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Leroy V. Eid
University of Dayton

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The Fox And The Hyenas

Leroy V. Eid

In late October of 1884 a huge parade wended its muddy way in a heavy rain down the streets of New York City. A fascinated English visitor watched as a thousand lawyers chanted their ridiculous:

Blaine, Blaine, James G. Blaine
We don't care a bit for the rain,
O-O-O-O-HI-O

The visitor knew they were celebrating the state of Ohio voting in favor of James G. Blaine for the presidency. Modern historians are just as amazed as was James Bryce, the first Viscount Bryce, when he described this unreal scene in his classic work, *The American Commonwealth*.¹

Who was Blaine and what does he have to do with Ohio? Did Blaine ever do anything worth remembering? is the type of question the ordinary person might reasonably ask. Why did such an obvious scoundrel elicit such a fanatical following in the America of the 1880s asks the older historian. James G. Blaine was the best known and most enthusiastically supported American politician of his day. Only an inopportune sickness kept him from being the Republican presidential candidate in 1876.² When he failed as front runner to gain the candidacy in 1880, he threw his votes to Garfield, assuring that Garfield would be president. In 1884 Blaine barely lost (1,047 votes in the crucial New York State tally) the presidential election. In 1888 he refused to run for president although his election seemed certain.

It should be profitable for historians to explore Blaine's connections with the politicians from "the great state of Ohio, which is fairly typical of the older Western or Middle States" (Lord Bryce's description).³ The focus here will be narrowed to the view on this subject then emanating from the leading comic journal of America, *Puck Magazine*. Although *Puck* prided itself as a historian of the entire age, yet it is widely accepted that its greatest moments were its pictorial struggles against James G. Blaine and his friends.

Today there are two competing historical views of Blaine and of many of the other politicians of the day—and ultimately of the country itself—during this period labeled the "Gilded Age" from a satirical novel of Mark Twain. The one view says that these "gilded" age politicians were a rather perceptive group who by slow stages completely revolutionized politics and the country. The most incisive statement backed by the most available quantifiable data is to be found in Richard Jensen's *The Winning of the Midwest*.⁴

Cynics mesmerized by the supposed corruption of the politician or the "failure" of the system to grapple with the "true" issues (invariably involving radical economic changes) have misunderstood American democracy and have failed to appreciate the genuine accomplishments of the decade.

Edward Levine in his *The Irish and Irish Politicians* has put the case in such a way that one can extrapolate and say that Blaine's career is simply the paradigm for the entire Irish political experience. That is, push for political jobs and eschew those questions of social justice that "hypocritical" Protestant reformers were so closely identified with.⁵

Puck shared none of this optimistic view as it espoused a quite different view. A couple of rather recent works based on pictorial matter from the second half of the Nineteenth Century show just how pessimistic was the view of *Puck* of both the politics of the Gilded Age, and more generally of the age itself.⁶ These works emphasize the unsavory aspects of the era that can be found in the cartoons of *Puck*. There a stress was always put upon the corrupt element of the age, with the lack of public morality often being noted. This stress is of special interest to this magazine since so many of these scorned politicians were in the Ohio or Midwest political orbit. *Puck* never hesitated to attack openly errant religious or ethnic tendencies, in contrast to Blaine type politicians who desired to downplay such religious and ethnic differences. In short, Blaine was the greatest force for evil in politics, thought *Puck*, because he openly courted the foreign (in particular, Irish) vote and refused to take a moral stance on public issues. His large nose ("Nosey Blaine" he was called in college) made him the most easily identifiable character in any cartoon. *Puck* almost always showed him larger than any of the other characters being attacked by the cartoonist. *Puck* firmly argued the "immorality" thesis of the gilded age politician, with only one moral politician—Grover Cleveland—as the shining exception. "The Board of Alderman are pretty tough cases, but they are ministering angels compared with the average Congressman,"⁷ particularly the Republican congressional politicians who were nothing more than "an office-grabbing, vote-buying, patronage-bartering faction."⁸

