

## The National Joker: Abraham Lincoln and the Politics of Satire

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readers a chance to examine interesting topics that might not otherwise have been included. Because of the importance of dairying to Wisconsin, Apps includes a fairly substantial spread on the “oleo wars” of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Despite the ascendancy of margarine after World War II, Wisconsin law requires that butter be served to all of those in state institutions, whether students, patients, or inmates. In another sidebar about World War II, there is a listing of all items rationed during the war and providing the dates during which the rationing took place. Because Apps covers so many topics, no one topic is examined in any significant depth. He has footnotes and a bibliography, however, so readers who want more can easily find the sources from which Apps drew his text.

This is a beautiful book. I suppose it could be called a “coffee table book,” because of its lavish illustrations, heavy, slick paper, and use of color, but that would not appreciate its real usefulness as a fairly encyclopedic piece of history. It is clear that Apps has put a great deal of thought and care into this book, and he has covered a wide array of topics that should engage anyone with an interest in the agricultural history of the upper Midwest. It would make a good model for similar tomes on the topic for other midwestern states. *Wisconsin Agriculture* is gorgeous, interesting, and sure to provide new information even to people who think they already know a lot about this topic. At \$34.95 for a hardcover, this is a bargain book.

*The National Joker: Abraham Lincoln and the Politics of Satire*, by Todd Nathan Thompson. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2015. xii, 178 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$29.50 hardcover.

Reviewer Mark Wahlgren Summers is professor of history at the University of Kentucky. His books include *A Dangerous Stir: Fear, Paranoia, and the Making of Reconstruction* (2009) and *The Press Gang: Newspapers and Politics, 1865–1878* (1994).

Humor: it’s no laughing matter. Visitors to the memorial in Washington, D.C., can see in Abraham Lincoln’s image the Great Emancipator and the grave man of sorrows, but it may be his fame as a homespun joke teller that has endeared him to most Americans and made them feel closer to him than to any other president. Now, in *The National Joker*, Todd Nathan Thompson lifts that aspect into the importance it deserves. Arguing that Lincoln’s yarns and quips were not just humor, but satire, he makes a compelling case for their use as a powerful rhetorical weapon on his behalf.

Lincoln’s gift for humor was already well known out west before his election. How feelingly his opponents knew it! The rising politi-

cian was a master of sarcastic slings and deadly zingers at the self-important “little big men” he came up against—always cushioned by self-deprecating humor. During the Civil War, books like *Old Abe’s Jokes, Fresh from Abraham’s Bosom* captured a president able to draw on everything from Aesop’s Fables to Joe Miller’s joke book to give a light touch to a serious matter, always making an apt illustration of the larger point he wanted to make.

Where Thompson advances common knowledge is in noting how much Lincoln consciously used his humor satirically, to mock and expose the pretensions of those ranged against him, and how much his belittling descriptions of himself helped create a public image working to his political advantage and taking the sting out of the potential lines of attack that enemies could use against him: that he was a self-made man who, in his own words, had done a “d—n bad job” of it; that he was ugly, ungainly, tall, rustic, and, by eastern standards, wholly un-presidential. That image became the norm in a burgeoning illustrated press, where for the first time presidential caricatures ranged not in the handfuls but in the hundreds. Only in the South and in England, where rising from the bottom and awkward manners were treated as contemptible and where images of Lincoln as race-mixer, devil, or vampire qualified as inspired art, could his intended image-making fail to take hold. Elsewhere, Democrats could hardly do damage by exposing in their opponent limitations that he so readily satirized himself. Far from denigrating him, caricature only embodied the image that Lincoln had designed for himself.

Thompson’s argument works; his book, richly laden with cartoons—each of them explained perhaps more than necessary—is crammed with insight. He knows his satirists, and the Civil War had them, thick as brevet generals: Sut Lovingood, Orpheus C. Kerr, Petroleum V. Nasby, Bill Arp, and Artemus Ward. He also can fit them into the broader tradition of frontier humor, dating back to Davy Crockett, whose sallies may have inspired a young Mr. Lincoln. If there is any limit, it is as minuscule as the combined jokes of the Great Emancipator’s half-dozen successors: Why did none of them learn from Lincoln? Why did so many later presidents treat humor and satire as if they lessened the dignity of their office? Why, as late as 1952, would Adlai Stevenson’s wit be used as an argument against his fitness to take the highest office in the land? If that is this review’s punch line, it is a punch of the most diluted sort. Thompson’s *National Joker* ought to be taken seriously by all scholars.