Political Cartoonists of the 20th and 21st Centuries: Treasures of The Cartoon Museum

Background notes

Emma Stirling-Middleton — 17 November 2021

The Cartoon Museum

In 1988, a group of cartoonists and collectors came together as The Cartoon Art Trust, a registered charity, with the aim of founding a museum dedicated to collecting, exhibiting, promoting and preserving the best of British cartoon art.
After a decade of exhibiting in smaller venues, in February 2006 the Cartoon Museum opened to the public at its first permanent home in Bloomsbury, London. Housed in a converted dairy off Museum Street, it was Britain's first museum of cartoons. In 2019 the museum moved to a new home in Fitzrovia.

Today the Museum holds a collection of over 6,000 original cartoon and comic artworks and a library of over 18,000 books and comics dating from the 1700s to the present day. The collection is home to the most successful cartoonists of the 20th and 21st centuries, including William Heath Robinson, H.M. Bateman, Pont, Gerald Scarfe, Ronald Searle, Giles, Martin Rowson, Steve Bell, Ralph Steadman, Posy Simmonds, Cath Jackson and many more. This lecture will explore the work and lives of six influential cartoonists of the 20th and 21st centuries with an illustrated journey through some of the treasures of this unique and important collection. It will examine how their work drew attention to problematic issues particular to them in their time and place and how they used the art of cartooning to protest either overtly or more subtly against the prevailing conditions.

The lecture will conclude by reflecting on the curation of the art of dissent through the museum's two most recent temporary exhibitions: V for Vendetta: Behind the Mask and BLACK.

It is hoped that listeners will leave feeling inspired by the power of pictures and words – and maybe even consider picking up a pencil themselves!

H.M. Bateman, The Late Arrivals, *The Tatler*, 3 December 1922

H.M. Bateman (1887-1970)

Henry Mayo Bateman was born in Australia, the son of an Englishman (the family returned to England when he was two years old). Influenced at first by *Comic Cuts* and *Ally Sloper's Half Holiday*, his first humorous drawings were published in *Scraps* (1903). He later drew for the *Sketch*, *Passing Show*, *London Magazine*, *Radio Times*, *Punch* (from 1915), *Bystander*, *Strand*, *London Opinion*, *Field* (sporting cartoons, 1935–7), and other publications. His most famous drawings, 'The Man Who . . .' series of social gaffes, first appeared in 1912 in the *Tatler*. In a lecture delivered at the Royal Society of Arts in 1949 he first promoted the idea of a permanent museum of cartoon art in Britain, a dream that his daughter Diana Willis (a founder of the Cartoon Art Trust) did much to realise.

Sir David Low (1891-1963)

David Low was born in Dunedin, New Zealand, and was largely self-taught. At the age of 11 his first strip was published in *Big Budget* and a topical cartoon was accepted by the *Christchurch Spectator*. In 1908, Low became the *Spectator*'s Political Cartoonist (his first full-time job), later moving to the *Canterbury Times* and the *Sydney Bulletin*. His bestselling *The Billy Book* (1918) lampooning Australian PM Billy Hughes drew praise from Arnold Bennett (who later said 'Low draws as the fishes swim'), and led to his move to England in 1919. He began work on the *Star* and then in 1927 became the first ever Political Cartoonist on the *Evening Standard*. He then moved to the *Daily Herald* (1950) and the *Manchester Guardian* (1953), becoming the paper's first staff cartoonist. In addition, he contributed to *Picture Post*, *Graphic*, *Life*, *New Statesman*, *Punch*, *Illustrated*, *Colliers*, *Nash's Magazine*, *Pall Mall Magazine* and others. Low has been perhaps the most influential cartoonist and caricaturist of the twentieth century. He also created a number of memorable comic characters, including the TUC carthorse, Musso the Pup, the Coalition Ass and the walrus-moustached Colonel Blimp.

Graham Laidler 'Pont', 'Now don't you dare come in here and tell me you think you've got measles.', *Punch*, 1930s

Graham Laidler 'Pont' (1908-40)

Graham Laidler was born in Jesmond, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, and studied at the Architectural Association's School of Architecture in London. Soon after qualifying he contracted tuberculosis, and after a major operation in 1932 was unable to pursue an architectural career. While still a student his first cartoon strip, 'The Twiff Family', appeared in *Woman's Pictorial*, and he had his first cartoon accepted by *Punch* in 1932. The first drawing in his celebrated series 'The British Character' appeared in the magazine on 4 April 1934 and when *Night & Day* tried to lure him away *Punch* signed him up for a unique exclusive contract. Pont, whose name arose from a family joke concerning 'Pontifex Maximus' was, with Paul Crum (Roger Pettiward), very influential: 'these two, Pont and Pettiward, probably did more during this period to carry the development of modern pictorial humour a whole stage further than any two or twenty others put together' (Fougasse). In describing his work Pont always insisted: 'I do not try to draw funny people . . . I try very hard to draw people exactly as they are.'