Biographers of the young Blaine usually mention two significant facts that are quite related. For one thing he grew up in a closely-knit family that was externally Protestant except for its practising Irish-Catholic mother. In a very crowded cartoon showing 1884 presidential candidates as dogs, Blaine sits on a cage marked "dangerous" holding "Rossa Runt," the well-known Irish dynamiter.⁹ The only dog chained in the picture was the one with the marked Irish ape-like face, "Tammany Terrier." Americans of that day were very much aware of the fact that Blaine's two eldest daughters openly became Catholics. Fear of this Irish-Catholic background helped lead *Puck* into its militant 1884 campaign against both Blaine and Irish-Catholics.¹⁰

The second important childhood fact of Blaine is that his early education was received while he was living in Ohio in the household of his mother's relatives, the Thomas Ewing's, who are quite famous in Ohio and National politics as staunch

Democrats (and Catholics). "It was undoubtedly in the atmosphere of the Ewing family that young Blaine received his first impressions of political life."¹¹ Tolerance would be a natural result of this childhood, and toleration translated into the political concept of pluralism is what allowed—according to Richard Jensen's analysis—the so-called McKinley Ohio Plan to capture in time so many of the big-city foreign votes for the Republican Party.¹²

Ohio in the gilded age enjoyed great political prestige. A *Puck* cartoon showed various 1880 presidential aspirants in which no state had more than two presidential candidates, except Ohio with eight!¹³ These included the then President Hayes, the future president Garfield, Ewing the relative and childhood playmate of Blaine, Sherman related to Blaine by General Sherman's marriage to an Ewing,¹⁴ "Calico Charlie" Foster of Hayes' own political district, Thurman who did most of the 1888 campaigning for the Democratic presidential ticket.¹⁵ *Puck* admired Ohio for a while as a center of financial sanity; *Puck* did not think well of much else in Ohio. A typical jibe:¹⁶

"Smith, of Smith and Biler, Cincinnati, Pork, has taken to patronizing art. He called on a New York painter recently, and commissioned a picture.

"Something takin', you know—not too quiet. Gimme something showy. Say a—an apple-tree, all a bloomin', in a field of yaller wheat, and autumn leaves kinder lying 'round."

Even moving from Ohio to New York City itself didn't seem to help either as S. S. Cox, the well-known Democrat, found when he moved from an Ohio that was becoming overwhelmingly Republican.

In 1876, for example, the musician Theodore Thomas, who had taught New York to love Wagner, decided to leave the city and go to Cincinnati to take over its College of Music. "From the metropolis to the Porkopolis" *Puck* labeled this outrage to their civic sensibilities. Also at this time a financial scandal broke out concerning the Catholic Archbishop of Cincinnati, Purcell. *Puck* cartoonists simply identified the pigish looking archbishop of its cartoon "hogopolis," and a few weeks later printed the "Puzzle That Puzzles Porkopolis."¹⁷ In short:¹⁸

The Mid-West is not greatly given to considering or consulting the tastes, opinions or rights of any other section of the country.

We are afraid that the Mid-West is hardly, as yet, in sympathy with the ideas and tendencies of Eastern civilization.

But why worry about *Puck's* opaque view? Because simply it was an extraordinary journal. Cleveland has been credited with saying that *Puck* did more to elect him in 1884 than any other news or literary source for *Puck* had achieved journalistic greatness by its series of violent cartoons depicting Blaine as the "tattooed man." At a time when the average working family was spending around a dime a week for all their reading material, *Puck* reprinted for \$4.25 its 1884 campaign series "including

the famous "Tattooed man" series"—as *Puck* immodestly advertised. Technically *Puck's* success and a prime reason for treating its cartoons as sound historical data, rests in the conclave of artists and writers who met every week to decide on the cartoons:¹⁹

It must be an *idea*—a clear pictorial presentation of the point to be made; something that tells its story at sight, and is rigorously logical in its application, direct and indirect.

On the occasion of its 1,000th issue the magazine anxiously asked "Are you sure you give me the high place I merit as a historian of my time?" *Puck's* pretence is less absurd if we remember Lord Bryce's view that Americans are "conspicuously the purveyors of humor to the nineteenth century."²⁰ In America they listened to the preacher who laughed as he preached.

REPUBLICAN PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES

Puck, in the English version, came too late on the scene to comment on the 1876 Hayes election. In the very first political cartoon of the first issue, however, Hayes and the office-seeking Ohioans were criticized. *Puck* has a supposed correspondent reporting about the "great expectations" of the state:²¹

Last week business called me to Ohio, and I traveled through a large portion of the state. About half the male population with whom I had intercourse appeared to be living in a semi-undecided sort of way, waiting for an appointment under the present administration.

