

# Puck Magazine and the Birth of Modern Political Cartooning

by Alex Dueben | September 10th, 2014



In the late 19th Century, long before *Mad Magazine* and the *Daily Show*, there was *Puck*. The magazine helped to change the very nature of political cartooning, was at the forefront of printing technology and agitating for progressive causes during the Gilded Age — and is even credited with helping to put Grover Cleveland in the White House in the election of 1884! In their new book *What Fools These Mortals Be: The Story of Puck, America's First and Most Influential Magazine of Color Political Cartoons* writers Michael Alexander Kahn and Richard West look at the history and the influence of the magazine. Richard West has written extensively about political cartooning in books like *Iconoclast in Ink* and *Satire on Stone*. He was the founder and editor of *Target: The Political Cartoon Quarterly* and the political cartoon editor of *Inks: The Magazine of Cartooning*. He is also the owner of *Periodyssey* in Easthampton, Massachusetts.

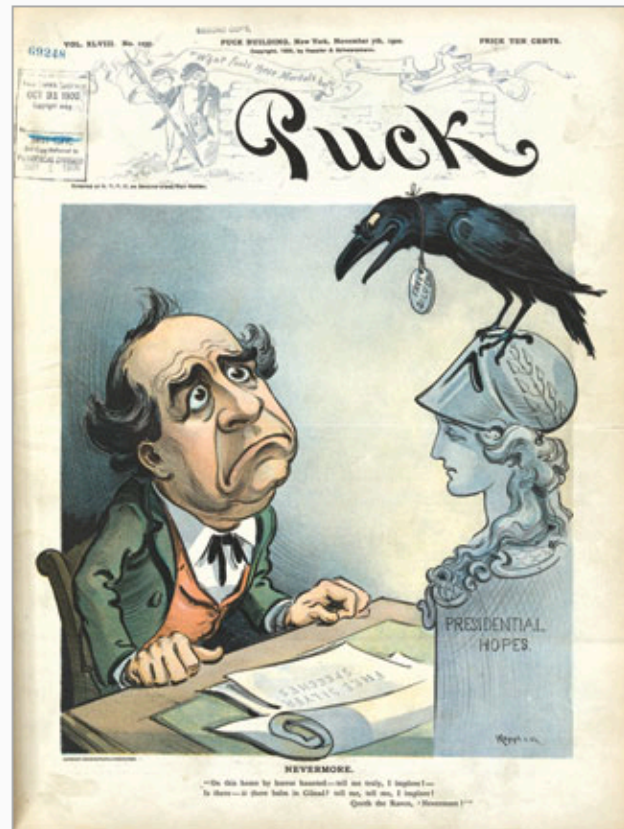
After more than a century, many of the cartoons are dated and confusing to the contemporary reader, but what remains striking even after more than a century is the artwork. The artists clearly took advantage of the opportunities that the new printing technology offered them to produce beautiful work that was also astute, sharp witted and often laugh out loud funny. As Bill Watterson writes in his forward to the book,

their cartoons are lavishly drawn. Some are bold and graphic, some are exaggerated and cartoony, and others are richly illustrative. The Commentary is equally varied, ranging from silly, to satiric, to outraged. In these early days of cartooning, the weekly humor magazine gave cartoons real prominence, and cartoonists immediately began pushing every limit of the art form.

I talked to Richard West about *Puck* and the history of political cartooning.

