

Historical use of a caricature **The destiny of the perfidious Albion.**

Among the different kind of images, cartoons are considered as the last lasting because they are supposed to be spontaneous. They refer to an event that happened a long time ago and is not anymore meaningful. In a way, they belong to the past. They rarely escape from this fatal destiny unless they fulfill some conditions:

_First, they have a *global* meaning. They refer not only to a particular event or time but to a general character, an attitude, an habit a deep-rooted prejudice.

_Second, they must be *provocative* enough. There are plenty of poor pictures, simple drawings, short dialogues. It is less common that a caricature is efficient enough to communicate immediately a feeling, an idea, and provoke a reaction. This supposes to breach with a simple racial representation. The caricature must also look good and have fine *artistic qualities*. The mere expression of hatred tells us more about the author than about the target.

_And finally they don't have only one meaning but *many*. They can be interpreted in different ways depending on the time.

The short story of a commercial success

The beginning of the XXth century can be seen as a golden age of caricatures in popular newspapers. The *Assiette au beurre* was one of them, that can be compared to *Simplicissimus* in Germany, as it deals with everyday life topics and the caricatures are sharp. The quite long Boer War opposing the United Kingdom with the Transvaal Republic in South Africa between 1899 and 1902 gave a major opportunity to cartoonists to depict the British mistakes. The issue n°26, released on 28th September 1901, and concerning the “concentration camp” was printed twelve times and reached 258450 copies (See below Fig.1)¹. On the cover, a veiled woman – the death – calls for silence. The cartoonist, Jean Veber, wants to break it and to unveil the massacres. This is not a comic issue, but a strong denunciation.

¹ According to an advertisement in *Le Figaro*, 5th October 1901. cf. F. Dixmier, *L'Assiette au beurre*, Paris, Maspero, 1974, 379p.

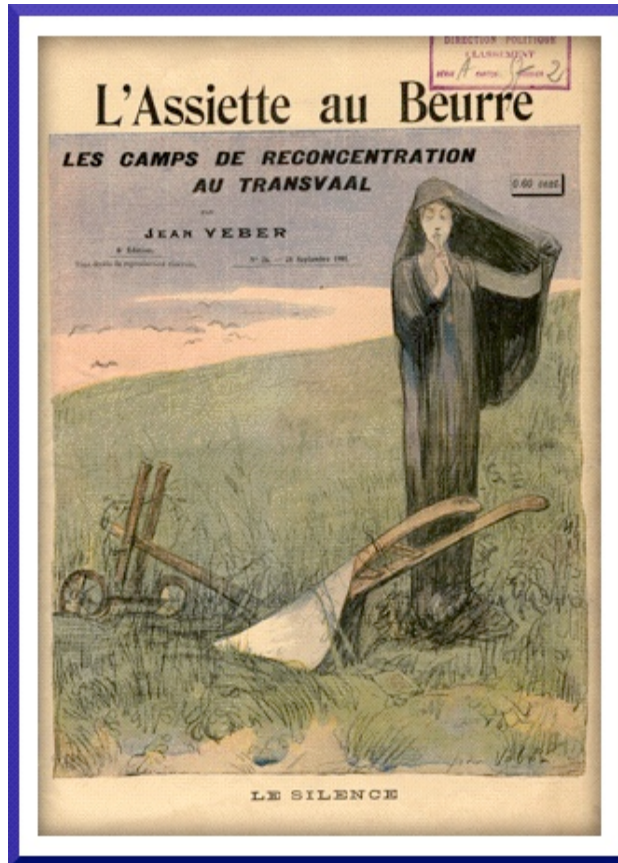


Fig.1. “The Silence”, Cover of the *Assiette au beurre* n°26, 28th September 1901.

In this issue, the last cartoon, named “Perfidious Albion” is not the most violent, but the most provocative (See below Fig.2). This cartoon has drawn the attention of many readers, politicians and historians. It has already been spotted by many different studies, all insisting on the anti-british feeling – Anglophobia – fed by this type of representation. Few studies insisted on the various interpretations and the different historical uses of it². Lets describe it rapidly: Albion is depicted as an quite old woman bearing Albion’s helmet bowing and laughing, seen from behind. Her skirts are lifted, displaying her backside, on which the reader can identify the features of King Edward VII. According to the French ambassador Paul Cambon, it is shocking, but very well made. The caricature is still regarded as provocative enough to be lately forbidden at an exhibition organized in London by the French Embassy.

² See J. Guiffan, *Histoire de l'anglophobie en France : de Jeanne d'Arc à la Vache folle*, Rennes, Terre de Brume, 2004, 277p. ; I. et R. Tombs, *That Sweet Enemy, The French and the British from the Sun King to the present*, Londres, Heinemann, 2006, 780p. ; R. Bachollet, « Satire, Censure et Propagande, ou le destin de l'Impudique Albion », *Le Collectionneur français*, n°174, December 1980, p. 14-15.



Fig. 2. *L'Assiette au Beurre*, 28 septembre 1901

The cartoonist also uses the picture as a means to criticize the UK. It stirs up passions in a context when the UK is criticized around the world. The title is important as it refers to the longterm habit of British diplomacy as “perfidious Albion”. In a way, it continues the story of anglo-french rivalry by responding to negative British cartoons. This time however, it adds something more by attacking the morality of Victorian society, underlining the opposition between the moral values and the atrocities of the Boer War.

