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Visual Humour and the Pocket Cartoon: Osbert Lancaster and a Paradigm Shift in the British Press in the Interwar Years

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ABSTRACT

During the interwar years in Britain, titles such as the *Daily Mirror*, *Daily Mail*, and *Daily Express* made significant editorial shifts to place themselves within a social paradigm that began to fully embrace ideas of popular culture that were both aspirational and commercially orientated. Taking their lead from the American popular press, these newspapers sought to develop and present a new relationship with their readers that sold an idea of togetherness by working to create strong brands which would engender reader loyalty. Foremost among these innovations was the *Daily Express's* introduction of pocket cartoons by Osbert Lancaster in January 1939, a culmination of the changing form and content of visual satire over the previous decade. Technology, along with an increasingly scientific understanding of their target audiences, led Britain's key popular newspapers to embrace the visual lexicon of news cartoons and include a different level of dialogue with their readers that added a new dynamic to popularization, including the strip cartoon and the joke cartoon. However, it was with the daily news or topical cartoon, and particularly the pocket cartoon, that mass-market newspapers fully embraced the multimodal approach to create the mix of entertainment and information that came to define popular culture in the press from this point.

KEYWORDS

cartoons, pocket cartoon, popular press, popular culture, *Daily Express*, *Daily Mirror*, Osbert Lancaster, British mass-market newspapers

Introduction

During the interwar years in Britain, titles such as the *Daily Mirror* (1903–), *Daily Mail* (1896–), and *Daily Express* (1900–) made significant editorial shifts to place themselves within a social paradigm that began to fully embrace ideas of popular culture that were both aspirational and commercially orientated. This apparent conflict lies at the heart of the emerging popular press in the interwar years where an embedded tension existed between the desire to voice ‘the aspirations of their society’ and simultaneously being ‘artisans, out to earn an innocuous dollar’.¹ During this period the popular press moved away from a politics-led news agenda to a more reader-focused platform in which the key question for editors was whether the paper could be comprehensible to people in ‘the back streets of Derby’.² Advances in technology, the impact of the first Audit Bureau of Circulations figures in 1931, and the resulting enhanced understanding of their audiences led Britain’s key popular newspapers to embrace the visual lexicon as a conduit to engender an enhanced level of dialogue with their readers that, in turn, created a new drive towards mass-market popularization. While photographs and advertising were important elements in this strategy, it was in the use of cartoons, and especially pocket cartoons, that we can best discern the popularizing tendencies of the interwar press.

The pocket cartoon differed significantly from the long-established news (or editorial) cartoon in a number of key ways. In form, it used a portrait orientation as opposed to the majority of editorial cartoons by the likes of David Low (1891–63) in the *Evening Standard* and Sidney Strube (1891–56) in the *Daily Express* (as well as those in previous centuries by the likes of Gillray [1756–1815] and Cruickshank [1792–1878]) which were landscape. More significantly, the pocket cartoon was much smaller, fitting into a single newspaper column. This allowed for more flexibility in placement. However, the biggest innovation was in content. The pocket cartoon largely dispensed with the use of metaphor and caricature, instead utilizing humour as its key trope, something that helped extend its subject from the Westminster bubble of politicians to events involving ‘normal’ people.

Throughout the interwar years, newspapers utilized a variety of visual humour models, including the strip and the joke cartoon. However, it was with the daily news or topical cartoons that newspapers fully embraced the multimodal approach to create a mass-market mix of entertainment and information, something that was a key weapon in the burgeoning circulation wars of the 1930s in which everything from kitchen utensils to complete bound sets of Dickens was offered to readers. During this period, newspapers, while ‘regularly [selling] in their millions’ were spending increasingly large amounts to maintain their place within the marketplace.³ The *Daily Express*, which became Britain’s largest selling daily during this period, was only making a ‘£150,000 profit on a turnover of £10.2 million in 1936 and 1937 [...] [which] had the effect of exerting strong pressure [...] to universalize their appeal’.⁴ Therefore the popularization of the mass-market press was driven by a commercial imperative that was perhaps most noticeable in the *Daily Mirror*’s shift from a middle-market paper with a diminishing

