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“Vox Populi, a Bully that Must be Put Down?”

Matt Morgan’s radical critique of the Reform League for *The Tomahawk* (1867)”

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The Tomahawk, or Saturday Journal of Satire (1867-70) was launched in May 1867. Its founder, Arthur William à Beckett was the younger son of Gilbert Abbott à Beckett who also contributed to *Punch*. The new magazine was co-edited with Matthew ‘Matt’ Somerville Morgan (1836-90), a theatrical scene designer who also cartooned for *Fun*. At the time, Matt Morgan was already an experienced artist. Besides his work for *Fun*, he also supplied *The Illustrated London News* and its chief rival, *The Illustrated Times*.¹ As middle-class young men who shared interests in art, theatre and music, both Morgan and à Beckett were conservatives. Broadly traditional and monarchist, they “were disturbed by the working-class Reform League [and] saw the admission of working men to the political process as a threat to the order and stability of Victorian England.”² This bourgeois perspective was shared by most contemporary pictorial publications, and in the pages of *Punch*, the then market leader, much concern was expressed on the subject. But while Tenniel’s “big-cuts” for *Punch* were moderate in their intent, Morgan’s fold-out drawings for *The Tomahawk* provided a dramatic vision which came with its own ‘radical’ strength. For Thomas Kemnitz, this ideological blurring was intentional. “Morgan's cartoons,” Kemnitz explains, “were distinguished by the choice of points of criticism that could be stated in ways that were ambiguous enough that on first glance the cartoons might appear to be offering a critique. This ambiguity - was the opinion conservative or radical? - was a deliberate device to arrest attention and to make the cartoons distinctive”.³

Building upon Kemnitz’s analysis, this paper purports to examine the nature of this distinctiveness. At a time when the taste for idealised drawings provided black-and-white art with increased seriousness, Morgan’s distorted, colourful and sometimes openly burlesque approach to his subjects gave his pictures a specific status within the dominant discourse on the nature and evolution of the British political nation. Through the analysis of ‘VOX POPULI!, a Bully that *Must* be put down’, I contend that Morgan’s blurring of the magazine’s conservative rhetoric mainly relied on references to the aesthetic conventions of the eighteenth century. Borrowing from such famous names as Gillray

¹ Christopher Kent, ‘War Cartooned / Cartoon War: Matt Morgan and the American Civil War in "Fun" and "Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper"’ *VPR* 36:2, 2003, pp. 153-81, 155.

² Thomas Milton Kemnitz, ‘Matt Morgan of “Tomahawk” and English Cartooning, 1867-1870,’ *Victorian Studies* 19:1, 1975, pp 5-34, 15.

³ Kemnitz, 25.

allowed the artist to “create a sensation with his popular art”.⁴ It also testified to the persistence of a pictorial tradition which, far from being obliterated by the development of the Victorian illustrated press, survived and even thrived through it.

The first issue of the *Tomahawk* coincided exactly with the debates around the Second Reform Act. In a context marked by the failure of the Liberal Reform Bill (1866), popular protests had resumed in Britain on a scale unmatched since Chartism. The central question, at the time, concerned the nature and the scope of the political nation. And while most Conservatives (and some Liberals) defended the tradition of gradual reform which was thought to have protected Britain from the revolutionary upheavals of the Continent, progressive politicians such as John Stuart Mill, sensitive to the arguments of radical parliamentary figures like John Bright (MP for Birmingham), favoured a more extensive enfranchisement.⁵ Formally constituted in February 1865 under the leadership of Edmond Beales, the Reform League meant to tackle this question, pledging to ascertain “whether the working men are really desirous of obtaining the franchise, and, if so, whether the existing organisation of the working classes could be made available for furthering a measure of reform which would accomplish that object.”⁶ As Beales regularly addressed and led large crowds of demonstrators across the capital, he became a familiar target of Morgan’s.⁷

“*VOX POPULI* (?), or a Bully that *Must* be Put Down” was published in *Tomahawk* on 7 December 1867. A colourised double-page wood-engraving, it represents Edmond Beales as a colossus surrounded by a disorderly multitude.⁸ In this parody of the Reform League’s membership cards, on which an allegorical figure of Justice was represented under the words “Taxation without representation is tyranny”, the usual attributes are subverted, and while *Justicia*’s blindfold has been lifted, signifying inequity, her scales favour the murderous snake over the patriotic dove, and her sword of power is used as a threatening weapon. In the giant’s pocket, which also contains a shooting gun, a puppet-figure is speaking, pointing to the unbalanced scales. In the background, the equestrian statue of George IV indicates that the scene takes place in Trafalgar Square, where several prominent members of the League, including John Bright, had addressed vast crowds of listeners the year before. Here, Matt Morgan condemns the continuing action of the Reform League, insisting on the dangerous aspect of what is seen as a manipulated mob. In August of the same year, Disraeli’s

⁴ Kemnitz, 9-10.

⁵ Angus Hawkins, *Victorian Political Culture*. Oxford: OUP, 2015, 251.

⁶ *The Times*, 21 February 1865.

⁷ Matt Morgan, “But for Walpole !” *The Tomahawk* 1, 11 May 1867, p. 7, and “The Revolutionary Anthropoglossos; or, Place, not Party!”, *The Tomahawk* 7, 22 June 1867, pp. 79-80.

