, The Defender, The Statesman, The Consul.

As a twenty-year-old rover, he traveled with Italy's great liberator Garibaldi a year before he met America's great liberator President Lincoln. Galena's General Grant was another major Nast hero. Like Alfred Waud, Edwin Forbes, and Winslow Homer, Nast, hired by Harper's Weekly, helped create the role of the war correspondent by going directly to the front and following the armies. Paine writes, in his lively style, that young Nast's sometimes artless pen dealt blows that were swift and savage and aimed to kill, a sword dipped in ink, smelling of cannon powder and blood.

Picture this: Ambush in the hills, the plunder of houses; pleading women and children, marching soldiers handing out bread in the snow to starving, ragged women, young and old, and children left behind by men gone off to war; a man lying dead under a fallen beam, his kneeling wife weeping; brother and sister cringing, as an army passes between fires in a small town, a mansion deserted except for a brooding skull; and the bars of a prison, all in a one double-page spread, framed by two large circles like cannon mouths, a smaller one like a rifle bore, in the illustration *The War in the Border States*.

Picture this: a lone Union soldier holding up the flag, with a little help from a fallen wounded man, with some soldiers still firing, many lying around him in grotesque postures like the figures in Gericault's *The Raft of the Medusa*.

And imagine, if you cannot remember or never saw, the very famous drawing Nast etched in acid showing Jefferson Davis in uniform on the right, his booted foot on a grave, shaking hands above the tombstone (engraved with *In Memory of the Union Heroes in a Useless War*) with a one-legged ordinary Union soldier, propped on two crutches, his face averted from the viewer, beside him a woman symbolic of the nation half-kneeling, her face in her hand:

Compromise With The South. This image activated men to enlist. Near war's end, Lincoln said, Thomas Nast has been our best recruiting sergeant. His emblematic cartoons have never failed to arouse enthusiasm and patriotism, and have always seemed to come just when these articles were getting scarce.

Nast's drawings conveyed a feeling which appealed more directly to the emotions than could be found in the work of his fellows. It must have been the throb of his own fierce loyalty—his determination to destroy whatever stood in the path of his conviction. It was the same quality that a few years later was to demolish corrupt politicians and city officials. It was the handling of metal at white heat—a trade at which he was the master craftsman of them all, one forever associated with the history of the nation.

The legacy of the war and Reconstruction as it affected the nation, especially the North up to the turn of century, was etched in newsprint as seen and recast by Nast in Shakespearean drama and Roman Empire allegory. Only Shakespeare and Roman emperors could provide models, Nast was inspired to see, for satirizing the outrages of Reconstruction President Johnson's rule. A double page shows Johnson as Iago, endeavoring to convince the colored man that he is still his friend. Nast was only twenty-seven years old, unaware, as was the nation, that his many cartoons exposing the crimes of Boss Tweed's regime were yet to come.

Nast's last three great works were paintings. The Immortal Light of Genius is a luminous, Rembrandt-like scene in which Shakespeare sits at his writing table in a veritable halo of inspiration. By contrast, the character actor William E. Burton as Tootles stands in a comic pose. His last and largest painting was his most famous, Peace in Union. The Surrender at Appomattox, finished on April 9, 1895, the 30th anniversary of that event, the consequences of which every American and, I dare to declare, every other citizen in the world from that day to this has in some sense felt. Ponder this: even though Grant was his hero, Nast seems drawn to General Lee, by far the most heroically placed figure in the painting.

Nast's feeling for Lee is seen in this book even more poignantly in the photograph in which he, an old man, stands, palette resting along his left arm, brush in his other hand, to the right of his almost life size painting of General Lee who is seated, his sword resting as if not a thing of steel across his lap, waiting for Grant to arrive. Both men appear as sad as they would ever be. Nast

never finished *The Hour of Surrender*.

Donald and Velvia Crumbley Professor of Creative Writing at LSU, David Madden is the author of Sharpshooter, a Civil War novel, and editor of several books on the War. He is founder of the United States Civil War Center and of the Civil War Book Review and co-editor of Classics of Civil War Fiction at the University of Alabama Press. He is nearing final construction of London Bridge Is Falling Down, his ninth novel.