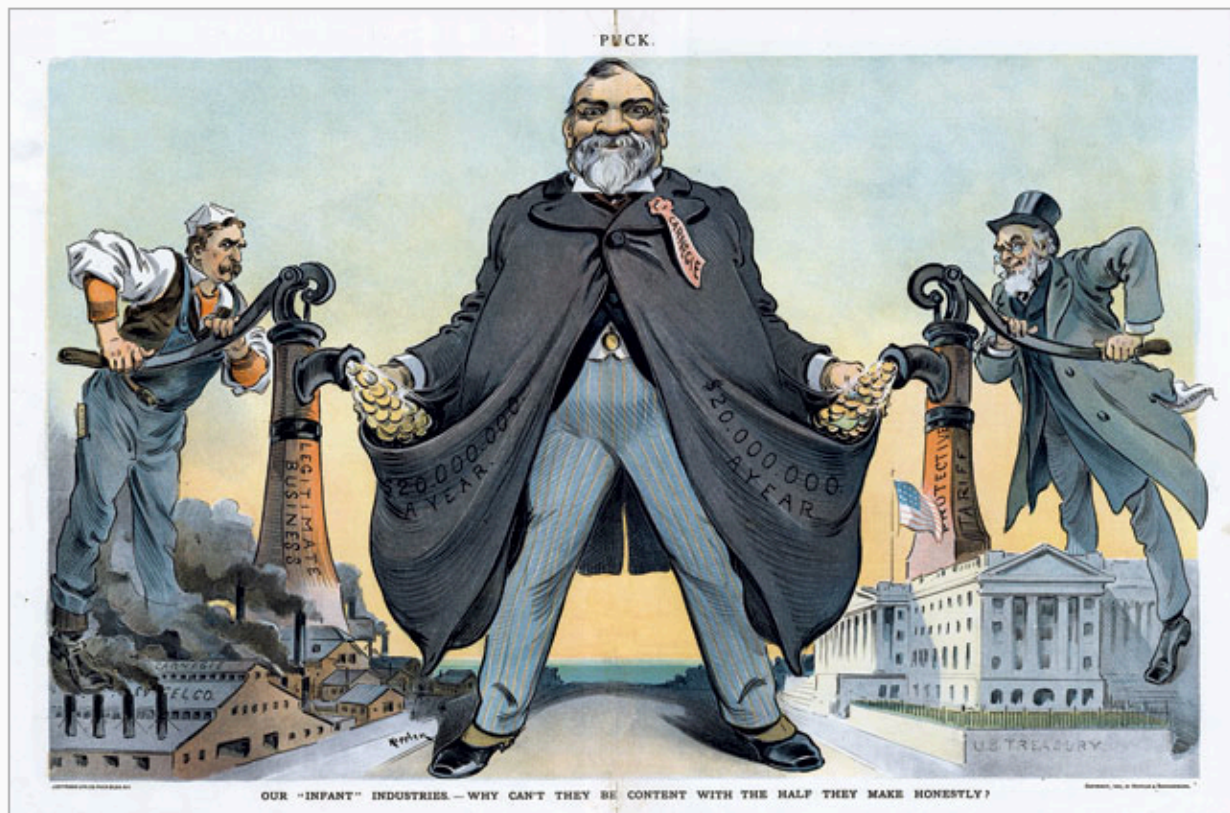
## What was *Puck* Magazine?

*Puck* was America's first successful humor magazine, which is to say it was long-lived (1876-1918), influential, and quite prosperous. It published three large color cartoons in each issue, which for the first ten years or so were all political in nature. Later they were increasingly purely comic or illustrative. At *Puck's* height, the cartoons were among the country's most important political pronouncements of the week. In addition to that, *Puck* played a critical transitional role in the evolution of American humor, moving the art from its tall-tales and dialect-laden roots toward the more urbane and literary humor associated with magazines like the *New Yorker*. It became a training ground for a generation of cartoonists, including beside its founder, Joseph Keppler, great talents such as Frederick Opper, Bernhard Gillam, Eugene Zimmerman, C. J. Taylor, Louis Dalrymple, J. S. Pughe, Harrison Fisher, Rose O'Neill, F. M. Howarth, Joseph Keppler, Jr., Will Crawford, and many others.



## What was political cartooning generally like before *Puck*?

Nast was the apotheosis of what political cartooning was like before *Puck*; he was dogmatic and saw everything in black and white. There were other cartoonists as well, mostly in the *Punch* tradition, producing sedate, gentlemanly cartoons, some well drawn and mildly humorous, but most not so much. Keppler was a satirist and enjoyed poking fun at just about any target.



**The best known political cartoonist of that time was, as you say, Thomas Nast. The people at *Puck* really seemed to not like him.**

No, I do not think there was real animus there (Keppler socialized with Nast on several occasions and many of the *Puck* cartoonists acknowledged their debt to him). But Nast did represent the older generation of cartooning and *Puck* wanted to distance itself from that.

**Was *Puck* relatively alone in moving to a more urbane, literary humor?**

Yes, or at least it played the leading role. The old comic *Life* magazine, which followed *Puck*, was important as well.



**Why was it so revolutionary?**

It does not qualify as revolutionary, but it was different. Unlike most of the other humor magazines published before it, it was not influenced by *Punch*, but rather by the humor magazines of Austria and Italy, which made it more flamboyant and colorful than any magazines that preceded it. Was it the production? This was certainly a big part of it: *Puck* looked unlike anything else on the newsstand. It was the first magazine in America to publish chromolithograph plates on a weekly basis. It led the way in an explosion of color in American printing during the last quarter of the 19th century, inspiring newspapers to follow its lead, which led to, of course, the advent of the comic strip. The proprietors were predisposed toward liberalism, which turned out to be a key element of *Puck's* success. The magazine was from its inception a magazine of reform, decrying monopolies and monopolists, corruption and money in politics, bigotry (though it did perpetuate outrageous stereotypes in its cartoons), and fraud and hypocrisy in general.