⁸ Matt Morgan, “*VOX POPULI* (?), or a Bull that *Must* be Put Down”, *The Tomahawk* 31, 7 Dec. 1867, pp. 318-9.

franchise bill had received Royal Assent, finally entering the Statute Book as the 1867 Reform Act. However, the period of intense political activity that had followed the accession of Derby's government was far from over.⁹



Matt Morgan, "VOX POPULI (?), or a Bull that Must be Put Down", *The Tomahawk* 31, 7 Dec. 1867, pp. 318-9.

At the "Bully's" feet, on the pedestal, the word 'Dei' ('Vox Populi, Vox Dei') has been erased, signifying the unholy, outrageous and above all illegitimate nature of the scene. Around him, a dense

⁹ "In particular, with an imminent parliamentary election in mind, [the passing of the Act] resulted in a renewed radical concern to maximise their potential working-class vote by registering as many working-class electors as possible." Gustav Mayer, *The Era of the Reform League: English Labour and Radical Politics 1857-1872. Documents Selected by Gustav Mayer*. Breuilly, John, Gottfried Niedhart and Anthony Taylor eds. Mannheim : Palatium Verlag im J & J Verlag, 1995, 205-6.

and indistinct crowd is represented, evocative of a proletarian wave about to submerge the British nation. Filtered through a range of artistic conventions like caricature and the grotesque, the *Tomahawk's* working-class rising tide evokes “the well established traditions of repulsion and contempt through which eighteenth-century caricature described the labouring poor.”¹⁰



James Gillray, *The Giant Factotum Amusing Himself* (1797)

But perhaps more strikingly, Morgan's Beales also recalls James Gillray's *Giant Factotum Amusing Himself* (1797), where the then Prime Minister, William Pitt the Younger, was represented bestriding the Speaker's chair in the House of Commons, playing cup and ball with the world, his

¹⁰ Brian Maidment, *Comedy, Caricature and the Social Order 1820-50*. Manchester : MUP, 2013, 20.

pockets stuffed with the money - gold coins and bills – taken from the English people, down below him. Placed in a very central position, both characters, one hand raised, hold twisted symbolical attributes – a cup-and-ball globe; tampered scales - powerfully towering above a crowd of diminutive onlookers. Rejecting the concept of a “death of caricature” in the 1830s, Brian Maidment has demonstrated the ways in which, “through an innovative and transformative engagement with the periodical press, the political caricature and other forms of humorous graphic social commentary maintained a significant presence” in the early Victorian pictorial press.¹¹ Harnessing this pictorial idiom years later certainly allowed Matt Morgan to produce outstanding pictures for *The Tomahawk*. The technical sophistication of the cartoon, in particular its use of colour, attention to light and shadow and large dimension, provides it with a bold and vigorous style which reinforces its effectiveness. Moreover, Morgan’s choice of a colour reproduction instead of an ordinary black-and-white lithography at a time when such a choice was both technically difficult and extremely expensive, may be interpreted as part of this continuity with a more oppositional aesthetic tradition, thus tampering the picture’s conservative message.¹²

On 30 July 1870, *The Tomahawk* came to a “mysterious and abrupt end.”¹³ At a time when citizenship came to be defined in terms of social and cultural identities, à Beckett and Morgan’s magazine had taken part, during its short existence, in the construction – or reconstruction – of the British political nation, verbally and visually reviewing the body politic. Freighted with social and political complexities and strongly influenced by the artist’s theatrical background and aesthetic formation, Morgan’s representations of the Reform League had consistently retained and conveyed something of the attraction, cultural energy and oppositional strength of the single-plate etchings which artists like Gillray, Rowlandson or the Cruikshanks produced at the turn of the century.

After the major disappointment caused by the 1868 election, in which no working-men candidates or Leaguers at all were elected, the Reform League was formally dissolved in March 1869.¹⁴ In 1874, four years after *The Tomahawk*’s demise, William Arthur à Beckett joined the high-profile *Punch*, which his own father had contributed to at the time of its launch, in 1841, while one of

¹¹ Brian Maidment, “Graphic Satire, Caricature, Comic Illustration and the Radical Press, 1820-1845” in Shattock, Joanne Ed., *Journalism and the Periodical Press in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, 2017, 84-104, 84.

¹² Laurel Brake and Marysa Demoor (Eds.). *Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century Journalism. In Great-Britain and Ireland*. Gent and London: Academia Press and The British Library, 2009, 305.

¹³ Christopher Kent, ‘The Angry Young Gentlemen of *Tomahawk*,’ in *Victorian Journalism: Exotic and Domestic Essays in Honour of P.D. Edwards* ed. By Barbara Garlick and Margaret Harris (Queensland University Press), 1998, pp 75-94, 76.

¹⁴ Mayer, *The Era of the Reform League*, 257.

his brothers, Gilbert, also carved his initials in the famous mahogany table a few years later.¹⁵ Matt Morgan emigrated to New York where he assumed the management of the *Opera Comique*, shedding quite literal light on other dramatic figures, like “Buffalo” Bill Cody (*Wild West Shows*). When he died there, in 1890, he was mourned by several British newspapers as the author of the sophisticated and unique cartoons for which *The Tomahawk* was known.

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¹⁵ Arthur William À Beckett, *The à Becketts of “Punch”. Memories of Father and Sons*. London: Archibald Constable and Co. Ltd, 1903, 23.

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