

H-Net Reviews

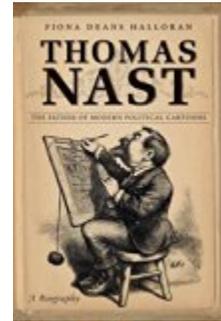
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Fiona Deans Halloran. *Thomas Nast: The Father of Modern Political Cartoons*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013. 352 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3587-6.

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Visual Politics

Thomas Nast's unforgettably wild Tammany tigers and his bulging, slovenly Boss Tweeds are among our most deeply engraved images of the Gilded Age. Yet Nast's moralist biases are not always carefully examined by lecturers hungry for the ostensible comic relief of Gilded Age politics after the grim tragedy of the Civil War. Fiona Deans Halloran has produced a biography exploring Nast's drawings in the context of his life as an artist whose drawings had a strong Republican slant. She shows convincingly how Nast expressed his identity both in his sentimental home scenes and his cutting political satires, but on occasion her interpretation of that identity is slightly off.

Nast was a German immigrant and spoke with a accent his entire life, even though he arrived in America at age six. But while Halloran does emphasize the influence of German liberalism on him, she assumes on very thin and unconvincing evidence that the artist abandoned a Bavarian Catholic background (p. 8). Nast's father, Joseph Thomas Nast, was a trombonist in the Bavarian army and left after his commander warned that he was in trouble for his political beliefs. But the Nasts came from the Palatine city of Landau, at that time one of the most liberal, religiously diverse, and republican areas of Germany, in contrast to more conservative Bavaria, which governed it. So there is no reason to assume that the family was Catholic to begin with (p. 36).

The chapter on Nast's early life in New York is weak. Halloran's portrait of young Thomas as a street urchin,

fearful of the Irish and eager to ascend to the middle class, distorts his class background. Halloran speculatively reconstructs Nast's childhood, emphasizing the proximity of Nast's lower-middle-class German neighborhood to Five Points and its toughs (p. 17). Halloran assumes that as in Five Points, "nativist riots, race riots, drunken brawls and simple crime would have been all too familiar concerns for the Nast family" (p. 14). But her "closer reading" of New York neighborhoods doesn't really reflect how New Yorkers experience neighborhood boundaries, with middle-class districts often oblivious of much poorer ones across the street (p. 17). For a political cartoonist, the proximity of Five Points might have been less relevant than the nearness of his family's William Street home to City Hall and the courts. The Nasts were not rich, but Appolonia Nast did not need to work to support the family during her husband's prolonged absence. And the family of a musician playing in the New York Philharmonic was probably culturally bourgeois, even if they didn't have much money.

Halloran finally hits her stride with the start of Nast's career as an illustrator. At age fifteen, he approached Frank Leslie, the editor of a new publication, *Frank Leslie's Illustrated News*, and asked for a job. Leslie sent Nast on an assignment, presuming that a fifteen-year-old would fail the test, but Nast's drawings were so good that instead he hired him at a salary of four dollars a week.

Nast advanced rapidly, eventually becoming one of the highest paid artists in America. His courtship of his

wife, Sally Edwards, brought him into abolitionist circles on the eve of the Civil War, but was temporarily interrupted by an assignment to go to England to cover the championship fight between American John Heenan and the British fighter Tom Sayers. Stranded in London when the *New York Illustrated News* failed to pay him, he borrowed money from the victorious Heenan and accepted an assignment from the *London Illustrated News* to cover the Italian revolutionary Giuseppe Garibaldi in Sicily. Halloran convincingly argues that Garibaldi was the prototype of Nast's romantic heroes, and his drawings from Italy marked the beginning for a new journalistic style of art that sought "not to transmit facts, but to render emotion" (p. 83).

Nast returned in time to cover the Civil War, and few could match the raw power of his renderings, even when he borrowed battlefield material from other artists. Halloran does a good job of explaining Nast's techniques of framing, juxtaposition, image, and symbol (pp. 63-64). She emphasizes his use of parallel images that provide "temporal and geographical motion allowing Nast to contrast leaders of North and South, the war in the two sections, and life before and after the war under various scenarios." Nast also "filled the borders of his drawings with—often violent—miniature images, many of which were far more pointed than the central images." He added pictures of women and children to increase the drawings' emotional impact, and clouds, wind, and rain to create an atmosphere of "distance, violence or despair" (pp. 70-71).

The New York City draft riots of 1863 moved Nast closer to the Republican Party, as did his admiration and eventual close friendship with Ulysses S. Grant, his second great hero. Nast's work for Grant's election and reelection made him a fortune. His support of Radical Reconstruction and his humane, individualized portraits of African American victims of white supremacist terrorism, such as his drawing "One Vote Less" (*Harper's Weekly*, August 8, 1868), depicting an African American man murdered by the KKK, were almost unique among white artists of the late nineteenth century (p. 116).

Nast's cartoons of the Tweed Ring cemented his national reputation and are still his best-known work (besides his indelible images of Santa Claus). But the Tweed cartoons draw their power from the simplicity of their politics, obscuring the complexities of corruption in late nineteenth-century New York. Indeed, Nast's lack of nuance proved controversial even at his own magazine.

Halloran ably explains the continual stresses between Nast and the editor-in-chief of *Harper's Weekly*, George Curtis. Curtis thought that the entire magazine should reflect his point of view, and chafed when Nast, who demanded full control over his drawings, made fun of some of Curtis's Washington friends, such as Charles Sumner, or aggravated divisions within the Republican Party when Curtis wanted unity (p. 175). Curtis was uncomfortable with caricature and considered it demeaning to politicians. But Fletcher Harper, the magazine's publisher, always insisted on publishing Nast's submissions. Curtis regained the upper hand after Harper's death, and by the mid-1880s Nast severed his ties to the magazine.

Though he should have been able to comfortably rest on his fortune and laurels, Nast lost nearly all his money. About a third went in the collapse of the investment partnership of Ulysses S. Grant Jr. and the swindler Ferdinand Ward, in 1884. (General Grant, who had backed his son's venture, also lost everything). Nast recouped with a successful turn on the lecture circuit, and promptly lost the rest in a silver mine and in the failure of his own weekly magazine. Desperate for funds, he applied in 1901 to his old friend Secretary of State John Hay for a consular post, one of the traditional ways the U.S. political system supported its artists and writers. While Nast might have expected a job in some German-speaking country, Hay sent him to the mosquito-infested city of Guayaquil in Ecuador, where Nast died of yellow fever in December 1902, just one year after Walter Reed proved that the disease was transmitted by mosquitoes. The State Department notified Sally Nast with a cold unsympathetic note, and did nothing to help his family, though Nast had died in the line of duty. Nast's Republican heroes, including President Theodore Roosevelt, let him down in the end.

Halloran does a good job of portraying Nast as an artist with a sentimental view of politics as a contest between good and evil. She helps the reader recognize the innovative techniques he uses to accomplish this end. Despite its weak points and a few copyediting errors—reversing New York's Municipal and Metropolitan police (pp. 26-27) and the boxers Heenan and Sayers (p. 47)—*Thomas Nast* is a useful adjunct to recent scholarship by Kenneth Ackerman, James Connolly, and David Quigley, among others, that has added depth to our understanding of both Tweed and his opponents, and shown us how we can enjoy Nast's satire, while developing a balanced understanding of the contest between democracy and bourgeois hegemony in the period between the Civil War and World War I.

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