

Book review

Hardy, Dominic, Gérin, Annie & Carney, Lora S. (Eds.). (2018). *Sketches from an Unquiet Country: Canadian Graphic Satire, 1840-1940*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.

On the world stage, one can understand how Canada might be considered a “quiet” country. Rather than a powerhouse nation that sets the agenda in global politics, Canada cultivates a somewhat modest public persona – it is typically thought of as a nation of polite, kind, and tolerant people. It is also often the case that Canadian humour gets painted with the same milquetoast brush; for instance, Stephen Leacock, one of the most revered humourists in the English speaking world during the early 20th century and whose name adorns one of Canada's most prestigious comedy awards, defined comic sensibility as “the kindly contemplation of the incongruities of life and the artistic expression thereof” (quoted in Bourgeois-Doyle 2015: 2). However, like many a good joke, there are layers embedded in first impressions. In this *Sketches from an Unquiet Country*, the authors demonstrate how these first impressions fail to tell the entire story of Canadian humour and satire, particularly in the case of the politically charged works of graphic satire. As will be further detailed, Hardy, Gérin & Senechal Carney's edited volume is a welcome addition to the burgeoning field of Canadian Humour Studies. In particular, the book's focus on Canada's graphic satire is both an uncommon as well as a necessary foray into the topic's fascinating history.

This edited book contains ten essays that consider different aspects of Canadian graphic satire from the 100 years between the 1840s and the era of rebellions to the 1940s and the conclusion of World War Two. As alluded to, this book initially seems to be counter to expectations concerning early Canada. For instance, the title of the book, *Sketches from an Unquiet Country*, refers to an earlier book by Carman Cumming, *Sketches from a Young Country*. The latter explores how one magazine, *Grip*, revealed the growing pains of a nation in its infancy. Certain preconceptions come with youth; the term comes with an insinuation that, with time, comes maturity and stability. However, as Dominic Hardy contends in his introduction, this type of understanding of the topic glosses over many realities of the time. Writing about the entire volume, he contends that “our book shows that [Canada] was an *unquiet* country, where discursive, physical, and symbolic violence was part of daily life; it may have been neither innocent nor young” (p. 6).

Hardy's assertion suitably outlines the remainder of the book, where more in-depth essays offer case studies illustrating the complexity of Canadian history. As he correctly notes, graphic satire is especially attractive for this task; it is both a snapshot of a single moment in time that, at the same time, requires careful attention to historical and social

context. Part of this requirement is due to the layered quality of satire; one needs to not only appreciate the historical reference points but also develop a sense of the period's sense of humour, which is not at all consistent between different times and places (e.g. Kuipers 2015). Crucially, each of the book's essays does precisely this task; it not only explains the what, when, and why of a historical event, but also offers the sort of unique glimpse into how comedy shapes people's perception of politics and history. Accordingly, an in-depth reading of a particular set of comics can reveal more broadly relevant insights about the country itself.

The book is organised, more or less, chronologically, progressing in time as the book proceeds. The book's second essay "Frankenstein's Tory" also by Dominic Hardy, illustrates how early graphic satire in Montreal relied on various sources of visual texts through a process of adopting, adapting, and repurposing. As he rightly notes, his reading of texts reveals strategies concerning how new meanings arise via the genre, as well as how graphic satire is rich in a unique sort of intertextuality that not only references but also inverts and challenges using irony (p. 28). Christian Vachon's article, "Uncle Sam, a not-so-distant cousin," exemplifies these abilities, arguing that Canada, as a young country, formed its identity in large part through adapting foreign and colonial culture. In contrast, Robyn Fowler's wonderful work on the imagery of Miss Canada was less about being adapted to Canadian sensibilities than it was an opportunistic ability for various competing interests to mobilize their particular ideology.

Similarly, Pierre Chemartin & Louis Pelletier's article, "Clubs, axes, and umbrellas" and Jaleen Grove's "Crossing the line" find connections to Fowler's essay, with all three examining how graphic satire sheds light on masculine insecurities and anxieties in Canada during the 20th century. Josée Desforges' article, "Anti-Semitic Caricature in 1930s Montreal," explains how graphic satire was not only implicated in anti-Semitism but, moreover, does so by demonstrating how the language and imagery of the genre can create social conditions sympathetic to the totalitarianism burgeoning overseas. As a sort of thematic continuation, Lora Senechal Carney analyses the publication *New Frontier* and its attempts to use satire as a means to resist fascism and expound communist ideas via visual culture. Laurier Lacroix, in contrast, spends more time in the biographical sphere, looking at how one satirist, Albéric Bourgeois, personifies a shift in how we have come to understand the role of the artist and, furthermore, how this sort of satire simultaneously shapes both said artist and the society in which they create.

There might be the assumption that the relatively narrow national focus of this book limits the scope of who might be attracted to its essays, although my own experiences suggest otherwise. Given the range of the themes and years discussed in the book, many fields will find insightful elements from which to draw. One can easily envision, for instance, those interested in topics concerning gender gaining a new perspective from the articles addressing those themes. In short, the essays generally do an excellent job of avoiding the trap of over-specificity; each says something valuable about society, as is the goal of graphic satire as well. Moreover, many will have much to learn from the methodological strategies used by the authors. Lacroix, for instance, has a deft manner of finding crucial details in the graphics that come from the keen eye of an art historian. Of course, there is also the most obvious contribution of this book, which is detailing the

political history of colonial Canada, a form that has traditionally lagged behind other forms of representation (Walker 2003). Collectively, the book offers diversity in themes, perspectives, and perhaps most significantly, case studies that will be of interest to both general and scholarly readers.

It is clear that the chapters of this book were written by distinct voices with distinct interests and points of view. While this is not inherently an issue with an edited volume – it is indeed merely a reality of the form – in situations such as this, there might have been more done to create some connective linkages or a narrative arc that would make the volume feel more cohesive as a whole. This view is especially true as the volume relates to the study of comedy and satire. As those in the field know, analysing humour is a delicate matter and is much helped by understanding some of the concepts and tools typically used by those in the field. While Annie Gérin's epilogue addresses some of these concerns, one might wonder if her explanatory concepts could have come nearer the beginning of the volume, framing issues and further deepening appreciation for how comedy has various social functions. Given the current status of humour studies, there could have been greater attention paid to perspectives on humour that focus on some more critical debates within the field. For instance, while Billig (2005) is briefly mentioned in the epilogue, his discussion concerning the multifaceted role humour can play in society as both emancipatory and disciplinary in differing contexts would have been particularly useful.

Similarly, since scholarship on Canadian humour is comparatively small, work from scholars like Rasporich's *Made-in-Canada Humour* (2015) could have helped create a fuller picture of cultural attitudes in Canada, both past and present. That being said, Gérin's article does do many things well, and there is never enough time to say everything. Her framing of the essays through Leacock's contribution to Canadian humour, for instance, is beneficial in bringing the many disparate ideas in the collection under one umbrella.

On the whole, however, *Sketches from an Unquiet Country* is a splendid collection of essays that offer insightful and provocative examinations of under-considered topics in graphic satire, Canadian history, and humour. One marker of an excellent collection is that each article stands alone as independently compelling and useful, of which they all are. Accordingly, this book will prove valuable not only to the general reader interested in humour and graphic satire but also to those scholars interested in the specific topics and themes addressed in the individual essays.

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