- 1 Leo Bogart, ‘Editorial Ideals, Editorial Illusions’, in *Newspapers and Democracy*, ed. by Anthony Smith (London: MIT Press 1980), pp. 247–67 (p. 247).
- 2 Arthur Christiansen, *Headlines All My Life* (London: Harper Row, 1961), p. 2.
- 3 Kevin Williams, *Read All About It! A History of the British Newspaper* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), p. 153.
- 4 James Curran, Angus Douglas, and Garry Whannel, ‘The Political Economy of the Human Interest Story’, in *Newspapers and Democracy*, ed. by Anthony Smith, (London: MIT Press, 1980), pp. 288–348 (p. 290).

and ageing readership to what Hugh Cudlipp has called young working men and girls, 'hundreds and thousands of them working over typewriters and ledgers'.⁵ This resulted, it has been argued, from the fact that 'there were more right-wing papers than the market could sustain'.⁶ This imperative to maximize circulation resulted in a broadening of newspapers' visual appeal to the extent that, by 1936, the *Mirror* was privileging cartoons so that 'they were given more space than serious news'.⁷ Broadening readership was absolutely central to the cross-platform appeal of titles such as the *Daily Express* and *Daily Mirror* and can be best seen in the way daily cartoons 'demonstrated the capacity for conveying serious political messages within an entertaining medium'.⁸

The Ancestry of the Daily Cartoon: Sidney Strube, the World's Most Popular Cartoonist

While the pocket cartoon arrived late to the pages of the British popular press, we can trace its antecedents to the early 1930s in the work of Low and, especially, Strube. During the interwar years, visual satire developed steadily as it moved away from the painstakingly detailed drawings of the pre-Great War period, as exemplified in the pages of the weekly magazine *Punch* (1841–2002), to the less formal style that reflected the increasingly accessible pages of the popular press, a transformation that had been completed 'by 1936' when the *Mirror's* front page became dominated by a single story and its 'visual impact [...] was immediately conspicuous'.⁹

Sidney Strube was, in many ways, the immediate forerunner to the pocket cartoonist. Although he drew what were certainly editorial cartoons and made use of the traditional caricaturists' tropes, such as metaphor and caricatures with labels attached to their clothing as signifiers of character, politicians quickly became the subjects, not the focus, of his cartoons, along with the increasingly frequent appearance of his everyman character. Strube's Little Man represented the 'man in the street', whom the *Daily Express* was so intent on targeting, and often appeared in his cartoons as an *observer* of events and the personification of a specific class.¹⁰ Created during Strube's time serving in the First World War, where original sketches portrayed him in uniform, Strube's Little Man was a product of his time. Following the Representation of the People Act of 1918, in which men aged twenty-one and over, as well as some women, gained the right to vote, and the British economy's move to a more service and mass production base, many British workers became consumers as well as producers. An integral part of this process 'was the development of the mass press [...] [and] the most profitable elements of the new mass media were able to conceptualize their audience as the "man in the street"'.¹¹ In essence, Strube's cartoons provided the concept of the man in the street with a visual identity; it encapsulated what the *Express* wanted to achieve by presenting itself as the voice of common sense and the tax-paying middle-class man, who was often a victim of the vested interests of politicians, and acting as a method of 'disseminating [Lord Beaverbrook's (press baron and owner of the *Daily Express*)

5 Anthony Smith, *Paper Voices* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1975), p. 83.

6 Martin Pugh, 'The Daily Mirror and the Revival of Labour 1935–1945', *Twentieth Century British History*, 9.3 (1998), 420–38 (p. 426).

7 Hugh Cudlipp, *Publish and be Damned! The Astonishing Story of the Daily Mirror* (London: Andrew Dakers, 1953), p. 73.

8 Mark Hampton, 'The Political Cartoon as Educational Journalism: David Low's Portrayal of Mass Unemployment in Interwar Britain', *Journalism Studies*, 14.5 (2013), 681–97 (p. 681).

9 Cudlipp, p. 53; Pugh, p. 427.

10 Christiansen, p. 91.

11 Rod Brookes, 'The Little Man and the Slump: Sidney Strube's Cartoons and the Politics of Unemployment, 1929–1931', *Oxford Journal of Arts*, 8.1 (1985), 49–61 (p. 49).

ideas'.¹² Bespectacled, with bowler hat and umbrella, the Little Man was used by Strube to forge a direct connection with the newspaper's readership. Instead of the readers of his cartoons essentially looking in at the actions of politicians, Strube allowed viewers to feel *a part* of the cartoon by allowing them to relate to the Little Man.

