

Chris Lamb. *Drawn to Extremes: The Use and Abuse of Editorial Cartoons.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2006. xii + 281 pp. \$19.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-231-13067-7.



Reviewed by Wallace Eberhard

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Although it is premature to relegate the editorial cartoonist to dinosaur status, things are definitely not the way they used to be.

As a kid in Niles, Michigan, I grew up reading four newspapers from three different states: the *Chicago Tribune*, the *South Bend Tribune*, the *Niles Daily Star* and the *Detroit Times* (which, ironically, I later worked for). The *Trib* (Chicago, that is) was then under the eye and ownership of Colonel McCormick, and featured a daily, full-color cartoon on the front page by John Tinney McCutcheon. McCutcheon was nearing the end of a cartooning and writing career that began late in the nineteenth century during the Philippine insurrection and lasted until 1944. It wouldn't have been the *Trib* without McCutcheon. According to biographical notes from the University of Missouri Collection where many of his cartoons are archived, he spent forty-three years with that newspaper. Tenure of that order is rarely seen in our times.

Fast-forward more than half a century, and the obituaries that followed the untimely death of acclaimed cartoonist Doug Marlette on a rain-slick

road in Mississippi on July 10, 2007, brings back the outline of a career dedicated to the art of skewering people, policies, and culture on the point of an artist's pen. Like McCutcheon and his contemporaries, Marlette had talent and dedication. He never wavered about the function of editorial cartoons in the mix of opinion. In a piece written for the Feb. 24, 2006 edition of Salon.com during the dispute over whether Danish newspapers should withhold cartoons depicting likenesses of the Prophet Mohammed, Marlette said that "there's something about cartoons, which are by definition unruly, tasteless and immature, that brings out, if not the ayatollah, at least the disapproving parent in even the most permissive of adults." But, he said, if we shrink from an obligation to print what springs from the cartoonist's pen, we have capitulated "to intimidation and threats and negotiated with terrorists." McCutcheon, we think, would have nodded yes.

Chris Lamb's *Drawn to Extremes* is a reminder of the power of the editorial cartoonist. This is the paperback version of an earlier hardback, making it more accessible for personal li-

braries. Its content reaches from before McCutcheon started in the nineteenth century and carries us to Marlette's times, when editorial cartoonists seem to be a threatened species, though hardly extinct. Even the casual newspaper reader must have noted the decline in their numbers.

Lamb's research interest in editorial cartoons and those who draw them led to a thesis (Tennessee) and dissertation (Bowling Green State University), followed by many articles ranging over individual cartoonists and the problems they face, including libel actions. (Lamb is currently an associate professor at the College of Charleston.) His opening acknowledgements credit a range of individuals interviewed, as well as those who maintain and nurture archives, such as Lucy Caswell, curator of the Cartoon Research Library at Ohio State, a major though not the only site where cartoonists' papers and products are housed.

Each of the eight chapters is titled with a quotation, starting with "You Should Have Been in the World Trade Center!" and ending with "Comfort the Afflicted and Afflict the Comfortable." Notes, credits, permissions, and a useful index follow. A bibliography would have been useful. The credits section is illustrative of the hard work that goes into a book of this kind. It would seem impossible to discuss the cartoonists' art without accompanying work samples. In this case, about 150 cartoons are reproduced, some from the nineteenth century with their finely drawn detail, to the modern period, where, more often than not, simple, bold strokes give us instant connection with the idea behind the sketch. Some pieces and artists are familiar, and some are not. For instance, Bill Mauldin's 1963 cartoon of Lincoln bending forward in his granite memorial chair, head in hands, after Kennedy's assassination, has to be one of the finest lasting reflections because it caught the nation mourning as one person. And, we are introduced visually to cartoonists who were unknown to us but deserve more recognition.

There is little doubt about Lamb's expertise, and his writing moves along well enough. There is considerable room for doubt about the way the book is organized, or rather not organized, and room for healthy disagreement on conclusions and viewpoints along the way.

Readers are entitled to some clues as to what the author is up to, and they simply are not to be found in this volume. The acknowledgements are just that. No introduction sets out the writer's goals, plan, or outline of what is to come. Each chapter is chock full of insights into some aspect of the cartoonist's work, but readers are left on their own to see where each is headed, and how it contributes to some organizing whole. The catchy quotes that serve as chapter headings do not always set up the content within, and transitions between chapters are nonexistent.

The dustjacket accolades from the hardcover version are, nevertheless, merited. The book is "rich in its insights and perspectives," according to Roger A. Fisher, professor of history at the University of Minnesota-Duluth and author of *Those Damned Pictures: Explorations in American Political Cartoon Art* (1996). It is "passionately argued" with "fantastic reproductions" (*Financial Times*). But I'm not sure it's an enlightening "history of cartooning" as *Bookform* wrote. Enlightening, yes. A history of cartooning, no.