In general, though, Hayes for *Puck* was a pathetic figure, not worthy of a total opposition. For example, a typical *Puck* reference was in a satirical article on the Rev. Talmage and his marathon preaching and in which Hayes surfaces as the time-keeper.²² Like most comic papers, *Puck* often joked about Hayes' much publicized teetotalism.

Garfield, the next American President, never hid the fact that he owed his election to James G. Blaine. Blaine himself described Garfield, who had been a fervid public supporter of Sherman, as sitting "pale and motionless" in his convention seat as it became clear he would become the presidential candidate.²³ Harrison, himself a future president, was the Blaine man who got the Indiana delegation to vote for Garfield's nomination. When Garfield was assassinated, the stunned man standing next to Garfield was Blaine, who himself narrowly escaped a bullet. Blaine's eulogy to the combined Houses of Congress is a masterpiece of oratory and its comparison of the dead Garfield with Lincoln ended the controversies over Garfield's implication in the pervasive Credit Mobilier scandals, and over the fact that Garfield's 1880 campaign manager, S. Dorsey, became "soap" Dorsey through his wholesale bribery tactics. It is of some interest in this unsavory connection that J. Warren Kiefer, of Springfield, Ohio, was chosen the orator at the unveiling of the Garfield Statue in Washington, May, 1887.

Eid: The Fox and the Hyenas

In 1884 Blaine unsuccessfully ran for the presidency in the campaign that Lord Bryce chronicled. Blaine stumped Ohio for eighteen days, and the state voted for him. One small consolation *Puck* garnered from the Ohio election was that the above-mentioned Kiefer, civil war major general and former Speaker of the House, was not re-elected by his Ohio constituency. "Get out!" says the cartoon, "One Tattooed Man Is Quite Enough For Us."²⁴ Kiefer's defeat stopped the regular attacks by *Puck* on him as a symbol of speakership corruption. The magazine had been infuriated by a well-publicized speech he gave (5/9/1882) at Delmonico's where he claimed that "the country was never better and purer, individually and officially, than now." A decade later Editor Bunner wrote:

. . . —but it is really unfair and insulting to the Republican party to call Kiefer a Republican. Of Kiefer the best thing that can be said is that he was an accident and that he did not happen again.

For a more important fact about Ohio's contribution to the 1884 election, we see that the *Puck* cartoons invariably portray Whitelaw Reid at Blaine's side. Reid is a former Ohio journalist whose Xenia, Ohio birthplace is a short distance from Kiefer's voting district. Reid had the distinction in 1860 of being alone among Ohio editors in proposing Lincoln's nomination for the presidency. Now editor on the paper made famous by the crusading reformer, Horace Greely, *Puck* pictures Reid and the turncoat New York *Tribune* as the journalistic mouthpiece of Blaine. One cartoon shows only Reid (on a crutch labeled "Greeley's Memories") following the new Pied Piper, Blaine.²⁶ An editorial on a number of politicians compared them to characters in the Gilbert and Sullivan operetta, the *Mikado*. Reid was characterized as Pish-Tish, the noble lord who as the messenger of the *Mikado*, had the unenviable task of promulgating the Lord's outrageous ideas.²⁷

The most important single cartoon of the "Tattooed Man" series showed the obviously obtuse Reid unveiling the tattooed figure, crying out "Here's Purity and Magnetism for you—can't be beat!"²⁸ Or again in a cartoon designed in every way to remind New Yorkers of Thomas Nast's famous cartoons against Boss Tweed, we see Reid unblinkingly puffing the corruption-marked Blaine.²⁹ Reid's defence of Blaine was rare in the New York journalistic world. Reid's key position is rightfully stressed by Puckish cartoons, for Lord Bryce observed: "The press, and particularly the newspaper press, are of course the chief organ of opinion."³⁰ Reid long admired the words which the prestigious *Cincinnati Commercial* bore at its head "independent, not neutral."³¹ Murat Halstead, the editor of the *Commercial*, was a powerful ally on many occasions of Reid and Blaine. "Marse Henry" Watterson in his autobiography talked about how the liberal Republican movement in 1872 could not move till Reid (not then a full editor) was accepted as an equal to the other full editors (Halstead, Bowles, Schurz, White), and even then Reid bested the others by getting the nomination for Greeley!³² This same Watterson account dramatically showed the power of the press by his account of the putsch by the five editors (including Reid) to eliminate the Judge David Davis presidential boom of 1872.³³ *Puck's* view of the central wickedness of Reid's paper is seen in a later Puckish editorial, in which the editor of the supposed

