

Lines of Contention: Political Cartoons of the Civil War

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Review

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Lewin, J.G. and Huff, P.J.. *Lines of Contention: Political Cartoons of the Civil War*. HarperCollins Books, \$19.95 softcover ISBN 9780061137884

Drawing Political Distinctions

So here's the problem: if you intend to publish a book analyzing political cartoons, you need to balance the cartoons against the text. Publish too few pictures and the book becomes an excruciating series of descriptions punctuated by moments of explanation. Publish every cartoon you find amusing or important and you seriously restrict the space available for interpretation.

Historians, writers, and editors have confronted this problem for decades, and even the best examples of the genre demonstrate its limits. Morton Keller's wonderful 1968 selection of Thomas Nast's cartoons provides beautiful reproductions but only sixty-five pages of text. In such a short space, no author could delve deeply into the symbolism, context, or reception of a set of political cartoons.

The nature of 19th-century cartoons only adds to the problem. Nast and his contemporaries larded their work with references to history, literature, mythology, and popular culture. They quoted public figures, winked at amusing scandals, and generally relied on an informed reader to understand the joke. Thus, modern interpreters confront a medium in which a single cartoon can require pages of text to explain every reference, any one of which may be completely alien to present-day readers.

This is the challenge J.G. Lewin and P.J. Huff confront. Their new book *it joins* *How to Feed an Army* (2006), *How to Tell a Secret* (2007), and *Witness to the Civil War* (2007) *it compiles* a number of interesting cartoons with brief descriptions of the meaning and context of the image. While the text offers little to academics, the images could be very useful as teaching tools. For a general reader, this is a good introduction to the variety, conventions, and style of Civil

War cartooning.

Lewin and Huff organize their book chronologically, but group the cartoons thematically. First are those which address the reasons for the war and its beginning. The election of 1860 follows, and then cartoons examining the fighting. After a chapter on slavery comes the election of 1864, and then a final chapter touching on the aftermath of the war.

The merits of this approach lie in its ability to give a reader a taste of each issue — the players, the questions, the emotions of the moment, and the grim humor that political satire relies on during a civil war. On the other hand, the authors cannot interpret any single issue in detail using this approach, particularly given the limited text devoted to each cartoon. For readers interested in a particular battle, abolitionist, president, or general, this book will spur further investigation.

In *Witness to the Civil War*, the authors examined *Frank Leslie's Illustrated News*. Clearly, they have immersed themselves fully in the periodicals of the time, and they offer readers a taste of that world in the two appendices. Each paper receives a paragraph or two of explanation, and each cartoonist a brief biography. A reader familiar with the existing scholarship on Civil War cartooning might bemoan the brevity of these sections. Lewin and Huff fail to offer a comparative sense of how powerful different papers were, how influential different cartoonists could be, and how popular political cartooning became during the 1860s. But the chapters demonstrate a point historians of cartooning have made repeatedly: that cartoons and cartoonists are understudied and offer a wealth of interpretive material for students of this era.

If the book offers little to historians as *scholars*, it could prove useful to them as *teachers*. Students of the Civil War engage images in curious ways. Enamored of Mathew Brady's photographs, familiar with Ken Burns's documentary, and addicted to movies like *Glory* and *Cold Mountain*, they come to class with a mental picture album already in place. Professors sometimes struggle to nudge students toward or away from certain interpretations embedded in those pictures. Here, Lewin and Huff provide a great service. Their images are products of the furies of the age. Unapologetically slanted, they toss the reader directly into the maelstrom of Civil War politics. No soft music, no blurred focus, no sentimental claptrap gentles the blow. Better still, many of the cartoons in *Lines of Contention* mix recent themes in Civil War historiography. The home

front, masculinity, death and trauma, soldiers' motivations and party politics all appear. Historians could easily use some of the images to spark class discussion or to push students toward greater complexity of thought.

Lines of Contention joins works like Hess and Northrup's *Drawn and Quartered* and Dewey's *The Art of Ill Will*. Not as satisfying or provocative as Fischer's *Them Damned Pictures*, Lamb's *Drawn to Extremes*, or West's *Satire on Stone*, Lewin and Huff's most recent book is, nevertheless, a useful addition to the library of general readers or teachers of the American Civil War.

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