

Thomas Nast: the Father of Modern Political Cartoons

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Review

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Halloran, Fiona Deans *Thomas Nast: The Father of Modern Political Cartoons*.
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Drawing a New History of Political Cartooning

Fiona Deans Halloran, a history teacher at Rowland Hall-St. Mark's School in Salt Lake City, surveys the life and career of Thomas Nast, the famed nineteenth-century political cartoonist. Nast was born in Bavaria on September 27, 1840, and his family fled to New York City at the onset of the revolutions of 1848. The youthful Thomas studied painting, but neglected his English reading and writing skills. He joined the staff of *Frank Leslie's Illustrated News* in 1856, at the tender age of fifteen.

Halloran is hampered in her discussion of Nast's early life by a lack of contemporary sources, but she compensates by including a detailed narrative of the German immigrant community during this period. The author has a disconcerting habit of introducing new topics with rhetorical questions and some pressing matters are treated with ambivalence. For example, the reader is left wondering what level of literacy Nast obtained throughout his life and, in light of his later anticlerical stance, whether he was raised a Roman Catholic.

Halloran is on firmer ground with her treatment of Nast's career. He traveled to Europe on assignment for *The New York Illustrated News* to cover a boxing match in the spring of 1860. The *London Illustrated News* subsequently engaged him to accompany Giuseppe Garibaldi's army in Sicily. Nast spent six months observing the horrors of war and gaining an admiration for the Italian patriot. He returned to New York in early 1861, in the midst of the secession crisis, and married Sallie Edwards the day before his twenty-first birthday.

During the Civil War, Nast began a twenty-five-year relationship with *Harper's Weekly*. He was accused by A. R. Waud and others of using their

sketches to create his own drawings. In truth, Nast probably saw little, if any, military action or camp life; but he infused his political cartoons with an enduring sentimentality that artists who worked in the field avoided. Nast's reputation was enhanced with his emotional treatment of the New York City draft riots in 1863, and Lincoln's reelection campaign. Nast's support of black Americans and the Republican Party was fueled by his lifelong contempt for the Irish, many of whom participated in the riots, and Tammany Hall. While rightly deploring the conscription exemptions available to the wealthy, however, Halloran remains silent about Nast's personal draft status.

Following the war, Nast continued to hammer away at corrupt New York politics. His attacks on William "Boss" Tweed and the Ring are legendary. Nast also supported the goals of Liberal Republicans during Reconstruction. In 1872, he broke with the Liberals and blindly supported Ulysses S. Grant's reelection campaign. He mercilessly lampooned Carl Schurz and Charles Sumner for embracing civil service reform and favoring the Democratic candidate, Horace Greeley. He introduced the elephant as a symbol of the Republican Party in the following off-year congressional elections.

During these years, Nast worked under contract to *Harper's* and supplemented his salary with lucrative freelance work and lecture tours. He made \$40,000 in 1873 alone on the lecture circuit, and purchased a spacious house in affluent Morristown, New Jersey. The Nasts raised seven children and Thomas drew on their comfortable home life to create an enduring series of Christmas illustrations that helped form the modern image of a jolly, impish Santa Claus. This period marks the apogee of Nast's public reputation.

Halloran is at her best delineating Nast's struggle for editorial independence with George William Curtis, *Harper's* political editor. Ultimately, this conflict led to the decline of Nast's career and personal fortune. Following the death of Fletcher Harper, Curtis won control of the magazine's editorial policy, and Nast became an employee rather than an editorial contributor. Nast and Curtis joined in opposing the Republican candidate, James G. Blaine, in 1884; but their collaboration was short-lived. Three years later, Nast broke with *Harper's*, only to return briefly after Curtis died. An effort to launch *Nast's Weekly* (and restore his political independence) failed after only seven months.

At the same time Nast was becoming disenchanted at *Harper's*, his personal finances were falling apart. In 1879, Halloran informs us, Nast owned the

Morristown house and had accumulated \$125,000 in total assets. Several years later, Nast invested \$30,000 with the brokerage house Grant and Ward. That money represented the proceeds from the sale of the family's first house in Harlem. Nast felt confident in the investment because Ulysses S. Grant Jr. was a partner in the firm. In the spring of 1884, however, Grant and Ward collapsed. Ferdinand Wood turned out to be an embezzler, and was sentenced to ten years in prison. Without further explanation of his personal liability beyond the \$30,000, Halloran states that "Nast had invested most of his fortune" with Grant and Ward, and he "lost everything but his Morristown home" (265). He never recovered financially, and eventually accepted the consular post at Guayaquil, Ecuador; where he died of yellow fever in 1902.

This biography is more of an examination of Nast's political cartoons than his life. With only sporadic references to Sallie and several mentions of Thomas Nast Jr.; Nast's family recedes deeply into the background. Most notably, his eldest daughter Julia's birth and death are recorded on the same page (276), along with the acknowledgement that she may have committed suicide. An endnote reveals that "there is reason to believe that Julia did kill herself and that she and Nast were estranged" (337 n.38). The other children are essentially ignored, except for a comment that they outlived their mother. This is particularly curious since Halloran frequently extols Nast's love of family and hearth, and notes how his home life shaped his cartoons—especially the Christmas illustrations.

Halloran presents a balanced critique of Nast's work that illuminates his impact on the political scene. Clearly, this is no hagiography. Unfortunately, her writing style is at times laced with ponderous pedantry and redundancies: "It is here, then, that we can pause to examine . . ." (5). "It is worth pausing here to consider that . . ." (48). "It is worthwhile to pause here for a moment to recall . . ." (115). "It is worthwhile to pause for a moment to reflect on . . ." (134).

Such quibbles aside, Nast's illustrations are well represented in this volume. Halloran, in short, sheds light on the influence wielded by the nation's foremost political cartoonist of the era. Nonetheless, calling Thomas Nast "one of America's greatest artists" (17) is clearly an overstatement.

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