

# Is Mr Punch still Relevant?

by Francis Bennion

In old France a *charivari* was, says the *OED*, a babel of clatter and noise raised in mockery. So in 1841 Mark Lemon and Henry Mayhew thought of adopting that name for their new weekly magazine. Then a supporter reminded them that a satirical journal did indeed need lemon - just like good punch. So the founders took for their name and masthead the anarchic glove puppet Mr. Punch, of Punch and Judy fame. They called the magazine *Punch, or the London Charivari*. Mark Lemon was the editor for the first thirty years.

The 1866 yearly volume of *Punch* landed among my recent Christmas presents. Glancing through it I felt that there is nothing like a satirical magazine for giving the flavour of an age. The people of mid-Victorian England seem to have felt just as self-important as we do today, though they were perhaps more insular. Many of their concerns were like ours, particularly when it came to parliamentary representation. If MPs were not cheating on their expenses then, they were being dishonest in other ways. In one of his large political cartoons titled Bribery and Corruption the 1866 Mr Punch has a top-hatted MP 'on the terrace of Parliament Palace' engaging in conversation with a grimy Father Thames below in the water. 'O you horrid dirty old river!' the MP says. Father Thames replies: 'Don't *you* talk Mr Whatsyername! Which of us has the cleaner hands I wonder?'

Preparing for the passage of the second Reform Act the following year, the 1866 volume was full of references to rotten boroughs. Losing patience alongside a drawing of 'A bribery bloater from Yarmouth', Mr Punch slyly suggests that in order to make the best of a bad bargain the sale and purchase of a vote should be treated as an ordinary commercial activity, with the Chancellor of the Exchequer collecting the price from the highest bidder. Speaking more seriously, he recommends as a cure the long clamoured-for secret ballot - as in later years it turned out to be. My own adopted county of Devon features prominently here. The first Reform Act of 1832 had disfranchised most of the rotten boroughs. A few remained, such as the Devon towns of Dartmouth, Honiton and Totnes. The last is named half a dozen times in the 1866 volume, sometimes with one s and sometimes two. The following year it was duly despatched by the 1867 Act.

Banks are also criticised, just like today. In his ponderous way, Mr Punch said in 1866 that because too many acceptances (of bills of exchange) had been issued of late 'in consequence the word "late" has been the fitting prefix to the mention of establishments formerly of financial repute'. (One thinks of Northern Rock in 2007). Mr Punch, still ponderous, goes on: 'But if we ask ourselves what is the position of the Bank of England we cannot think that the financialists would be much reassured by the statement that it adjoins the Royal Exchange.'

A Duke of Edinburgh is mentioned in my 1866 volume and also a Duke of Cambridge, both royal titles revived in our own time. Our own cherished Duke of Edinburgh would scarcely relish the story of what happened to his predecessor when sojourning in the city of his dukedom. The following appears under the heading REVERENCE FOR THE SEAT OF ROYALTY:

'The Duke of Edinburgh found himself incommoded by the multitude of flunkeys who followed him about and thronged him. To evade this nuisance, His Royal Highness, having need to go shopping, took a hack-cab from the stand. As he got out of the vehicle two well-dressed ladies asked the cabman "For a shilling, how long will you let us sit just where he was?"'

Mr Punch, delicately marvelling at 'the lack of pride, not to say self-respect,' involved here, thought the ladies supposed that this intrusion 'communicated to them some of the honour

which, together with warmth, had been communicated to it by the surface which had rested on its own’.

The Mr Punch of 1866 is very interested about what goes on in the street. Horses are constant, being the sole means of motive power. Garrotting, a favoured method of street robbers, is mentioned many times. So is black fog, caused by the ubiquitous use of coal for heating and cooking. Each house has a coal cellar, indicated by the circular metal covers dotted down the middle of every pavement. Sweeps feature prominently. Shoeblick boys fight for custom. In one drawing an old gentleman struggles to retain his balance with a boy adhering tenaciously to each foot.