Ronald Searle CBE (1920-2011)

Ronald Searle was born in Cambridge and studied at Cambridge Technical College and School of Art. His first cartoons were published in the *Cambridge Daily News* in 1935. During World War II he served with the Royal Engineers, contributing to the *Daily Express* (1939), *London Opinion*, *Lilliput* (1941) and others until captured by the Japanese at the fall of Singapore. From 1942 to 1945 he was a prisoner of war in Siam (now Thailand) and in Changi, Singapore, where he met George Sprod. Returning to England, he began work for *Illustrated*, *Strand Magazine*, *John Bull*, *Daily Herald*, *Tatler & Bystander*, *Men Only*, *Radio Times* and others. He was cartoonist on *Tribune* (1949–51) and the *Sunday Express* (1950–51), Special Feature Artist on the *News Chronicle* (1951–3) and cartoonist for the same paper (1954), and cartoonist and theatre artist for *Punch* (1949–62). He also contributed cartoons to *New Yorker*, *Life*, *Time & Tide*, *Saturday Evening Post*, *Graphis* and others, and drew regularly for *Le Monde* from 1995. He also drew advertisements and designed medals for the French Mint and the British Art Medal Society. In addition, he designed and/or drew animation sequences for a number of films including *Those Magnificent Men in Their Flying Machines* (1965), *Monte Carlo or Bust* (1969), *Scrooge* (1970) and *Dick Deadeye* (1975). Founder of the Perpetua Press with his first wife, Kaye Webb, he received many international awards for his work, including National Cartoonists' Society of America Awards (1959, 1960, 1966) and the CAT Lifetime Achievement Award (1995). Particularly memorable characters created by Searle include the devilish schoolgirls of St Trinian's (featured in five films) and Nigel Molesworth in the books written by Geoffrey Willans.

Norman Thelwell, Free Range Poultry, *Punch*, 9 December 1964

Norman Thelwell (1923-2004)
Norman Thelwell was born in Birkenhead, Cheshire, In World War II he served in the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers (1942–6) and while Art Editor of an army publication in New Delhi, he had his first cartoons published in *London Opinion*. After the war he

studied at Liverpool College of Art and lectured on design and illustration at Wolverhampton College of Art (1950–57). He sold his first drawing to *Punch* in 1950 and contributed more than 1600 cartoons – including 60 covers – to the magazine (1952–77) as well as working for the *News Chronicle*, *Sunday Dispatch*, *Sunday Express* and *Tatler*. His freelance work included *London Opinion*, *Lilliput*, *Daily Express*, *John Bull*, *Illustrated*, *Picture Post*, *Countryman*, *Esquire* and others He also produced book jackets and worked in advertising and for TV. He was particularly well known for his cartoons on fishing, sailing, motoring and English country life – especially those (from 1953 onwards) featuring young girls and ponies. He was one of the founder members of the British Cartoonists' Association in 1966.

Ralph Steadman in his studio, 2013

Ralph Steadman (b.1936)

Ralph Steadman was born in Wallasey, Cheshire. His first cartoon (about Nasser and the Suez crisis) was published in the *Manchester Evening Chronicle* in 1956. He then joined the Kemsley Newspaper Group as a cartoonist (1959–61). While studying art part-time at East Ham Technical College (1959–66), the London College of Printing (1961–5) and with Percy Bradshaw, he also freelanced cartoons for *Punch* (including covers), *Daily Sketch*,

Private Eye (from May 1962) and the *Daily Telegraph* until he became Artist-in-Residence at Sussex University (1967). He later worked for the National Theatre, *The Times* and the *New Statesman* and has contributed cartoons to *Rolling Stone*, *Radio Times*, *Black Dwarf*, *New York Times*, *Times Higher Education Supplement*, *New Scientist*, *Guardian*, *Observer*, *Sunday Times* and *Independent*. He has won numerous awards for his work including the V&A's Francis Williams Book Illustration Award (1973), Designers' & Art Directors' Association Gold Award (1977), American Institute of Graphic Arts Illustrator of the Year (1979), W. H. Smith Illustration Award (1987), BBC Design Award (1987), CAT Advertising Cartoonist of the Year Award (1995, 1996, 1998), and received an Honorary D.Litt. from the University of Kent in 1995. In addition, he has directed a film for TVS (1992), designed for the stage, written libretti, designed stamps for the GPO (1986), given lectures and designed Oddbins catalogues.