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Drawing the line on franchise reform

Picturing Reform in Victorian Britain, by Janice Carlisle, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012, 290 pp, illustrated, £60 (hardback) ISBN 9780521868365.

John Ruskin, in his influential book *Elements of Drawing* (1857), urged his readers to think carefully about the analogies between pictorial representation and social institutions stressing that these analogies could not be pushed too far, indeed ‘the farther you pursue them, the clearer, the more certain, the more useful you will find them’ (3). *Picturing Reform in Victorian Britain* does just that. Carlisle provides a richly detailed and innovative exploration of how the art of the wood engraver and, to a lesser extent elite artists such as Sir George Hayter, contributed to the visual modes of public debate that were prominent between the 1840s and 1860s. Carlisle’s central premise is that the *Illustrated London News (ILN)* and *Punch* practiced a ‘politics of vision’ which invited their readers to ‘think with their eyes’. Rather than illustrations being on the peripheries of political life *Picturing Reform* persuasively demonstrates that graphic art allowed both the governed and those who governed them to envision the impact of the Reform Acts of 1832 and 1867 on Britain’s unwritten constitution. Yet while mainly focused on graphic art Carlisle’s methodological approach is interdisciplinary drawing upon novels such as Anthony Trollope’s *Phineas Finn*, (published in serial form 1867-1868), high art theory and politics. It is a detailed finally grained study in which even the very tools used by the engravers do not escape analysis (the masters used gravers, while the apprentices practiced the lesser art of hatching).

The book is organised into four parts. The first section establishes the theoretical parameters for how one might approach art as politics, with particular emphasis on the drawing of lines in theory and in practice. Here Carlisle analysis of ‘The Map of Society Island’ printed in the *Poor Man’s Guardian* in 1832 aptly demonstrates the significance of where lines are drawn to delineate boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. The map charts the relationship between society and the shape of this constitution by contorting the land mass of Scotland, England and Wales into a pyramid shape which depicts social hierarchies. A strong black line has been ruled across the island beneath the mountains of wealth, only those occupying the upper reaches of the island are enfranchised. This is one of the least ambiguous wood engravings in the book and, having firmly fixed in the readers mind the political work done by the line, it encourages the reader to approach the lines of subsequent engravings with a fresh, inquisitive eye. The second chapter, ‘Pictures on

display' studies art as both parliamentary decoration (high art during the period 1841-1863) and explores how Parliament was represented in the engravings of the illustrated press, 1832-1860. The third section is a close study of the *ILN* and *Punch* which considers how constitutional boundaries were redrawn in the 1860s. Carlisle's argument that working men were either seen as numbers or as individuals depending on the proclivities of publisher, and the artistic convention of presenting high class individuals in portrait and workers in landscape (and thus at a distance) is convincing. How *Punch* explored ideas of respectability and the deserving working man (as opposed to the ruffian) forms another illuminating case study. The final section 'within the pale' looks at how anticipation of a second reform act shaped the graphic art of the 1860s.

Carlisle draws upon the theories of John Ruskin and Walter Bagehot utilising Ruskin's *The Elements of Drawing* (1857) alongside that key text of Victorian parliamentary political culture, Bagehot's *The English Constitution* (1867). Ruskin's *Elements* equates pictorial composition with social organization while Bagehot, as a political theorist, was primarily interested in the different parts which made up the British constitution, recognising that real power lay within the efficient part, the House of Commons. *Picturing Reform* investigates the binary oppositions which dominated Victorian theory and practice and for this reason Carlisle's approach is 'unabashedly and insistently comparative' (2). Just as the line has the power to bisect an image into two parts (or literally both sides of the bigger picture) she employs the analytical technique of the 'comparative encounters' (17) which allows the reader to grasp the significance of one phenomenon in relation to that of its opposite.

By the 1860s the graphic art of the illustrated press moved between the parliamentary arena of institutional politics and the extra-parliamentary pressure group politics of the Reform League. A key incident which informed the debate on political inclusion was the Hyde Park riots of 1866. Hyde Park had long been associated with free speech and assembly. It was also the place where the class gradations of Victorian London were in most evident in the manner, dress and behaviour of those using the park recreationally. For Carlisle it is the perfect arena for the comparative encounters that form the essence of her study. William Thomas's engraving (Rotten Row, *ILN*, 17 May, 1862) stresses the multiple strata of social classification by giving prominence to the railings as lines which divide groups from one another – divisions are not only on income and rank but also on moral behaviour. Thus the moustached gentleman, located on the wrong side of the railings, is perhaps tarnished by past misdeeds (127).