The Cartoons' Role in Brand Management and Reader Representation

Strube's cartoons also fulfilled another role: that of 'creating a coherent outlook' for the *Daily Express*, something Colin Seymour-Ure has defined as 'a paradoxical combination of the predictable and the unexpected. They help to order the world beyond the breakfast table [...] [leading to] a kind of reassurance about the paper's personality.'¹³ Strube, like other cartoonists — from Osbert Lancaster to Matt in today's *Daily Telegraph* — can certainly seem to be offering a cosy middle-class view of the world, but it can also be argued that this is only a perfunctory assumption. Deeper study reveals a cartoonist who was by necessity operating within a certain political framework and contributing to the *Express's* overall positive outlook, but was in fact capable of a stronger, more realistic and pragmatic view of the contemporary world. This became more prevalent as the 1930s progressed and shadows of war lengthened. Strube's 15 October 1934 cartoon shows the Little Man talking with John Bull, a character long used as the personification of Great Britain, who tells the Little Man, 'everything in the garden's lovely', essentially an encapsulation of the *Daily Express's* world view. The Little Man counters by saying: 'Yes, I suppose one day you'll be able to afford a bit of barbed wire around the fence.' Pictured in a typical English garden, the somewhat rickety garden fence is struggling to keep out the chaos of terrorism, revolt, fear, and Hitler; far from being a safe and secure place, the garden of England is portrayed as oblivious — or intentionally ignorant — of the threat encroaching upon it from the rest of the world.

Osbert Lancaster and the Birth of the Pocket Cartoon

Osbert Lancaster (1908–86) spent much of the 1930s working as a freelance artist, with a particular interest in architecture. He published a number of popular books, including *Pillar to Post* (1938) and *Homes Sweet Homes* (1939), that built on his experience as a contributor to the *Architectural Review* (1896–) and foregrounded his ability to communicate ideas in an easily understood manner. In late 1938, after seeing cartoons in French newspapers, he suggested to the editor of the *Daily Express* that they use something similar. Named after the pocket battleship, Lancaster's new form of topical cartoon debuted in the *Daily Express* on 3 January 1939. The decision to place his pocket cartoons within the 'Hickey' gossip column is most instructive and informative about how the newspaper initially viewed its latest innovation. Writing as 'Hickey', columnist Tom Driberg covered not just politics, but social issues as well. It might be argued that this demonstrated one of the key differences between Lancaster's fresh creation and the long-established political cartoon, as drawn by the likes of Strube, Low, Illingworth, and Poy. The pocket cartoon would tackle politics, of course, but in doing so it would also move away from spotlighting Westminster to focus on topical stories involving ordinary people, such as the building of air raid shelters and the rationing of food; essentially, it was a personification of the popularization of the press. These stories certainly have a political element, but as Strube and Low had begun to do with their use of the Little

12 Robert Allen, *Voice of Britain: The Inside Story of the Daily Express* (Cambridge: Patrick Stephens Limited, 1983), p. 30.

13 Brookes, p. 54; Colin Seymour-Ure, *Prime Ministers and the Media* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), p. 9.

Man and Colonel Blimp, Lancaster built on their work by approaching stories through the prism of the man in the street, and then through a cast of characters he would create.

Recognizing the shift in tone of this new style of cartoon helps us see how Beaverbrook and Features Editor John Rayner understood the importance of a multimodal approach to content, in which cartoons and the written word are not simply placed in juxtaposition but co-exist as part of a written-visual lexicon whereby the caption is often more important than the drawing. This was in sharp contrast to the majority of editorial cartoons and can function in two main ways. Firstly, there can, of course, be a direct causal link in which the cartoon is drawn about a topic also discussed in the column. This ventures close to the role of illustration and was not something, apparently, that interested Lancaster. Secondly, the subject of the cartoon needn't have any direct connection with the text, but could be linked indirectly through attitude or viewpoint, something which helps contribute to Beaverbrook's wish to have the whole paper present a unified brand. That is, the *Daily Express's* new cartoonist comments on both the external political landscape and the internal thoughts and concerns of a society facing the impending outbreak of war and all its implications. That is, the cartoonist makes a direct connection between the spirit of the Hickey column and the attitude of the characters who inhabit the single column of Lancaster's cartoons, both of which do not underestimate the intelligence of the newspaper's aspirational readership. A case in point is a cartoon showing a German officer breaking a civilian's umbrella across his knee while saying: 'Herr Goebbels has just decided that it is, after all, a symbol of non-Aryan pluto-democracy.'¹⁴