Daily Trombone is pictured holding to some shred of self-respect by at least telling his little baby the truth about his editorial defense of the Republican position on the tariff:³⁴

If I drivel in this way, my son, it is only because the newspaper is glutted with men who can and will write such nonsense, and because a lot of fat protected gentlemen pay the *Trombone* to pay me to help them fool the people with talk of this sort. . . .

In another Puckish article from the 1884 campaign "Barney O'Dynamite" describes a Fenian party where "Misther Whitelaw Reid" (often identified by *Puck* with Irish dynamiters) is asked by "Misther Blaine" to accompany on the flute the singing of Paddy Ford, editor of the *Irish World*, who croons out:³⁵

Arrah! Jerry agragh, for the past few days
The *Tribune* is at its owld thricks;
We're Celtic Americans, now, av ye plaize
Though we wor on'y flannel-mouthed Micks.

In this age when not many reformers, at least in the rank and file, could overcome the prejudice against all Catholics, *Puck* pictures Blaine going to confession to a sympathetic Priest (Reid).³⁶ After the election in *Puck's* "Political Hunting Ground" we see a dead fox (Blaine) and a dead hyena (Kiefer), and Bunner in his 1893 reprint is still gloating.³⁷

Reid was a classmate at the University of Miami (Ohio) with the brother-in-law of William Harrison, the next president of the United States. Harrison was himself a graduate of Miami, having been born in Ohio and having studied law in Cincinnati, before moving on to Indianapolis. An editorial poem which seemed dear to *Puck's* literary editor, Bunner, has Harrison pitifully asking of the ghost of Blaine whose presence spells defeat for Harrison in the 1892 presidential election: "MUST I go to Injinap'lis?"³⁸

Like most historians, *Puck* had a field day attacking Harrison. The cartoonists normally pictured the President as a very small midget who could be lost in his grandfather's hat.³⁹

"Presidential Phraseology"

Foreigner—Does not a man by the name of Harrison fill the Presidential chair?

Disgruntled Republican—Not fill, not fill, sir! Occupy is the word.

Harrison was a loss.⁴⁰

"Not An Elevated Opinion"

Talkative Stranger (in an elevated train, reading paper)—What do you think of this plan for a new coinage to show the head of each President on some coin?

Eid: The Fox and the Hyenas

Disgruntled Republican—Wouldn't do. They could never get in the present one.

Talkative Stranger—Why not?

Disgruntled Republican—We've stopped coining half cents.

No, he was even less than that:⁴¹

"Getting at the Size"

The President (throwing down a newspaper passionately)—Blank it! Here's another Republican editor who calls me a figure-head!

Benny McKee—What ought he to call you, Grandpa—a cipher-head?

Worse yet, Harrison didn't understand the ethics of office. How could he? The infamous "blocks of five" had been used to purchase his election in his own state. He had a huge scandal break out over a house he accepted (although carefully put in his wife's name) on Cape May Point. The moral tone of his administration is seen in this supposed anecdote *Puck* published:⁴²

"Highly Scandalous"

The President—Do you think these charges against Mr. Quay are true, Brother John?

The Postmaster-General—They may be true, Brother Benjamin; but I am shocked that he doesn't deny them.

But one fateful path had been cut in the 1888 election. The tariff became a central issue. Blaine through the pages of the traditionally pro-high tariff *Tribune* saw to that. Although Harrison was the candidate, the *New York Times* editorialized that *Puck's* cartoons on "Protection As It Is" show forth clearly "the utter subjection of the Republican leaders to the will of Mr. Blaine."⁴³ A typical cartoon showed McKinley as a modern Robin Hood stealing from the poor to give to the rich.⁴⁴

In 1892 when Cleveland became President for the second time, the political tide was completely against the Republicans and their monopolistic backers, and there were those like *Puck* who foresaw the speedy dissolution of the party. In that unhappy Republican year Harrison ran unsuccessfully for the presidency with White-law Reid as his running mate. The tariff issue had seemingly impaled the party. With the crack-up of the party, the number one casualty seemed to be William McKinley, the personification of the Republican position on the tariff. How, then, do we account for the phenomenal success shown in the 1896 election by both McKinley and the Republican Party?

