Civil War Humor

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Review

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The Civil War in Cartoons

Every year numerous articles and books come out on the Civil War and many of them add little in the way of new and significant information, however, some do and one of these is Civil War Humor by Cameron C. Nickels (2010). Little has been published on the use of humor during the Civil War: Sylvia Dannett’s A Treasury of Civil War Humor (1963) and Paul Zall’s Blue and Gray Laughing (1966), but Cameron Nickels’ new book adds considerably to what we can learn about this topic and provides historical, social, and rhetorical insights to this topic and the Civil War.

To those unfamiliar with humor as a rhetorical device, it may at first seem distasteful that humor would be applied to an event like the Civil War, so sad and grim in its effects on human lives. But, in fact, humor can be a very useful way of gaining insights and an understanding of the appalling event. Nickels, professor emeritus of English at James Madison University and the author of New England Humor: From the Revolutionary War to the Civil War, does this well in his book.

Nickels explores in detail the role of humor in “shaping and reflecting the cultural imagination" about the war (xii). To do this he examines humor as published in political cartoons, newspapers, sheet music covers, lithographs, printed envelopes, comic valentines and humor magazines. Ultimately he concludes it was a “paper war" in which both sides used the medium of humor to sell their propaganda and create negative images of one another (5). He correctly points out that the Confederacy was at a huge disadvantage in this “paper” war because it had fewer printing presses, paper mills, no way to make paper from wood pulp, engravers, and ultimately paper.
Most of the published war humor appeared in magazines and newspapers. Humor had a role in providing a counterweight to the grim war news in the papers and typically described the enemy as laughable, incompetent, with corrupt morals and symbolized by the two presidents, Davis and Lincoln, as cowardly and unmanly. *Vanity Fair* was the leading humor magazine in the North and the South countered with *Southern Punch*. Both used satire and political cartoons to amuse their readers.

Chapter one describes, in good detail, the attacks on Lincoln and Davis. The point of the rhetoric was to make the war personal as in humorous and satirical descriptions along with jabs at the other side’s President. These personal attacks were meant to discredit both the man and what he stood for as a leader. For example Lincoln was called “King of the Yankees,” a gorilla and “Ape Lincoln.” Davis was often portrayed as a spider, a pirate, and a favorite was to put his face on the body of a dog. After Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 a cartoon was published in Richmond depicting Lincoln as a hairy monkey, complete with a baboon tail, squatting on a Union flag and grinning as he presents the document to a happy black male.

Davis, after fleeing Richmond, became the focus of humor at the end of the war when he was said to have been captured in Georgia, disguised in his wife’s clothing. Of course he quickly became the target of jokes told in cartoons, poems, songs, lithographs, and broadsides which referred to him as “The Shero,” “Jeff in Petticoats,” and the “Belle of Richmond.” All of it in the language of symbolic humor that questioned the manliness of Davis. P.T. Barnum took it a step further and made Davis a wax figure in female clothing and titled it “The Belle of Richmond,” which subsequently became a popular exhibit when presented at his American Museum in New York.

During the Civil War the Confederacy fought a defensive war which meant that the home front actually became the battle front. Consequently, this led to different impacts and in particular on the citizens who suffered from the war even though they did not fight in it. This was keenly felt in the South as food, utensils, horses and modes of transportation became more scarce. The use of humor by the North and South to describe these deprivations became sharply contrasted in focus. Chapter two does an outstanding job of capturing these attitudes as expressed in humor.
Confederate humor also focused on the realities of the war as the battle front was so near with one writer who described the siege of Chattanooga published in the *Charleston Mercury* (September 1863) writing: “We had shells for breakfast yesterday, and expect to take a few more on the half shell this evening, if not in batter, at least battery” (55). *The Confederate Recipe Book* (1863) described a recipe for “Apple Pie without Apples” (62). A way of life in the South had changed leading to an acute lack of daily essentials, but humor and satire provided one way of recognizing and coping with this deprivation.

Even women at the home front were attacked by both sides. For example, the *Wisconsin Daily Patriot* (1862) reported “Some of the furious she rebels of Nashville are ugly, scrawny, lank and toothless old girls who can’t attract the notice of the Union soldiers.”

Chapter three examines humor from the perspective of a soldier’s life including such interesting topics as imprisonment, death, being wounded, draft dodging, army officers and of course, army food. Much of the humor reflected the horrible conditions the men were living under, again using humor as a way to acknowledge and ultimately cope with them. For instance, Union prisoners at Camp Ford in Tyler, Texas “published” a handwritten newspaper, *Old Flag* (1864) with “local” news; here an “inside” joke among the men. Food was scarce and often barely edible. One Ohio soldier wrote home about meat so infested with maggots that “we had to have an extra gard (sic) to keep them from packing it clear off" (109). If the biscuits (hardtack) became infested with bugs, the soldiers joked about finally getting some “meat.”

Generals on both sides became easy and common targets for satire because of their vanity and incompetence. Author Nickels correctly points out that disdain for Confederate officers was more common and bitter than it was in the Union. The basic reason lay in the class differences in the South where plantation owners could be exempt from the draft and this contributed to the phrase, “Rich man’s war, poor man’s fight." The editor of the *Southern Punch* (February 1864) referred to the officers as “gold-braided gentry." In short, the privileged office class lived well and often at the expense of the poor musket-carrying foot soldier.

Chapter four focuses on an important and interesting topic of civil war humor involving the African American. Much of it is racist of course, but one of the great lessons of history is that there is much to learn from looking at the past,
regardless of how distasteful. Typically the black male was represented as a
caricature with peculiar speech habits, unusual pronunciations and a dialect full
of bad grammar and malapropisms. Whites on both sides used the blackface
mask as part of their propaganda war. Through this war even though the purpose
of each side was different, the comical minstrel caricature was formed to be
laughed at by both sides.

Overall this book makes a valuable contribution to a deeper understanding
of the Civil War era and makes the reader reflect in a more thoughtful way on
the role of humor in confronting the harsh realities of war. It also clearly
demonstrates how humor can be used as propaganda to attack the enemy. The
research of the topic is thorough and well-documented and the writing excellent.
Additionally the book has over sixty illustrations, eight of them in color, to
underscore the pictorial use of civil war humor. For the Civil War enthusiast or
the serious scholar this book makes an important addition to that literature.

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