The issue was very popular. The picture itself was reprinted in some other issues. At the time of the Entente cordiale, in 1903, in a special issue, the minister of Foreign Affairs is forced to lead the King to visit the Parisian exhibitions. Among the pictures, the caricature is represented as a picture in a gallery like an historical artwork. Still in January 1922, long after the *Assiette au Beurre* had disappeared, a special issue reprints the cartoon³. What is striking is that the cartoon does not belong anymore to the cartoonist or the editor. The first aim of the editor is to raise sales by provoking the audience and to maintain high sales. The booksellers understand very fast the efficiency of this caricature. Long after the Entente cordiale, the kiosks used it as a commercial tool. The government sought to ban caricatures that could damage bilateral relations⁴. In theory, the Republic had to respect the liberty of the press could not impose censorship. The newspaper was discharged on the 12th October 1901. But the police was ordered to urge the bookshops to put the issue far from passersby's

³ *L'Assiette au beurre*, 20 janvier 1922, p.4.

⁴ R.J. Goldstein, “Political caricatures and international complications”, *Michigan Academician*, volume XXX, March, 1998, pp. 107-122.

sight. To avoid this control, the cartoonist made new versions with a blue polka dot petticoat covering the face of the King. But this can have a counterproductive effect by raising public attention⁵. It is a kind of advertisement⁶. De facto, the cartoon was used many times by the Parisian kiosks on the grands boulevards: in 1903, June and August 1904, in January 1905, in January 1905, in January 1909⁷. In the Netherlands, the issue is authorized as it has been translated and the caricature by Jean Veber has been suppressed⁸.

Diplomatic crisis between the European powers.

Other historical uses non initially expected by the cartoonist emerged. The political use by the British politicians. The English government protested against a number of caricatures published in France during the 1898-1903. As soon as the caricature was released, the British government complained bitterly about it. The British ambassador even refuses to keep the issues that would damage the British archives according to him. The King Edward VII denounces the cartoon as “obscene”⁹. These talks seem to have been efficient. The French police reports every time the caricature is displayed on a kiosk and act to make it disappear. But this was not enough. The president du Conseil Poincaré himself had to act himself against the reprinting¹⁰.

The French authorities were very careful not to hurt the British diplomacy as they were eager to build a new Entente Cordiale. After 1904, they intensify the fight against the reprinting of the cartoon, but they also encourage a new historical use. Some postcards show that the same type of drawing was used against Germany. Albion was replaced by Germania, and Edward VII by William II (See below Fig.3). We found three different kinds of these postcards imitating the initial pattern by Jean Veber, this time against Germany. They are not as well made as the original, but are good marks of the evolution of mentalities just before World War I.

5 Marieta et alii Harley, *The Anglo-Boer War and the French caricature : Alfred le Petit, 1841-1909*, Johannesburg, Rand Afrikaans University, 1999, 133 pages, p.12-14.

6 As noticed by the British ambassador in Paris, Edmund Monson, Disp. 4th October 1901, Public Record Office Foreign Office 27/3537.

7 Various police reports and postcards, Police archives, Paris, Box BA 2300.

8 Dispatch of the French consul in Amsterdam, French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Nouvelle Série, 13.

9 Talk with the French ambassador, Dispatch of Paul Cambon to Théophile Delcassé, 30th October 1901.

10 Letter of Poincaré to the préfet de police, 29 janvier 1922, F.M.F.A. Z Europe G.B. 48.

Original drawing by Jean Veber

Fig.3. One of three antigerman postcards¹¹



This postcard reflects the evolution of the political alliances. The building of the Entente Cordiale in 1904 changed the representation of foreign politics in France. Even if the original caricature was still displayed on the boulevards, the main enemy became Germany.

War propaganda during World War I and World War II.

But also, it was also used for international propaganda during the two world wars. During the first world war, the cartoon is used by the Germans to breach the unity between the Allies. Schwarz, editor of the *Assiette au Beurre*, apparently sold the number to the Germans. Examples are published in Holland and Belgium in 1915 and 1916. A special issue called *La Satire* aims at a global review of international caricatures¹². In fact, it is the mere reprinting of the issue of the AB on the concentration camp, but the cartoon of Jean Veber has disappeared. Soldiers on the

¹¹ One of three antigerman postcards, private collection de Perthuis, France.

¹² *La Satire. Revue rétrospective de la caricature mondiale*, Bruxelles, septembre 1915.

front are also the target of a campaign of prints dropped by planes on the trenches in May 1916.

This was against the case during World War II. The German propaganda rapidly used the old caricatures against England. It insisted on the crimes during the Boer War in a movie called *Ohm Krüger*. A document made with the movie reprints the “Impudique Albion” among other anti-British caricatures¹³. At the time of the Vichy government, the issue was also reprinted.

Conclusion

The final historical use of this image is precisely the fact that it serves nowadays to evoke the past tensions between England and France with a sharp sense of humor. At the end of the day, we can at least distinguish four different uses: a commercial use, a pressure on diplomacy, a tool of war propaganda, an instrument of reconciliation, as shown by the Box below.

Box.1. Historical uses of the *Perfidious Albion*.

| User | France | | England | Germany | France & Britain |
|---------|--|--|--|--|--|
| Target | | | | | |
| | French editors | French government | | | |
| England | Edward VII (Belle Époque, interwar period) | Police and censorship (IIIrd Republic) | Complains and Political pressure on French diplomacy (Belle Epoque, interwar period) | WWI, WWII | Funny exhibitions, reconciliation (after 1945) |
| | | Reprinting (Vichy government) | | | |
| Germany | William Ist (after 1904-WWI) | | | Complains against <i>Le Rire</i> (1898) also by Jean Veber | |

¹³ Zur festlichen Aufführung des Emil Jannings Films der Tobs Ohm Krüger, 1941.

F. Serodes, 2009.