

**The Gallery of Comicalities –  
Graphic humour, the wood engraving and the development of the comic magazine 1820-  
1841**

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This paper forms part of a wider project that seeks to bring together the development of comic illustration, the emergence of mass circulation cheap diversionary magazines, the practicalities and processes of producing humorous illustrations, the processes through which comic images ramble and wander through print culture in the 1820s and 1830s and, less obviously but most important, the origins of naturalistic graphic social reportage. This concatenation of events occurs, by my reckoning, between 1825 and 1841. I take my cue from a seminal essay by Michael Wolff and Celina Fox on graphic representations of early Victorian urban society written over forty years ago for Dyos and Wolff's *The Victorian City* (1973):

At the point where stock characters in the city are displayed with comic intent, the news magazine overlaps considerably with the humour magazine, stemming as they do from the same caricature tradition. Blanchard Jerrold maintained that 'the taste for pictorial journalism was directly the creation of our caricaturists....There is evidently greater freedom in the comic magazines for a sort of picturing of urban reality....their view of the city is at once more spontaneous and more authentic than the convention-bound or blinkered treatment which characterises the illustrated newspapers. This greater apparent freedom is presumably a function of comedy. The freedom enjoyed by the caricaturist may be described in psychological terms too, in which emphasis is placed on the role of comedy as a release function.'<sup>1</sup>

Wolff and Fox go on to argue that the quest for 'authenticity' that characterised much graphic journalism was a constraint compared to the range of 'comment', 'individual bias', 'prejudice', exaggeration, lack of impartiality and freedom from the fear of libel that gave freedom to comic draughtsmen. They conclude:

The effect of this argument about the comic magazines' relatively freer capacity to use potentially disconcerting material is to confirm what an examination of the volumes themselves discloses, namely, that more about the real world of the Victorian city slips through in the illustrations of the comic magazines than in those of the news magazines.<sup>ii</sup>

By way of a brief introduction to these issues I want to say a little about a magazine that forms a relatively well-known harbinger of the graphic future - *Bell's Life in London* and its 'Gallery of Comicalities'. There are good general introductions to the magazine to be found in David Kunzle's study of down market illustrated magazines and in *The Waterloo Directory*

entry<sup>iii</sup> so all I want to say here by way of introduction is that *Bell's Life in London*, a large format London based multi-column weekly with a primary interest in sporting and theatrical affairs, introduced a feature called 'The Gallery of Comicalities' in issue 289 (September 9<sup>th</sup>. 1827). It ran for over ten years, eventually comprising over five hundred comic or satirical illustrations which appeared as a numbered sequence in most, though by no means every, issue of the magazine. Each 'comicality' comprised a small wood engraved vignette that could be fitted into a single column of print, and was accompanied by a short anecdote in either prose or verse. The journal quickly realised the potential of this feature, and frequently organised images from the 'Gallery' into 'recapitulations' that claimed more of the page and opened up the possibility of grouped or sequential images that might build into a series.

It is important to ask where these images came from, who made them, and, less obviously, where they went. The original intention of the 'Comicalities' seems to have been to re-use illustrations already in commercial circulation. The first few issues of the magazine to contain the 'Gallery' were largely supported by the re-publication of George Cruikshank's 'Illustrations of Time' which had been originally published 'by the artist' on May 1<sup>st</sup>. 1827 but distributed by James Robins. [Fig. 1] *Bell's Life* pirated these illustrations without Cruikshank's permission. <sup>iv</sup> Cohn states that Cruikshank contributed twenty-six woodcuts to the magazine, all of them initialled, although he also notes that 'these illustrations were "lifted" much to the artist's annoyance, and for them he never received a penny.' <sup>v</sup> Despite the rows, this incident powerfully suggests the extent to which images and the blocks that carried them had become significant and commercial entities – it is important to acknowledge that these images were essentially first published as a miscellany of loosely thematically related visual jokes not conceived as 'illustrations' to a text. Indeed the *Illustrations of Times* images offer evidence of a significant process of remediation. Cruikshank self-published *Illustrations of Time* in 1827 in a form that comprised six oblong folio multi-panelled sheets and a title page.<sup>vi</sup>