The Serious Business of Humour

There is a common misconception that editorial cartoons are political cartoons and pocket cartoons deal with less weighty subjects, an idea that has dogged critical appraisal of pocket cartoons for many years. Even critics who acknowledge the importance of cartoons focus almost exclusively on the editorial. Seymour-Ure's discussion of the role that political cartoons have played in depicting prime ministers completely ignores the pocket cartoon, presumably because he does not feel they can be classified as political. While conceding that 'we should not assume that cartoons are frivolous because they may be funny', he seems to define such humour as belonging to the well-established landscape of metaphorical tropes, as seen in the depiction of prime ministers as gorillas in order to indicate primitivism.¹⁵ He then goes on to acknowledge that 'cartoons must be at least as dangerous as hostile editorials', but focuses on the likes of Low and Strube, and then Steve Bell of the *Guardian* and Peter Brookes of the *Times*.¹⁶ Indeed, the foremost contemporary pocket cartoonist rates only one mention — and that in connection with the sale of originals — while Lancaster is ignored. Of course, the author is free to structure his appraisal in any way he sees fit, but what is most revealing about this chapter is that it demonstrates an assumption that pocket cartoons — whether present-day or historical — are not worthy of consideration as political, a familiar approach to popular culture in general, such as Matthew Arnold's description of New Journalism as 'feather-brained'.¹⁷

Of course, the critics' reluctance to engage with the pocket cartoon may be due to cartoonists themselves tend to hide their own politics. Readers do not struggle to identify

14 *Daily Express* (14 March 1939), 6.

15 Seymour-Ure, *Prime Ministers*, p. 230.

16 Seymour-Ure, *Prime Ministers*, p. 231.

17 Matthew Arnold, 'Up to Easter', *Nineteenth Century*, no. 123 (May 1887), 629–43 (p. 638).

the political position of cartoonists such as Low or Bell, yet the pocket cartoonist again breaks with tradition. Indeed, this is one of the genre's key strengths: pocket cartoonists often freely criticize all political parties, as seen today in Matthew Pritchett's work as 'Matt' in the *Daily Telegraph* and introduced by Lancaster in his first cartoons. This difference in attitude can be seen in interviews with Lancaster. While reticent about criticizing other cartoonists, he succinctly articulates the difference between editorial and pocket cartoonists: 'It's OK when you're in opposition [...] [but] even Low [...] occasionally had to do an idealistic picture of happy young workers marching into the dawn — like a soap ad', something we also see in the work of Victor Weisz ('Vicky') (1913–66) in the *Daily Mirror* and which Lancaster found somewhat awkward, noting 'When Vicky turned on the sob stuff it became rather embarrassing.'¹⁸

