

## Broadsides: Caricature and the Navy 1755-1815

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An exhibition at Greenwich, where caricature is being used to highlight a specific theme, offers a welcome excursion into the satiric print. The punning title plays on the double sense of 'broadside' as a large sheet of paper printed on one side, and a simultaneous firing of all the guns from one side of a ship. The wit is suggestive. Caricature is considered as a paper blast, as concerted noise; explosive and potentially destructive. Furthermore, as the parameters of the exhibition are fixed to 1755-1815, a period defined by war, mostly with France, the navy is presented as an enduring subject. Despite the sixty-year time span, however, this is a small show, essentially comprised of twenty colour prints that have been organised into three themes ('Officers and Ratings', 'Napoleon', 'John Bull and Britannia') and displayed across three walls. An additional bound volume where caricatures are pasted to the page has been placed in a cabinet, usefully suggesting how this sort of printed material was collected and viewed by contemporaries.

There are no prints in the exhibition of the Seven Years' War and the majority (14) were published between 1800-13, when the nation was fighting Napoleon. In fact, the earliest dated work was published in 1782 and depicts the surrender of the French at the Battle of the Saintes. The print, which was designed by an anonymous hand, was issued on May 27th, nine days after news of the victory reached London, and it is one of several depicting the officer class. It hangs next to Thomas Rowlandson's *Sea Amusement* (1785) and together the two form an interesting pair. In the first, Count de Grasse is shown 'delivering' his sword to the 'Gallant Admiral Rodney'. The Englishman is a diminutive, doll-like figure, dwarfed by his French counterpart and no bigger than his sword. They stand on the decks of the surrendered ship (*Ville de Paris*) congratulating each other on their 'handsome' fighting while cries of 'Huzza' rise from the ratings peppered among the sails. The space is flat, the forms are two-dimensional but the humour is explicit, helped along by the printed title and the realistic detail (bundles of coiled rope, broken rigging, a battle-damaged flag and the careful delineation of naval uniforms).

In the Rowlandson print, on the other hand, satire is more elliptical. An orderly is serving tea to a pair of 'Commanders in Chief' who are more absorbed by a game of 'cup and ball' than by their naval responsibilities, signalled by the maps scattered beneath their feet. The image insinuates, through subtle physical resemblance, a reference to two distinguished public figures: the Duke of Cumberland, at the time a Vice Admiral, and Sir Edmund Affleck, a Rear Admiral and a veteran commander at the Battle of the Saintes. The design is an early example of Rowlandson's satirical etching and it dates from a time, in the mid 1780s, when his name was new and increasingly in demand with London publishers. The commercial attraction of a caricature like this was not just its topical allusion. It was also the assured fluidity of the line, the delicate colouring, both of which make the print resemble a tinted drawing. Side by side, the two indicate how naval caricature is operating across a highly diversified visual field and within a variety of aesthetic registers.

Six prints then shift the focus to sailors. In contrast to their feckless commanders, these men are dependably robust, scornful of the enemy and sceptical in the face of new inventions (such as the American torpedo). A frequent figure is Jack Tar, the seaman's version of John Bull, whose dim wits were repeatedly exploited to comic effect, notably when he returned to life on land. A particularly interesting print (*The Balance of Justice*, 1802) provides a veiled reference to mutineering, punishment and hanging, and offers a stark reminder that the life of a rating was worth less than that of a general. Five prints focus on Nelson and range from his victories at the Battle of the Nile to his death at the Battle of Trafalgar. James Gillray's blistering *Dido in Despair* (1801) extends the pictorial satire to his lover, Lady Hamilton, a print that has been chosen for colour reproduction with annotations to clarify its iconographic connections. The last section presents the predictable John Bull (in four of the five prints) as the aggressive patriot, the dullard with a gargantuan appetite for naval victory, but a flexible tool for criticising government policy. The exhibition concludes with Gillray's *Physical Aid, or Britannia Recover'd from a Trance* (1803).

In recovering one of the important ways in which the navy was represented to British publics, the exhibition offers a mix of the novel and familiar. The choices preserve in condensed form some of the recognisable patterns of the contemporary print market, such as the prominence of Gillray (the author of six prints) or the voluminous trade of the publisher Thomas Tegg. Despite the stylistic diversity on display, the prints are connected by the themes they share: they are sceptical about those in positions of authority; they discriminate on class, are brutal on gender, they deflate the significant and elevate the trivial. Many also depend on the same repertoires of form, for example the same social types, who can be refreshed when repeated in new contexts.

The exhibition is accompanied by a lively and informative 64-page catalogue situating the prints within their social, political and artistic histories but structured around slightly different themes (Admirals, Nelson, Jack Tar, Invasion, Politics and the Navy). The attractive and colourful presentation does the important job of weaving the exhibited prints into broader frames of reference, establishing connections to other types of imagery and thereby emphasising their inter-referential identities. With 70 colour reproductions, however, 50 more than the exhibition, only eight of which are not in the National Maritime collection, the catalogue inevitably highlights what the exhibition omits: why so much land-locked John Bull and not more Jack Tar? Why the silence on press-ganging and why so few that exploit the visual potential of the sea? Only two prints reference Napoleon's plans for a sea-borne invasion (*Physical Aid*, 1803; *John Bull Peeping into Brest*, 1803), despite the fact that in 1797/8 as well as in 1803/4 invasion fears stimulated a number of fascinating images such as *Coffin Expedition* (1803), showing the French being tossed on the churning seas, or the satiric designs by Robert Dighton, Isaac Cruikshank and Gillray imagining the extraordinary 'floating machines' that would be carrying Bonaparte's army across the Channel.

One of the questions this exhibition leaves behind is that of how to exhibit the caricature print. How do you display it so that it conforms to the ways in which it is described? Caricature's specific identity is repeatedly bound to ideas of mobility, density and power. It is deeply inter-textual, always inter-medial; it circulates as fact and fiction, as historical document and as the sign of artistic invention. As the generic term for a type of printed visual humour, caricature is a fractured pictorial category, stylistically splintered. Once framed and placed on the wall, the images are inevitably aestheticised. They invite scrutiny as visual objects but can seem weighed down by the pressure of a frame, too trapped and too cleansed of their print culture contexts. In this sense, more would have been better. Excess would seem a necessity.

*'Broadsides: Caricature and the Navy 1755-1815'* is at the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, from 18 October 2012 to 3 February 2013.