**What were the cartoonists at *Puck* generally fighting for? Or can its politics not be easily summed up?**

Generally, they were reformers, interested in improving democracy and equality within the American system. This made the magazine Democratic, but it did stray from the path for about a decade from 1896 to 1904, when the Democrats under Bryan were too radical for it to stomach. Why it turned against TR in 1904 seemed to be entirely management-driven and not because of political differences. *Puck* always admired TR the man, but became increasingly disenchanted with his blood lust and giant ego.



**You write in the book that that the magazine's high water mark was the 1884 Presidential election? Why exactly and just how big was the magazine?**

*Puck* had a circulation of 125,000 during the 1884 campaign, which put it in the most elite circle of magazines at the time. Its cartoon series "The Tattooed Man" which held the Republican candidate James G. Blaine up to scorn is one of the greatest political cartoon series of all time. Since Blaine lost New York State by only a few thousand votes and hence the election, many attributed the loss to *Puck's* cartoons. Cleveland himself did so.

**Over the years were there specific periods or ways that it changed?**

The first ten years or so it was a fairly hardcore magazine of political satire and commentary. In the mid-1880s it began to loosen up a bit and follow the market into more purely humorous content, as well as publishing more literary material, particularly light short stories. By 1896, Keppler and H. C. Bunner (*Puck's* long-time editor) had died, and Adolph Schwarzmann, *Puck's* business manager, took over. Until his death in 1904, the magazine became increasingly conservative in its politics. By 1905, *Puck's* circulation and influence was in decline, but you would not have known it by looking at it. Keppler, Jr. was drawing some of the best political cartoons *Puck* ever printed and A.H. Folwell as editor filled the magazine with spritely content. *Puck* was sold in 1914 to Nathan Straus, Jr., son of the department store magnate, and he attempted to turn it into a high-brow magazine of satire and art, like the great European journals *Simplicissimus* and *L'assiette au Beurre*. The advent of WWI eventually scuttled his plans and he sold a much diminished magazine to Hearst in 1917. Hearst tried to brighten its appearance and contents, but could not do it. It folded with the September 1918 issue.



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**THE TENEMENT—A MENACE TO ALL.**

NOT ONLY AN EVIL IN ITSELF, BUT THE VICE, CRIME AND DISEASE IT BREEDS INVADS THE HOMES OF RICH AND POOR ALIKE.

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**Why did *Puck* end up declining or becoming less relevant?**

In the 1880s *Puck* had the stage largely to itself, but with the advent of four-color printing and lavish Sunday newspaper editions, not to mention the comic strip, the magazine lost its franchise. Also, with the advent of mass marketing in the 1890s, its format did not lend itself to advertising and its emphasis on partisan politics scared some advertisers away.

**Where did this book start for you? I know that you previously wrote *Satire on Stone: The Political Cartoons of Joseph Keppler* who was one of the founders of *Puck*.**

I have been fascinated by *Puck* for more than forty years. It is a beautiful magazine to behold and if you spend a little time getting to know the politics of late 19th century America it is laugh-out-loud funny. Like the humor of Twain, *Puck's* humor most of the time is so pure and original that it transcends its period.



**How did you and Michael Kahn come to work together on this book?**

Mike and I have known each other for more than thirty years, drawn together by our mutual love for political cartoons. He has long known about my regret that *Satire on Stone* was not printed in full color. When he got to know Jared Kushner, the present owner of the *Puck* building, the book grew naturally from the interests the three of us shared.

**You've written a lot about political cartooning and I'm curious what it is about it that fascinates you?**

I grew up in a political household and I was drawn to comic strips as a little kid, so my fascination with political cartoons is something of a combination of those two strands from my youth. I very much admire someone who can comment on political affairs with wit and style, cut through the crap as it were and reveal the truth as they see it.



WHAT IMPRESSED HIM.

UNCLE SILAS.—I kin remember when I was your age an' when the young fellers an' gals was gatherin' apples.  
SHE.—As fine apples as these?  
UNCLE SILAS.—Well, I don't remember the apples as well as I remember the gals.

**You said that if you know the politics of the time, it's laugh-out-loud funny, and for the ones I understood, I think that's true, but to what degree do you feel like these cartoons are dated in a way we just can't understand the way someone back then would have?**

Absolutely true. Humor is idiomatic, and *Puck's* humor is no different from, say, Letterman when he uses popular culture references to get a laugh that those not in the know will not understand. That is why I think it is important for 21st century viewers to be reluctant to pass a negative judgment on humor of another era, because so much is in period context and is framed by milieu of the times. So, I acknowledge that it takes some work to appreciate the cartoons, but there is great reward awaiting if you want to spend the energy to do so. Some of our captions may not sufficiently clue in readers to all that is going on in the cartoons, but we tried to strike a balance between providing a context without stepping on the joke.