Lancaster, as the first pocket cartoonist, set a trend that has largely endured. This is particularly interesting because it marks a significant departure from the history of newspaper cartoons up to that point and of future editorial cartoons. Lancaster's work certainly does not seem to be drawn from one political viewpoint; indeed, his cartoons contain extremely varied subject matter, and has been discussed, strays far beyond the established remit of politics. Perhaps unsurprisingly, considering Lancaster's interest in architecture and support for the preservation of historic buildings, he introduces the subject of town planning into the newspaper cartoon. Indeed, this cartoon acts as a microcosm of the genre as it demonstrates a new level of classlessness. This is a pivotal, if misunderstood, development of the pocket cartoon. The two figures in the cartoon are town planners, established by the visual metonymic signifiers of both dress and the map on the wall, helping situate them within a class structure. However, the key point here is that their class is irrelevant to the cartoon and the newspaper's readers. This is because we are not being asked to identify with the characters, but with the impact the characters' actions will have on us. That is, unlike the editorial cartoon, which is mostly about the subjects of the cartoons themselves — prime ministers, politicians, and so on — the pocket cartoon has inverted this paradigm of the elite to focus on the impact of their decisions. In other words, the social position of the characters being portrayed serves only to place them within a particular strata of society; what really matters is how they affect *everyone*. The town planners will make decisions that impact everyone regardless of their class. In the case of this cartoon, when one town planner says to the other 'There's only one solution, we must by-pass the by-pass,' we understand implicitly that, although ostensibly commenting on the town planners, the cartoon considers the impact on those travelling on the roads.¹⁹ Of course, we are not saying that this is all the cartoon is about; there is clearly a political element as the town planners will be working with the local council. However, a further level of meaning can be gleaned that hints at why a second by-pass is needed — could it be that the first was ineffectual? Or perhaps it is a comment on the increase in the number of cars on the road. This is not to say that editorial cartoons did not have more than one level of meaning — they often did — but rather that the effect of the pocket cartoon was achieved through significantly different means, and the result was a combination of image and text that together created a much more inclusive multimodal connection with the newspaper's readers, embodying *Daily Mail* and *Daily Mirror* owner Northcliffe's philosophy that newspapers should 'not just inform but also amuse and entertain.'²⁰

18 Richard Boston, *Osbert: Portrait of Osbert Lancaster* (London: Collins, 1989), p. 112.

19 *Daily Express* (19 January 1939), 6.

20 Colin Seymour-Ure, 'Northcliffe's Legacy', in *Northcliffe's Legacy: Aspects of the British Popular Press, 1896–1996*, ed. by Peter Catterall, Colin Seymour-Ure, and Anthony Smith (London: Macmillan, 2000), p. 32.

Osbert Lancaster's First Week

Lancaster's very first cartoon was laden with the symbolism of the occasion. It featured an ageing military man festooned with medals. Whether intentional or not, Lancaster featured a Blimp-style character either as a nod to David Low, the dominant cartoonist of the day, or as a sign that change is in the air. Drawn just after the announcement of the New Year's honours, the caption read: 'No, I asked them to leave me out this year. There comes a time when any additional honour is merely an added burden.'²¹ The following day's cartoon featured what appears to be a self-caricature, presenting at such an early stage the class of character who would so often populate his work.

However, it was just four days into the *Daily Express's* use of the new pocket cartoon that we see an example of the format's powerful impact. On Friday, 6 January 1939 the newspaper published both a pocket cartoon and its regular editorial cartoon by Strube. If we take the opportunity to examine them side by side, it becomes highly instructive to consider the differences between the established cartoon form and the innovation of the pocket cartoon. During the 1930s, the *Daily Express* had advocated appeasement towards Germany, while also printing a number of headlines that could be viewed as anti-Semitic, including the March 1933 headline: 'Judea declares war on Germany: Jews of all the world unite in action.' Of course, it is important to note that, unlike the friendship of Lord Rothermere, co-founder of the *Daily Mail* and owner of the *Daily Mirror*, with Hitler, Beaverbrook's motivation could not be seen as based on a sympathy with Hitler, but rather as being rooted in his desire for isolationism, something that fuelled his imperial obsessions and his Empire Crusade. This in turn can be linked to the *Express's* desire to be 'relentlessly cheerful and optimistic [...] at a time when economic and political storm clouds were gathering over Europe'.²²

As the decade drew to a close, this transmuted to something tantamount to self-denial. On 2 January 1939, the day before Lancaster's first cartoon, the paper's leader page featured an editorial headlined 'This is why you can sleep soundly in 1939' and followed by the unequivocal statement 'There will be no Great War in Europe in 1939'.²³ This had been the newspaper's line for most of the decade, and, as has already been noted, unlike Low in the *Evening Standard*, Beaverbrook did not encourage divergence from this editorial line in the *Express*. Four days later, the editorial cartoon used Roosevelt's radio speech as its topic. Strube drew an arm emerging from a giant radio and a fist banging on a table, around which sat nine men. The cartoon employed the long-established editorial cartoon trope of labelling the people with names like Hate, Aggression, and Lawlessness. The arm was labelled Roosevelt's Speech. It was certainly not a poor cartoon, nor was it atypical for its time. However, the image of the thumping fist was perhaps unintentionally revealing as it could be seen to encapsulate the didactic nature of the editorial cartoon as a genre.