Such a format – a gathering of 6, 8 or 12 multi-image large oblong folio sheets held together as a sequence within paper covers – was one of the key ways in which caricaturists staved off the reduction in the market for single plate satirical prints.<sup>vii</sup> [fig. 2] The format allowed them to gather relatively small and even trivial jokes, sketches and doodlings into a form that gave substance and stature to even the least ambitious of images. Indeed, the titles of such gatherings came to celebrate exactly their lack of coherence and ambition – Cruikshank’s *Scraps and Sketches*, Henry Heath’s *Tit Bits*, William Heath’s *Omnium Gatherum* and Henry Alken’s *Humorous Scraps* accurately suggest their content, and these kinds of publications were extremely important in the emergent market in scraps. [fig. 3] *Illustrations of Time*, however, sought to offer something beyond miscellaneity, and instead was structured to offer a prolonged joking and punning commentary on vernacular phrases and sayings that used ‘time’ – ‘behind time’, ‘time badly spent’, ‘hard times’ and so on, so that the publication never quite descended into haphazard accumulation.

Cruikshank’s images for *Illustrations of Time* were etched, and thus had to be re-engraved on wood before they could be published in *Bell’s Life*. The process of republication depended on each image within Cruikshank’s publication being small enough and easy enough to reproduce within the confines of the narrow columns that made up the *Bell’s Life* page. It also depended on the ability of these images to assume the burden of autonomy placed on them by their removal from both the multi- image plate and from the overall conceptual structure of *Illustrations of Time* and become free standing jokes that could hold their own within the ocean of print that made up the *Bell’s Life* page. There were also issues about the tastes and social status of readers to be addressed – was the relatively vulgar assumed readership of *Bell’s Life* up to the levels of punning sophistication and cultural allusion to be found in Cruikshank’s images? Apparently so, for ‘The Gallery of Comicalities’ seems to have been an immediate success. *Bell’s Life* had set an important precedent in pulling across images first published in a

relatively expensive format aimed at well off genteel consumers into a magazine that appealed to young clerks and small traders as well as wealthier readers.

Given the rows that using Cruikshank's images caused, the magazine quickly saw the need for originality in its illustrations. It was perhaps also anxious to offer its readership something less sophisticated and more direct in its visual appeal. Accordingly, *Bell's Life* began to commission its own original illustrations for 'The Gallery of Comicalities' drawing in a new generation of comic artists most notably Robert Seymour, Kenny Meadows and John Leech. These artists, while knowledgeable about the caricature tradition, had been forced to adapt their work to fulfil the increasing demands for small scale wood engraving as a means of survival in a market place where expensive single plate comic engravings were losing their popularity. *Bell's Life* subsequently made a huge fuss about its illustrations. Within the editorial content of the magazine frequent references were made to its commitment to include original illustrations despite their cost. On June 12<sup>th</sup> 1831 the journal noted that the fifty-three comic engravings that formed the 'recapitulation' published in issue 481 had cost the proprietors two hundred and sixty-five guineas. A few weeks later on July 10<sup>th</sup>, announcing the publication of all the 140 illustrations that had up to this point been published in *Bell's Life* as a threepenny reprint, the magazine put the cost of 'designing and engraving' at seven hundred and thirty-five pounds. The claim made by the magazine was thus that each 'comicality' cost five guineas. As one of the few indications of how much draughtsmen were paid this is an interesting figure, and represents a considerable sum for a single small engraving. Thus *Bell's Life in London*, in frequently publicising the amounts it was willing to expend on illustration, underlined the value it placed on its graphic content.

The gatherings of graphic 'comicalities' into yearly publications proved to be an astonishing success – here is a reminder of the ways in which *The Gallery of Comicalities* gathered a shape and commercial identity largely separate from *Bell's Life in London*, a shape