By 1896 Blaine is dead. So also by this date are the original owner of *Puck* and illustrator of so many anti-Blaine cartoons (Joseph Keppler), as well as the first English editor, Bunner. But in many ways the spirit of Blaine lived in McKinley and Hanna, with the result that the new Puckish editors and cartoonists faced in 1896 the

unenviable task of taking a position on two candidates, neither one of whom seemed acceptable.

Never did a journal give such back-of-the-hand support of a presidential candidate. On August 19, 1896:

“One View”

First Citizen—Think the office is seeking McKinley?

Second Citizen—No; it's merely trying to get away from Bryan.”

On November 4, 1896:

“No further need of restraint”

I'm glad the election is over.

So am I. It's a great relief to be at liberty once more to express one's opinion of McKinley.

The reason was simply this: McKinley wanted to keep the high protective tariff issue foremost before the voters; *Puck* hating the Republican tariff and yet still a lot more fearful of the “boy thinker” from the Platte emphasized the Republican Platform of sound money.⁴⁵ Hanna occurs in the cartoons as the leader pushing the issue of sound money over the poorer issue of tariff, and in the accompanying editorial McKinley is accused of “deliberately ignoring the real issue” for “he is the kind of man who would have insisted in 1860 that a high tariff was the only remedy for the social disease of the period.”⁴⁶ McKinley, thought *Puck*, was always a straddler on financial matters, refusing to stand firm against Bryan's “immoral” call for a “fifty cent” dollar.⁴⁷

“Warm Support”⁴⁸

First Deaf Mute—Are you for McKinley?

Second Deaf Mute—Sure! He's just like one of us, except that he doesn't make signs.

In one cartoon, McKinley is shown as a woman with a baby on her lap labeled “Gold Standard” but McKinley is saying: “I've got to take care of this Gold Baby for my political living, but I love my own tootsey-wootsey the best!” (i.e. “High Protection rag baby”).⁴⁹

Jensen in his view of the period argues that a really important change was signaled by McKinley's election in 1896. In fact, Ohio was already the model for the 1892 Republican Campaign because McKinley in the 1890 election had almost done the impossible and his “impressive showing was hailed as a moral victory of the first magnitude.”⁵⁰ The election of 1896, says Jensen, simply recorded this voter's preference for pluralism.⁵¹

Well, the *Puck* of Bunner and Keppler never saw it that way. At the end of the Nineteenth Century the magazine took a position similar to the views held by many

Eid: The Fox and the Hyenas

older historians: Cleveland really gets the credit for the new spirit in politics that began to dominate in the Teddy Roosevelt era since Cleveland by his obstinate honesty showed the way to political virtue.⁵² Actually according to *Puck* the McKinley gang was just as corrupt as ever.⁵³

“Doubtful”

“Do you believe Hanna’s raised a corruption fund?”

“No; there’s nobody left to corrupt.”

Puck felt America had to face up to the disturbing question why the land of freedom produced such “wretched tricksters,” and that America would have to face the fact that:⁵⁴

There must be a new deal of drums in the political army, and if the old men cannot beat the new drums—well, we will find men who can.

Jensen has the vast data to support his view, but as long as a picture is worth a thousand words (and a thousand, thousand correct but impersonal statistics) then Blaine and his Ohio friends will continue to be for most readers (if not for professional historians) the wicked political hacks of the nefarious Robber Barons whose activities darkened American life at the end of the Nineteenth Century.