When we compare it with the pocket cartoon from the same day, the difference in style is, of course, clear, but the marked difference in content is the most revealing. Lancaster's cartoon is simply drawn: a church metonymically signified by just an outline; but it is the content that yields the greatest impact. Two men dressed in black stand over a hole in the ground, and the caption reads, 'No perhaps they won't be much use now as air raid shelters in the next war, but they'll come in very handy as cemeteries in the next peace.'²⁴ (Fig. 1) It is an extraordinary cartoon in the sense that it completely

21 *Daily Express* (3 January 1939), 4.

22 Williams, p. 154.

23 *Daily Express* (2 January 1939), 10.

24 *Daily Express* (6 January 1939), 6.



Fig. 1 Cartoon by Osbert Lancaster, *Daily Express* (6 January 1939), 6.

goes against the paper's editorial line by implying that, in whichever way the coming conflict is semantically identified, it is coming all the same. Just four days into his role as pocket cartoonist, Osbert Lancaster can be seen to be both creating and defining the parameters of what the new form can accomplish. The importance of this should not be understated, as Lancaster was working in an environment in which striking a note contrary to the proprietor's position and countering what the cartoonist called 'the unhealthy optimism which still remained the corner-stone of editorial policy' were extremely difficult.²⁵ The cartoonist negotiated this situation, in which the *Daily Express* 'stoutly maintained day after day that there would be no war in Europe' and any 'unkind and possibly aggravating jokes about the Fuhrer and his minions, was rigorously taboo', by approaching the topic, as in the above example, in a way that did not explicitly counter the editorial line while subtly undermining it.²⁶ This was to become a recurring theme in Lancaster's early cartoons that continued to anticipate war, such as when a town planner says 'if it comes to war these houses may be bombed before we've had time to knock them down and build flats' and with the depiction of a tank adorned with the slogan 'Stop Me and Buy One', about which the tank driver says, 'Don't blame me! It's all a clever idea of the camouflage department.'²⁷

25 Osbert Lancaster, *With an Eye to the Future* (London: John Murray, 1967), p. 152.

26 Lancaster, p. 152.

27 *Daily Express* (14 January 1939), 6; *Daily Express* (19 May 1939), 6.

While some critics noted the increase of humour as part of a wider ‘depoliticization of the popular press’, this misreads the situation.²⁸ It is certainly true that the overall political content of the mass-market press declined to be replaced with human interest stories, competitions, photographs, and humour; a more accurate reading, however, would be to say that politics moved from a textual to a multimodal platform, as exemplified by Lancaster’s use of humour to engage with social and political themes. As Lancaster would continuously demonstrate in 1939 and in subsequent decades, it was not a case of *depoliticization* but rather *repoliticization*.

Placement of the Pocket Cartoon

Placing the pocket cartoon within the small confines of a single column illustration is a visual form that, when combined with its text, acts as a multimodal exploration of ideas and narrative. The fact that it was initially located within Hickey’s society column can be seen as a way to increase the column’s impact, especially as a typical day’s topic began with Roosevelt’s plan to tour Europe in 1940, an idea that clearly did not anticipate war, although Hickey did end by wondering whether Germany would let the American president have a visa. Hickey’s other topics during Lancaster’s first week in the role included white-tie events in London and an art exhibition in Scotland. While these subjects may seem facile in comparison with the possibility of war, the significant point reinforced by the Lancaster’s early pocket cartoons is that the *discussion* of war is important, especially a discussion not presented through the eyes of political elites, but instead through the eyes of two ordinary people, as presented through careful consideration of their appearance and speech.