What the book does well is to examine the state of the editorial cartoon in contemporary American society. The work of today's cartoonists is tied inexorably to the fate of contemporary journalism, the events of the day, and shifting currents in American culture. The horror and shock of 9/11, for instance, provided an historical moment of national unity and international sympathy, and the cartoonists responded initially much as the rest of us did. After that? The political decisions made in the months since that day have brought cartoonists back to their traditional role of providing pointed criticisms; so have the decision to go to war in Iraq, the Abu Grab revela-

tions, the detention of battlefield captives in Cuba, and on and on. The question arose once more as to the limits of criticism in wartime, whether by word or pen.

Chapter 3, "No Honest Man Need Fear Cartoons," provides a useful framework for continuing assessment of cartoonists. Lamb borrows criteria from *Satire* (1969) by Matthew Hodgart. Satire--and certainly editorial cartoons are a subgroup here--needs a degree of free speech, some interest on the part of the public in political affairs, confidence by the satirists that their work may have some influence, and, finally, a large audience that enjoys wit and understands the satire.

In the same chapter, Lamb reports a most curious incident. After the resolution of the 2000 election, the *New Yorker* carried an essay by cartoonist Arthur Spiegelman, calling an "emergency meeting" of the Cartoon Workers of America to discuss how they should draw the new president. Hmmm. Unite cartoonists in a single-minded crusade? That seems to us much like the proverbial herding of cats. Cartoonists are creative and independent. They soon enough found their own ways to "frame" the election and the president, as they would have without Spiegelman's exhortations.

There is a tantalizingly brief examination of female cartoonists--too brief for one who had no knowledge of the problem--in chapter 4, "McCarthyism." In a period where women have made inroads into city rooms and editorial leadership positions of American newspapers, there is still a success gap in terms of women who draw cartoons for a living. According to Lamb, there are only a handful of women in the male-dominated editorial cartooning field, and only three are regularly syndicated: Etta Hulme, Signe Wilkinson, and Ann Telnaes (p. 120). The "why" of this is unexplained, perhaps because there is a lack of research.

One of the most vexing issues for cartoonists surrounds the question of how free is free expression when it comes to sketches that enrage either

specific targets or visible segments of a readership. Are editorial cartoonists (chapter 5) "Second Class Citizens of the Editorial Page"? Lamb draws heavily on interviews with many contemporary cartoonists and other literature for an answer. Editorial cartoonists seem to enrage politicians, celebrities, and significant numbers of plain old readers well beyond that of their neighbors on the opinion pages, the editorial writers and columnists. Politicians--there are delicious tales about then-California Governor Ronald Reagan's bouts with the *Los Angeles Times* over Paul Conrad's cartoons--never realize they're not likely to win these battles. In truth, according to Lamb, most cartoonists seem to know their limits vis-à-vis the editor and publisher and seldom push it. Most enjoy a considerable amount of freedom to draw right up to the edge of firing by editors tolerant of the right to pen disturbing work. That right is not unlimited, though, and cartoonists are occasionally asked to move on or temper their work. Sometimes, too, they're not comfortable with unspoken pressure and move on. This chapter is written almost entirely from the viewpoint of the cartoonist, and one wonders if there isn't a rational rebuttal from editors. Doesn't everyone have a superior who can draw a line somewhere and say "No," or "We're not going to publish that"? And, better, how can limits be established before there's a confrontation? Does editorial employment convey an unfettered right to publish?

Lamb's concluding chapter, "Comfort the Afflicted and Afflict the Comfortable," reminds us once more of the decline of the cartooning profession within the field of American newspapers. There are fewer cartoonists, pure and simple. Once upon a time the local daily in our town, the *Athens Banner-Herald*, had a young cartoonist who had a sharp pen centering on local issues. No more. The more editorially conservative *Atlanta Journal*, long a stepchild in the Atlanta newspapers' scheme of things, had a fine cartoonist--Gene Bassett--who was not replaced on retirement. The consolidation of the newspapers into the *Atlanta*

Journal-Constitution left the more liberal editorialists of the *Constitution* in charge. Mike Lukovich's Pulitzer work is published, but, please, no conservative cartoonists need apply. And so it goes. There is some hope that the growing number of city papers and other alternative publications with their own lesser-known cartoonists may sustain and rejuvenate the visual side of opinion pages.

Lamb would have us believe the following: "No one serves the role of government critic as well as cartoonists do" (p. 238). We're not convinced that's the case. No question that theirs is a function worth supporting and protecting, but these satirists are only one squad in a small army of reporters, editors, public interest groups, and yes, government inspectors general (just for starters) who keep trying to make democracy work the way it should.

Still, while Lamb places editorial cartoonists on too high a pedestal, we are better off with them than without them, and this book will convince you of that.

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