To understand Carlisle's argument one spends a considerable amount of time peering at engravings and herein lies the biggest disappointment of this book, the illustrations from the *ILN* and *Punch* are poor. Leaving aside the luscious cover illustration of Sir John Hayter's *The House of Commons* (1833) the thirty-three illustrations are small and too dark. I had the urge to open up Photoshop and sharpen the lines and heighten the contrast. I suspect the quality of reprographics was beyond the authors control, and partly necessitated by format constraints, but it is a real pity for a book on visual representation.

Picturing Reform is not always an easy read – it is highly theoretical with, at times, intense attention to detail (rather like the intricate etchings of a wood engraving to which she devotes so much energy), however perseverance pays off and the innovative methodologies introduced by Carlisle offer tools that can be applied more widely to the immensely rich visual culture of the Victorian period. While academics in recent years have embraced the 'visual turn' for many historians interrogating pictorial representation is just one of many approaches. Thus while Kathryn Gleadle's impressive book *Borderline Citizens* uses Benjamin Robert Haydon's painting *The Anti-Slavery Society Convention* (1841) as an illustration of how women were both literally and figuratively on the peripheries of political life, the focus of Gleadle's book is on conventional historical records.ⁱ In this respect Carlisle is truly innovative as she puts the picture at the centre, giving the graphic art of the 1860s an agency of its own. At times this leads to bold assertions. On the eve of the Second Reform Act, according to Carlisle's analysis, it was 'the visual practices' of the *ILN* and *Punch* which determined 'their politics rather than the reverse'. If this was the case what was the politics of those paid to draw the political debate? How did the politics of the engraver impinge of the politics of visual representation and did they really have the power to shape editorial policy? I would have liked to have heard more about this. Wood engravers had a long association with radical politics, notable the likes of W J Linton who created engravings for the *ILN*. Linton was a Chartist and Republican and his memoirs *Threescore and Ten Years* recall how on many nights he returned to his engravings after attending a political meeting.ⁱⁱ

On a personal level *Picturing Reform* transformed my understanding of how politics might be both represented and understood through the process of depiction. Not only is an oil painting or a lowly wood engraving a simple representation of an event, institution or a personality, it was a mechanism by which those living through fundamental changes were able to imagine and explore the implications and meaning of change. To put it simply this book has made me think quite differently about how Victorians made sense of their world. It has also brought to mind the links between

visual and aural culture of the mid-nineteenth century Britain as it played out on the political platform. The ‘visual mode of thinking’ identified by Carlisle was so engraved on the Victorian psyche that orators and preachers encouraged their hearers to translate language into mental visual imagery, so while the image can be read as a text so too can the verbal be understood as a ‘word painting.’ⁱⁱⁱ All of which goes to show that Victorian visual culture deserves a more central role in our understanding of Victorian political reform and Victorian culture more widely. *Picturing Reform* has taught me to think with my eyes and to interrogate a wood engraving as I would do a text. But, above all, it has made me aware of lines, and to consider quite differently, how, why, and where they are drawn.

1487 words

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Biography

Dr Janette Martin is a Research Fellow at the University of Huddersfield. She received her doctorate from the University of York in 2010. Her research interests include nineteenth century reform movements, political oratory, biography and public history. Janette’s recent publications include: ‘Oratory, itinerant lecturing and Victorian popular politics: a case study of James Acland (1799-1876)’ *Historical Research*, Vol. 86, No. 23, (2013); ‘Reinventing the Tower Beefeater in the nineteenth century’, forthcoming, *History*, Oct. 2013, Vol. 98, No.330. She is working on a book on popular political oratory in the Chartist era.

ⁱ Kathryn Gleadle, *Borderline Citizens: Women, Gender, and Political Culture in Britain, 1815-1867* (Oxford, 2009).

ⁱⁱ W. J. Linton *Threescore and ten years 1820-1890: recollections*, (New York) 1894, p. 77.

ⁱⁱⁱ Martin Hewitt, Beyond scientific spectacle: image and word in nineteenth century popular lecturing, in Joe Kember, John Plunkett, and Jill A. Sullivan, eds. *Popular Exhibitions, Science and Showmanship, 1840-1910*, (London, 2012), p. 88.