University of Dayton

NOTES

1. James Bryce, *The American Commonwealth*, Vol. 2 London: 1888 p. 174.
2. Subsequently sketched with an “anti-sunstroke” hat.
3. J. Bryce, *op. cit.*, p. 58. This article was the background information for a slide presentation given a luncheon group at the 1975 Great Lakes Regional History Conference.
4. Richard Jensen, *The Winning of the Midwest*, Chicago: 1971. p. xiv. Cf. Review Article by Lewis Gould in the *AHR*, V. 77 #4, 10/1972, pp. 1074-82. For followers of Jensen it comes as no surprise that “tricksters” in fact often surface later as strong supporters of the reforms leading to Progressivism! It is a great strength of this interpretation that it prepares one for the otherwise paradoxical fact that many of *Puck*’s “wretched tricksters” give strong support to the reforms that became Progressivism.
5. Edward Levine, *The Irish and Irish Politicians*, Notre Dame: 1966 pp. 7, 86-96.
6. Otto L. Bettmann, *The Good Old Days—They Were Terrible!*, New York: 1974. Mary and Gordon Campbell, *The Pen, Not the Sword*, Nashville.
7. *Puck*, 2-14-1883.
8. *Puck*, 7-30-1890.
9. *Puck*, 5-9-1883.
10. Particularly *Puck*, 1-16-1884, the only cartoon the magazine ever admitted to having republished without change.
11. Theron Clark Crawford, *James G. Blaine*, Cincinnati: 1893 p. 46.

12. R. Jensen, *op. cit.*, pp. 158, 291.
13. *Puck*, 6-25-1879.
14. "The Shermans and the Blaines have always been intimate." T. C. Crawford, *op. cit.*, p. 46.
15. Plus Taft and Pendleton. Ohio-born U. S. Grant was not included. As could be expected of a reform periodical, *Puck* absolutely abhorred Grant and Conkling, his New York mouth-piece.
16. *Puck*, 1-16-1878.
17. *Puck*, 1-1-1879 and 2-19-1879. Times change and in just a decade Chicago garners all the honors in this field: "Chicago could make of any fair a poem in Pork and a symphony in sublimated swine."
18. *Puck*, 3-12-1890. The feeling was mutual. According to T. C. Crawford (a Washington correspondent for fifteen years), *op. cit.*, p. 568 Medill, editor of the *Chicago Tribune* advised Blaine in 1884 that "The country, and particularly the Western country, has no great love for New York City."
19. *Puck*, 3-2-1887. Moreover Henry Cuyler Bunner, who wrote the editorials and much else in the magazine, was an extraordinarily good writer. Cf. Larzer Ziff, *The American 1890s*, NY: 1968 p. 17.
20. J. Bryce, *op. cit.*, p. 244.
21. *Puck*, 5-1877.
22. *Puck*, 2-5-1879.
23. James G. Blaine, *Twenty Years of Congress*, Norwich, Conn.: 1884 Vol. 2, p. 666.
24. *Puck*, 8-12-1884.
25. Henry C. Bunner, *Cartoons from "Puck"*, NY: 1893 p. 202.
26. *Puck*, 5-21-1884.
27. Americans of that day were quite conversant with the Gilbert and Sullivan array of characters.
28. *Puck*, 6-4-1884.
29. *Puck*, 9-24-1884.
30. J. Bryce, *op. cit.*, p. 233.
31. Royal Cortissoz, *The Life of Whitelaw Reid*, NY: 1921 Vol. 1, p. 38.
32. Henry Watterson, "*Marse Henry*", NY: 1919, Vol. 1, Chapter 11.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 245-7.
34. *Puck*, 6-18-1890.
35. *Puck*, 10-8-1884.
36. *Puck*, 9-3-1884.
37. Bunner, *op. cit.*, p. 30.
38. *Puck*, 8-13-1890; Bunner, *op. cit.*, p. 30.
39. *Puck*, 4-2-1890.
40. *Puck*, 4-9-1890.
41. *Puck*, 5-14-1890.
42. *Puck*, 7-2-1890.
43. *New York Times*, 8-10-1888.
44. *Puck*, 6-4-1890.

Eid: The Fox and the Hyenas

45. *Puck*, 9-2-1896. "Appropriate
Askins—What do you think of the idea of calling Bryan "The Boy Orator of the Platte?"
Grimshaw—It seems to me very appropriate. The Platte is about two thousand five hundred miles long, and only about six inches deep."
46. *Puck*, 8-12-1897.
47. *Puck*, 6-10-1896.
48. *Puck*, 6-17-1896.
49. *Puck*, 9-2-1896.
50. R. Jensen, *op. cit.*, p. 152.
51. *Ibid.*, pp. 291 and 304.
52. *Puck*, 8-26-1896. A two page cartoon of Cleveland, as a muscular forester blazing the trail that the Republican party must follow.
53. *Puck*, 9-2-1896. What helped ease *Puck's* mind was the allegiance of the Irish politicians to the Democratic candidate.
54. *Puck*, 2-14-1883.

