



Amy Matthewson, *Cartooning China: Punch, Power, & Politics in the Victorian Era*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2022, xiii+174 pp. £30.70 (paperback). ISBN: 9780367460990

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A series of visuals of nineteenth-century China and Chinese people are re-represented and interpreted in Amy Matthewson's compelling monograph, *Cartooning China: Punch, Power, & Politics in the Victorian Era*, which is a welcome addition to recent critical work on the iconic Victorian periodical *Punch*. Unlike Richard Altick's study of the first decade of the magazine's history, or Patrick Leary's examination of the community of writers, artists, and proprietors who gathered around the Punch Table, Matthewson's focus is primarily trained on the power working behind and produced from the *Punch*'s sixty years of representation of China and Chinese people from its founding in 1841 to the death of Queen Victoria in 1901. The book would be of particular interest for the readers of the *VPFJ* since it offers ways to deepen our understanding of the relevance and significance of such eastern elements as the opium dens in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and other Victorian popular fictions.

In her "Introduction", Matthewson constructs a theoretical framework based on the politics of aesthetics, which is expanded upon in two key themes: the power behind the magazine and the power of the visuals in shaping public opinion. The author concurs with Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and W. J. T. Mitchell, suggesting that the popular magazine could be manipulated by colonial discourses to sway public opinion, and that caricature especially has the power of offering "biting critiques and opinions to current social and political events" (8). With the themes fully explicated, Matthewson moves on to reveal *Punch*'s full page or double page cartoons – particularly in its rich Large Cuts – as an important historical source, given its widespread dissemination and its international readership. Matthewson further argues that the Large Cut should be seen as "an indicator of the topics that preoccupied a certain

segment of Victorian society” (19), and points out that the spiking interest in China during the 1850s and 1860s coincides with the Second Opium War, whereas the *fin-de-siècle* dramatic increase corresponds to the First Sino-Japanese war of 1894–5. The framework works well for Matthewson to discuss the topic separately in two main chapters.

However, before chronologically tracing *Punch*'s narrative of China and the Chinese people in Large Cuts, Matthewson deftly addresses the intellectual underpinning of the magazine and considers general changes in the style of content in the next two chapters. In Chapter 2, Matthewson introduces *Punch*'s pivotal editors, writers, and illustrators from its founding era till 1901, in terms of their conflicting political leanings. What is particularly impressive is Matthewson's detailed study of conflicting views among these 'gentlemen' in accordance with their relevant diaries, something which offers invaluable insights into the creative process of the magazine. Matthewson argues that, despite the inevitable constant bickering and animosities among staff members during the famous Wednesday dinners, at the end of every week, the oppositional perspectives managed to reconcile with each other in order to produce the final version of the magazine. Matthewson reveals that it is *Punch*'s “sanitised humour” that caters to bourgeois sensibilities, as well as its sense of nationalism and imperialism that temporarily quenches the animosities.

The interpretation of the Large Cuts concerning China and Chinese people finally comes to the fore in the following two chapters. Chapter 4 examines *Punch*'s changing tone and attitude towards China in its first three decades, from its initial “playful condescension” to “scornful condemnation” (72-3). Matthewson notices that in the 1840s, the first opium war provided *Punch* with mocking targets including China's weak army and backward military technology. Such derision underscored a sense of British superiority in progress. China's absence in the Great Exhibition of 1851 offered another laughing stock, and tea was ridiculed as the only good that China could offer. Matthewson points out that by the end of the Second Opium War in 1860, *Punch*'s tone became noticeably acrimonious. Previous mild jabs now turned into more aggressive visual metaphors, such as the Britannia beating the Chinese dragon. Matthewson suggests that Palmerston's war-mongering rhetoric played a significant role in the shift. 1870s and 1880s are omitted because these two decades almost saw no representation of China in the *Punch*'s Large Cuts. Moving on to the 1890s, Matthewson pairs the shift in geopolitics with *Punch*'s variegated visual tropes, such as the Japanese shorty, Russian bear, German imperialist, and British lion, all scrambling for China. Matthewson rightfully argues that during this phase *Punch* redirected its focus on increased tensions among imperial alliances, and China's increasingly weakened position was ultimately reduced to a space where imperial rivalries were staged. In spite of the intriguing analysis, the misplaced figure numbers add a slight flaw to this chapter. Figures from 5.19 to 5.25 should have been 5.20 to 5.26 in sequence. However, such small mistakes do not harm the depth and range of the monograph as a whole, although they could have been avoided.

Matthewson's incisive arguments around the total of 76 illustrations are not only informative but very timely given contemporary concerns. In her “Introduction” and “Conclusion,” she sets her analysis of the Victorian visuals against the backdrop of twenty-first-century cartoon controversies such as the Jyllands-Posten “Muhammad” caricatures (2005), the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre (2015), and the *Herald Sun*'s Serena Williams caricature (2018). Matthewson suggests that some images in political cartoons “have the potential to incite a strong emotional response that hinders the viewer from thinking critically,” hence the necessity of “the incorporation of political cartoons as serious scholarly source materials” (157). *Cartooning China* is not only an essential contribution to the socio-political understanding of *Punch*, but also a kind reminder of the significance of impartiality in the visual and textual representation of our contemporary world.