Railways are of great interest in the 1866 volume. In Parliament Mr Lyster O’Beirne MP asked, ‘very reasonably’, whether the Board of Trade would do nothing to obviate the danger ‘to which persons on horseback and carriages are exposed by the railway engines which now run shrieking across thoroughfares’. According to *Punch* the Minister improbably replied that private persons ‘had no right to complain of being smashed’. Mr Punch observed:

‘Juries will take notice of such answers and, we trust, continue to give Howling Damages whenever an action is brought for the slaughter of such contemptible creatures as private individuals. The Jury Box is our only protection.’

There is a neat reversal regarding branch lines. In the twenty-first century many people are concerned to support preservation societies and reopen closed branches. The opposite was the case in the mid-nineteenth century, when people objected to spoliation of the countryside by railway contractors. Here Mr Punch breaks into verse.

We are monarchs of all we survey,  
Our progress there’s none to dispute:  
From the centre our lines, to the sea,  
Branches new, all around, ever shoot.  
O Solitude! Where are thy charms,  
If we choose, that we cannot deface,  
And destroy, with discordant alarms,  
The peace of a beautiful place?

The fallen Railway King George Hudson, once a great employer of such despoilers, has a spoof letter (genuine letters from readers are not published in *Punch*). In it he asks to be whitewashed by Mr Punch, like some other railway pioneers. He adds:

‘Financing wasn’t understood in my time, as it is now. If you do what I want I can put you up to a real good thing in Spanish lines’.

Church doings are of great interest. Mr Punch is opposed to what he calls ritualism, attacking it at every turn and calling it Pernicious Nonsense. A large cartoon with this title shows John Bull (the epitome of England) rebuking clerical dignitaries with the words: ‘I pay your reverences to look after my Establishment, and if you neglect your duty I shall see to it myself’. A robed thurifer swinging a smoking censer stands in the background.

The law also concerns Mr Punch in 1866, particularly when dealing with criminals. A modern note is struck when he cites, on those who would use drunkenness as a defence, the Lord Chancellor Lord Brougham (who invented a type of carriage, and said that education makes a people easy to lead, but difficult to drive; easy to govern but impossible to enslave):

‘One sees with astonishment and indignation, in cases before Magistrates in the country, intoxication urged in extenuation of offences, whereas it is a gross aggravation. No Magistrate is entitled to suffer one such word to be uttered before him on the part of the accused. Any Magistrate is entitled to stop the party or his advocate the moment he begins on this, and tell him that if he is intoxicated he must suffer a punishment more severe.’

Mr Punch says: ‘Bravo, Henry Brougham! These words of yours should be inscribed in every country justice-room and common sessions chamber.’

The *Punch* of 1866 is also relevant on spelling. One of the spoof letters from readers includes the following complaint.

‘Rings, bracelets, necklaces, and other trinkets, made of precious stones, gold and silver, articles sold by a jeweller, have hitherto been denoted in the aggregate by the word “jewellery”. Some of your contemporaries have lately taken to substituting the word “jewelry”. Now “jewel” and “gem” are convertible terms. Pray, Sir, do you think it would be proper to call gems “gemry”?’

This is still a live question today. The *OED* allows both spellings, while saying that the etymology is ‘still in dispute’.

I end with a subtle rebuke from the 1866 Mr Punch about the lack of sex education for children. It has to be subtle because the subject could not then be openly debated. A girl of about twelve asks her mother why she and Papa did not invite her to their wedding. Beneath the sober ‘straight’ drawing is one sardonic word: Innocence. I recall what I said about such cruel parental neglect in my 1991 book *The Sex Code: Morals for Moderns*.

I find another personal link. The 1866 *Punch* gives a pronunciation of ‘Greenwich’ that I have long believed to be the correct one, though many disagree. In two places it prints ‘Grinnidge’.

I think we may say that Mr Punch is still relevant.

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## References:

None