largely defined by the exigencies of the booming market place for scraps. [fig. 4] But here I want to think a little more about the graphic content of the ‘Gallery’ after it became clear that the magazine would have to commission its own illustrators rather than depend on seizing on pre-published images. Few commentators have found much of interest within the ‘Gallery’ other than its importance in the history of the evolution of magazine illustration. Mason Jackson, in *The Pictorial Press; Its Origin and Progress*, offered a brief description of some of the series of illustrations that *Bell’s Life* used, and named Cruikshank, Seymour and Kenny Meadows as among their authors. He also reprinted a few images from the magazine. But his conclusion was that the ‘comicalities’ ‘are much too coarse, cynical, and vulgar for the taste of the present day’.<sup>viii</sup> And it is true that many of images, as well as their inconspicuous assimilation into the formidable page of *Bell’s Life*, look hastily drawn and derivative in the ‘jokes’ they depict, thus confirming the generally held belief of scholars like Altick and James that the magazine was aimed at fulfilling the undemanding taste of lower class readers, and offered diversionary comedy rather than political satire.<sup>ix</sup> Brian Harrison noted in *Drink and the Victorians* that ‘the sporting print *Bell’s Life* was always more popular than the more political papers among the drinksellers’ customers’.<sup>x</sup> Nonetheless Gray recognised that the magazine was pro-Reform in the late 1820s and early 1830s, and ‘sponsored many burlesques and squibs attacking the aristocracy, clergy, and the establishment in general’ in its early issues before losing much of its political energy.<sup>xi</sup>

But there were other elements within the ‘comicalities’ that were important in developing the range and mode of periodical illustration even in the humble form of the small scale wood engraved vignette. One major feature was the use of the Hogarthian ‘progress’ which ascribed stereotypical narrative direction to the lives of socially abject or liminal characters. Beginning with a re-drawn version of ‘The Harlot’s Progress’ in June 1828, *Bell’s Life* subsequently commissioned a number of contemporary graphic ‘progresses’. Robert

Seymour, for example, provided both a ‘Drunkard’s Progress’ (January to March 1829) and a ‘Pugilist’s Progress’ (July to October 1829).<sup>xii</sup> While acknowledging the moralism of Hogarth’s narrative sequences, and while evidently losing Hogarth’s love of emblematic detail, these ‘progresses’, for all their graphic simplifications, offer some interesting commentary on social morality. Number 3 of the ‘Pugilist’s Progress’ for example, has a poem attached to it suggesting the ways in which physical force will always outweigh argument, a view given contemporary weight by an allusion to Lord Brougham’s attempts to persuade the British public of the value of working class education.

Even more important was the attention paid to individual physiognomy and physical ‘types’ as a form of social understanding, and the ways in which this interest began to develop ideas about scrutiny and representation that formed important later Victorian modes of urban awareness and representation. Here, for example, are the massed images of London street ‘types’ together with their expository verses that were brought together in one of the yearly ‘Galleries of Comicalities’. **[fig. 5]** The title of this anthology of physiognomies – ‘London Particulars’ – is a pun on visual perceptions and observational capacities – a ‘London particular’ is of course the infamous fog that frequently invaded London’s streets and kept people from seeing where or even who they were, but in these images street passers-by are given ‘particularity’ in ways that enabled the construction of detailed stereotypes.<sup>xiii</sup> Here is a single, or should it be a ‘particular’ example, ‘The Waiter’, cut out and stuck on to an album page in a central position between images from C.J.Grant’s *Everybody’s Album* and William Heath’s *Omnium Gatherum*. It may well be that Kenny Meadows drew this particular image although it is unsigned. **[fig. 6]** Such images mark exactly the turning point between caricature and naturalism, between exaggeration and observation and between satire and comedy that was increasingly characteristic of small scale comic wood engravings of this period. They also provide precedents for two major subsequent elements within illustrated periodicals. The first

was a recognition of the dramatic visual effect of massing small black and white image together to form large scale magazine pages. The second, and more important, was the development of the ‘particular’ – the closely observed delineation of an urban individual perceived as typical or stereotypical of an urban ‘type’ – a staple element in periodical literature in the 1830s and 1840s. It is important to stress that at this time the genre, which evolved into ‘the ‘urban sketch’ described by Martina Lauster in transnational study *Sketches of the Nineteenth Century*,<sup>xiv</sup> begins with a graphic depiction to which words are added. The visual is ‘illustrated’ by the verbal, and it is the image that draws the reader to the text and not the other way round, thus returning the ‘sketch’ to its primary residence within the vocabulary of the visual.

