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David E. E. Sloane, ed. American Humor Magazines and Comic Periodicals.

Sanford E. Marovitz
Kent State University

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David E. E. Sloane, ed. *American Humor Magazines and Comic Periodicals*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1988. 648 pp. \$75.00

In an address of 1848, "The Political Destination of America and the Signs of the Times," Theodore Parker professed that "our permanent literature" is generally unAmerican: "superficial, tame, and weak." In contrast, "The real national literature is found almost wholly in speeches, pamphlets, and newspapers," he said. "The latter are pretty thoroughly American; . . . that vulgarity, that rant, that bragging violence, that recklessness of truth and justice, that disrespect of right and duty are a part of the nation's every-day life." Parker might have added humor magazines to his media list, for with his description he has characterized the substance of those published not only during his own day but through the course of U.S. history as well. David E. E. Sloane lists about a thousand American comic periodicals in his new compendium, which will become an invaluable resource for the study of American culture—and not *popular* American culture alone.

American Humor Magazines and Comic Periodicals opens with a brief Foreword in which Stanley Trachtenberg, the Advisory Editor, points to humor magazines as reflectors of American thought, politics, and social issues, "serving at once as both a critical and cohesive agent." An equally concise Preface explaining the format precedes Sloane's informative historical Introduction. Thoroughly peppered with titles that will be unfamiliar to all but the well initiated, it presents publishing trends among the comic serials that connote their significance as indices of their age. Whether satirical, regional, sexual, or oriented toward other approaches common to the genre, Sloane appears to echo Parker in concluding that these magazines "contain much of the American spirit of independence from restraint in personal and political life" and offer "a valuable focus for the history of dissent and commentary in the democracy."

His volume is organized into four numbered parts. The first presents more than a hundred of the most important magazines with a descriptive historical entry of one to several pages for each. Generally the entries are informative to the extent that data proved available, though occasionally fuller development would be useful. The brief entry by Lorne Fienberg on *Yankee Doodle*, for example, a New York weekly of 1846-47 aligned with "Young America," probably should include specific reference to this group and to the series on "Old Zack" that Melville contributed. Donald J. Yannella's work on Cornelius Mathews and Perry Miller's *The Raven and the Whale* would have been helpful sources, but neither one is cited. Still, like the other entries in the first part, this concise account of *Yankee Doodle* is both well

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written and detailed enough to convey a clear sense of the comic spirit in that short-lived weekly whose publication span covered less than a year. Each historical account is followed by a short list of Information Sources and a Publication History that includes title(s), volume and issue numbers, publisher and place of publication, names of editors, and circulation (if known). Although nearly fifty named scholars contributed most of the entries in Part I, Sloane himself was responsible for more than a few of them.

Part II contains about four hundred more titles of relatively minor periodicals more briefly treated chiefly because dependable information about them is scarce. The entries in this part, nearly all contributed by Sloane, omit the Information Sources and Publication History. The third part comprises two lists, one with titles taken from the copyright files in Washington; neither the editor nor his contributors have seen the periodicals named, and Sloane acknowledges that some of them may not be humor magazines at all. The second list includes the titles of uncopyrighted magazines identified and described by earlier compilers but not examined or verified. The three generic essays that constitute Part IV deal respectively with college, scholarly, and almanac humor in American almanacs. Although all three are rewarding, the last will be especially appealing to browsers because of the plentiful examples of almanac wit and humor with which its author, Robert Secor, seasons it.

Other contributors treat their material similarly, but nearly all of the entries are written in a straightforward historical manner with little sidetracking into the jokes and satire that composed the *raison d'etre* of these periodicals. Many of the magazines included cartoons, and the annotators attempt to convey a sense of their effectiveness by describing them pictorially so that readers might envision the comic scenes as printed on the page. In most cases, of course, the humor is hopelessly outdated.

Following the four parts is a chronological listing of all the humor magazines from 1757 to 1985 that have been confirmed either by examination or by inclusion in the U.S. copyright lists. Because each main entry in Part I is followed by Information Sources, the Selected Bibliography near the end of the volume is limited to about fifty of the most important general reference titles. A double-column index of over 45 pages includes names and titles from the texts of the entries but not those from the appendicized Information Sources following them.

For most of the major entries, Frank Luther Mott's *A History of American Magazines* (1938-1965), the standard history in five volumes, provided the starting point, but Sloane's specialized compilation is meant to serve researchers in American humor who need to go beyond that broad study. Clear, well organized, and crammed with valuable details, *American Humor Magazines and Comic Periodicals* will prove

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essential for all good reference libraries and is not likely to be superseded in the foreseeable future.

Sanford E. Marovitz

Kent State University