It is also instructive to look at the placement of pocket cartoons throughout their first months in the newspaper. Although there is no direct evidence, it seems unlikely that the first cartoons were arbitrarily placed within Hickey’s gossip column. The column’s author has been credited with inventing the modern gossip column, which was named after the eighteenth-century ‘diarist and rake’ William Hickey, although it has been suggested that the *Express*’s frequent use of pseudonyms such as Hickey, Beachcomber, and Cross-Bencher was in fact a ploy by Beaverbrook to ensure that, should a successful columnist leave the newspaper ‘he cannot take elsewhere the readership’.²⁹ The William Hickey column soon moved away ‘from society gossip towards political and social issues’.³⁰ This made it the ideal host within the pages of the *Express* for the new pocket cartoon. The fact that Driberg was a ‘committed Marxist and devout Anglo-Catholic, Beaverbrook columnist and Labour MP [...] equally at ease in high life and low, a champion of the proletariat with the manners of a patrician’ seems apposite when we consider how Lancaster’s work was both full of contradiction and yet greatly popularity in such an aspirational newspaper.³¹ These contradictions were mirrored in Driberg, who was shifting from being a mouthpiece for Beaverbrook by namechecking his society friends, to the author of a consistently varied column. In an example from 6 January 1939, the Hickey column included a discussion of the pros and cons of either writing the percent sign or spelling it out, then finished, just as Lancaster’s cartoons had already begun to do, with a distinct sting in the tail, describing how an airline was still publicizing its services with the photograph of a plane that had crashed the previous

28 Seymour-Ure, ‘Northcliffe’s Legacy’, p. 18.

29 Tom Driberg, *Beaverbrook: A Study in Power and Frustration* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1956), p. 219.

30 Francis Wheen, *The Soul of Indiscretion: Tom Driberg, Poet, Legislator and Outlaw — His Life and Indiscretions* (London: Fourth Estate, 1990), p. 83.

31 Boston, p. 112.

November, losing five lives. Lancaster was beginning to achieve the same effect in his cartoons, such as one in which two establishment figures are watching a particularly violent boxing match with the caption: 'Goodness gracious! In ten minutes' time I'm due to address a pacifist meeting at the Albert Hall.'³²

Representations of Class

Not all cartoons were structured this way, of course. Lancaster's lack of an overt political stance allows him to mock all levels of class, including his own, which can be seen as one of the reasons for the cartoons great success. The *Daily Express's* target audience was the aspirational lower-middle class and those at the higher end of the working class and, therefore, any humour directed at their so-called social betters would have likely been well received. A cartoon showing a well-to-do woman saying to a government official, 'Of course, I should love to put up hundreds of children, but, you see, I have my dogs to think of' functions, once again, on a number of levels.³³ (Fig. 2) It obviously satirizes the kind of person who puts her dogs before people, but, more importantly, it serves as commentary on the possible mass evacuation of children from urban areas, something that contradicts the paper's 'no war this year' stance. The woman here represents the Establishment and, while the point of the cartoon seems to be her relationship with her pets, it can be argued that her utterance is based on an assumption that there will be no war and, therefore, no need to give serious consideration to the evacuation of children. That is, the pocket cartoon is both satirizing a social type and making a much more far-reaching point. This is particularly significant, as the development of a narrative across a number of cartoons is something that had been achieved in editorial cartoons by repeated representations of political elites, such as the frequent representation of a prime minister. In the pocket cartoon, critical themes were sometimes foregrounded, such as with the already mentioned air raid shelters portrayed as graves, but they were often subtly portrayed in the background, as with the dog lover's refusal to engage the question of why children would need to be evacuated to her home.

The Outbreak of War: Weaponizing the Pocket Cartoon

The outbreak of war in September 1939 almost certainly both directly and indirectly influenced the quick growth and popularity of Lancaster's work. Author Anthony Powell commended Lancaster's impact on home front morale, writing that he 'kept people going by his own high spirits and wit'.³⁴ This perspective, in fact, was one of the key innovations Lancaster introduced to visual satire in newspapers. As the first weeks of the war progressed, editorial cartoonists continued to employ metaphor-based tropes, such as the Nazi fist crashing down, whereas the pocket cartoon employed what most probably became one of its defining tropes: the ability to laugh at and make fun of very serious subjects. Even during the first years of the war, Lancaster made great use of concerns about German parachutists in disguise dropping into England, as in the cartoon published the week before the first Christmas of the war, in which Lancaster drew two German paratroopers dressed as Father Christmas. One says to the other, 'I suppose, Heinrich, that the credulous English *do* still believe in Santa Clause.'³⁵ Of course, other cartoonists had laughed at Germans. Low had been particularly good at

32 *Daily Express* (27 February 1939), 6.