It isn’t difficult suggest the various routes that the ‘particular’ takes into periodical forms in the late 1830s and 1840s. *Bell’s Life* printed a number of images of street boys along with accompanying verses as part of its continuing use of ‘The Gallery of Comicalities’. The two boys shown here appeared in April 1837. **[fig. 7 and 8]** Street boys became a recurring topic within the urban sketches published in periodicals. In describing the urchins that haunted London thoroughfares, lanes and alleyways such articles rehearsed every available way of viewing their presence. For some writers they represented a threat, for others a picturesque element within the street carnival offered by walking in London. Here is a double page spread of London boys from a satirical weekly *The Squib* (1842) in which the images prompt a brief but detailed pendant verbal explication. **[fig 9 and 10]** A genteel and literary version of the same idea is offered a year later in *The Illuminated Magazine* where Douglas Jerrold’s commentary on Kenny Meadows’s images provides something close to self-consciously literary essays rather than a mere caption.<sup>xv</sup> **[figs. 11 and 12]** A similarly extended commentary is provided by Thomas Miller to another Meadows image – ‘The Gin Drinker’ – one of short series to be found in an early volume of *The Illustrated London News*.<sup>xvi</sup> Meadows also provided the images that, while conceived as extra illustrations to Dickens’s *Nicholas Nickleby*,



ended up wandering about print culture in the late 1830s until they reappeared in a totally transformed context as the prompts for a series of extended essays on urban types gathered together in two volumes as *Heads of the People*.<sup>xvii</sup> Meadows's re-working of his Dickens illustrations confirms an early Victorian tendency to be suspicious of the visual image unless it was accompanied by a substantial exegetical text. *Heads of the People* provides a classic example of an extended text emerging from a few small images.

Given its interest in exaggeration, the grotesque, and physiological deviance caricature initially seems an unlikely source for early Victorian social reportage, where the stress is on naturalism and authenticity. Similarly, the reduction in scale and the loss of detail that accompanied the accommodation of wood engraved vignettes into the type set page would seem to work against the comic illustrations to be found in *Bell's Life in London* offering much by way of sustained social commentary, especially as such images were being marketed elsewhere as 'scraps and sketches' rather than fully realised caricatures. But the magazine found a number of strategies for giving the small scale comic illustration due weight even though it occupied a small area of printed space within a large text laden page. The location of the Gallery of Comicalities at the top right hand corner of the page, in the location to which the eye is first drawn, gave the image prominence, and the addition of text, usually in the form of comic verses, also lent it weight. The use of proto-narrative elements, especially the Hogarthian 'progress' and the gathering of images into thematic series, furthered the accumulated significance of visual humour in the magazine's repertoire of contents. The editorial references to the high cost of illustration and the 'recapitulations' and yearly collections of images also emphasised the centrality of the magazine's graphic elements to both its success and sense of social utility. For all their crudity and coarseness, the comic images that populated *Bell's Life in London* for over ten years were a significant source for the development of naturalistic social

reportage through the medium of the comic image, a development central to the wider projects undertaken by later Victorian social realism.

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- i Dyos and Wolff *The Victorian City* II, 565-567.
- ii Dyos and Wolff *The Victorian City* II, 567.
- iii Kunzle 'Cheap Newspaper Cuts'
- iv Patten *George Cruikshank* 1, 300-301; Cohn *Catalogue* 67.
- v Cohn *Catalogue* 67.
- vi George Cruikshank *Illustrations of Time*.
- vii Maidment *Comedy, Caricature* 47-49.
- viii Jackson, *Pictorial Press* 245.
- ix Altick *Common Reader* 342-344; James *Fiction for the Working Man*, 21.
- x Harrison, 49.
- xi Gray 'Comic Periodicals', 11.
- xii Both of these sequences by Seymour were reprinted in *Gallery of Comicalities, Embracing Humorous Sketches by the brothers Robert and George Cruikshank and others* (London, Charles Hindley, n.d.), a publication that kept comic images from *Bell's Life in London* in circulation well on into the nineteenth century.
- xiii *Bell's Life in London* ran several series of 'London Particulars', the first in June and July 1829, the second in January 1838 and the third between July 1840 and January 1841.
- xiv Lauster *Sketches* 1-24.
- xv *Illuminated Magazine* 1843.
- xvi Maidment 'An Image of 1848'.
- xvii Meadows, *Heads of the People*.

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