33 *Daily Express* (30 January 1939), 6.

34 James Knox, *Cartoons & Coronets: The Genius of Osbert Lancaster* (London: Frances Lincoln, 2008), p. 203.

35 *Daily Express* (19 December 1939), 4.



Fig. 2 Cartoon by Osbert Lancaster, *Daily Express* (30 January 1939), 6.

this in the run up to the war, an example of which being his cartoon showing Stalin as a ventriloquist's dummy on Hitler's lap, but there was a subtle yet important change that characterized Lancaster's work over the next forty years. His cartoons laughed at their subjects, as did editorial cartoons, but in addition to this they broke new ground by subtly — that is, by implication — allowing readers to laugh at themselves. There was a genuine fear at this time of fifth columnists infiltrating British society; but what Lancaster did was invert this fear via the visual construct of taking disguise to an extreme degree. He also tapped into this fear, and used a type of humour rooted in vaudevillian tropes of cross-dressing. This adds a sense of the ridiculous to the image, demonstrating how pocket cartoons engage via a multimodal platform. Even though the caption is often more important than the image, the drawing in this instance adds to the humorous element, diminishing the idea of paratroopers as objects of fear, while allowing readers to laugh at their paranoia.

Lancaster's Influence and the Future of the Pocket Cartoon

Following the Second World War, Lancaster's pocket cartoons transferred to the front page of the *Daily Express*, a position they retained until his retirement in 1981, over forty years and in excess of 10,000 cartoons after their initial appearance. During this time, his work influenced new generations of cartoonists to the extent that the pocket cartoon became a mainstay for a wide range of newspapers and magazines, from the *Daily Mirror* to the broadsheet *Sunday Times*. Some cartoonists transferred, at least

partly, to the new medium, such as Michael Cummings, while others made the format their specialty. Timothy Birdsall drew pocket cartoons for the *Sunday Times* in the early 1960s and took the multimodal form of the genre a step further by drawing cartoons live during the satire boom for the television programme *That Was the Week That Was*. By the 1980s, the *Times*'s Mel Calman had taken the simplicity of drawing to a new level with his front-page news cartoons, which combined simplistic, almost child-like, drawings with cutting political comment. Mark Boxer, drawing as 'Marc', can be considered Lancaster's spiritual successor with his *Times* and then *Guardian* cartoons satirizing everything from business to yuppies. Today, the pocket cartoon still features in a number of daily newspapers, most notably by Banx in the *Financial Times* and Matt in the *Daily Telegraph*, illustrating both literally and metaphorically the primacy of an inherently populist format in elite newspapers.

In addition to his daily pocket cartoons, Lancaster developed his style in a variety of areas, ranging from book illustration to sets for West End theatre. Yearly collections of his pocket cartoons were published between 1940 and 1982 and continue to be very popular. In 2008, a major exhibition in London celebrated his work.

Conclusion

As the interwar years drew to a close, Osbert Lancaster's new style of topical news cartoon demonstrated the ways in which visual satire could act as a key component within the popularization of the press. Quickly becoming the ultimate expression of this paradigmatic shift to a new entertainment-centric model of the popular newspaper rooted in humour, this method reflected how 'the most significant advance [in the popular press] occurred in the visual dimension of newspaper layout'.³⁶

Born of the circulation wars and the imperative to maximize circulation and, by extension, profits, a broadening readership led the popular press to not only appeal to the masses, but mirror the aspiration of its readers. This class fluidity had a long gestation, and its roots can be traced back to the advent of printing. But in the interwar years, it achieved currency through a paradigm shift within the very specific market economy of the 1930s that came to define the future of popular media in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Central to transition was Osbert Lancaster's introduction of the pocket cartoon, a new form of topical humour intrinsic to the way newspapers such as the *Daily Express* sought to develop and present a new relationship with readers that sold the idea of togetherness by aspiring to create strong brands and engender reader loyalty. The pocket cartoon, with its combination of humour and lack of metaphoric tropes, became the ultimate expression of the 'popular' in the British mass-market press.

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36 Williams, p. 156.

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