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From Shanties to Lace Curtains: The Irish Image in Puck, 1877–1910

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Students of drama, magazine fiction and novels know that virtually every nationality and minority group has been represented by a stereotype in print and on the stage. Social scientists generally discuss stereotypes as components of prejudiced beliefs accompanied by strong, unexamined reactions of dislike or approval. Historians and specialists in literature do not equate stereotyping with prejudice. Instead, they emphasize the origin of stereotypes as routinized, crude or at least oversimplified classifications of multifaceted characters and situations.

Historian, literary scholar and social scientist agree, however, that in order to understand various stereotypes, it helps to know how they originated, grew and changed. This essay shows what happened to one cluster of stereotypes—graphic caricature of the Irish—in *Puck*, a popular American humor weekly of the Gilded Age. In the 1890s, *Puck* reached the then respectable circulation figure of circa 90,000 copies before its circulation decline in the first decade of the present century, when its original format was changed under new ownership.

*Puck*, which called itself a ‘journal of mirth and fun’ and specialized in political humor and satire, began publication in New York City in 1876, in a German language edition. The magazine was the brainchild of Joseph Keppler, an Austrian immigrant who arrived in New York in 1872 from St. Louis, where he had briefly published two other German language satirical weeklies, one of them also entitled *Puck*.

In New York, Keppler had gone to work for *Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*. There he met Adolph Schwarzmann, foreman of Leslie’s print shop, and teamed up with him to found the firm of Keppler and Schwarzmann in 1876. With Sydney Rosenfeld, a popular playwright of the day, as editor, they issued in the same year the first German *Puck*, joined after a year by an English edition.

Before *Puck*’s New York debut, no regularly published American humor magazine had lasted long enough to make its mark. *Puck* soon caught on and within a few years was imitated, always a sign of influence and financial
maturity in publishing. In 1881, *Judge* appeared in similar format. In 1883, *Life* was launched as a competitor specializing in the foibles of high society, and in the 1890s there was a shortlived, decidedly less well-edited and printed *Yiddisher Puck*.

*Puck*’s boldly colored cartoons, the center spread in each issue measuring about 20 by 13 inches, the size of an opened Sunday *New York Times Magazine* today, were very effective in a day when color was unknown in weekly magazines and in newspapers. Nearly all the art was at first produced by Joseph Keppler, the versatile founder of and chief draftsman for *Puck*. As the journal became known for its potent political caricature, those whose work frequently appeared in it included James A. Wales, Bernard Gillam and Frederick Burr Opper, one of the fathers of the Sunday comics. After Keppler’s death in 1894, his son Joseph Jr., also a talented cartoonist, continued to draw for *Puck*. The original stockholders sold their interest in *Puck* in 1913. The magazine changed hands several times thereafter and expired in 1918 while owned by William Randolph Hearst, who continued its title for the Sunday comics edition of his *New York Journal and American*.

The objects of *Puck*’s satire and humor included Masonry, woman suffrage, easy divorce, inflation, socialism, anarchism, adulterated foods, anti-evolution churchmen, foibles in fashions and fads of the times. For the first ten years of publication, its chief targets were Tammany Hall and politicians like James G. Blaine, whose presidential aspirations were undoubtedly hurt by *Puck*’s ‘tattooed man’ cartoon series, directed against him. *Puck* prided itself on being independent in politics. Nevertheless, its most frequent political stance was Democratic. Favorite reforms advocated by it were lower tariffs, civil service extension and correction of voting abuses.

It was not a subtle vehicle; some of its jokes are offensive even by robust standards. It repeated rumors and scandalous gossip about Henry Ward Beecher and other popular preachers. It attacked Comstockery and teetotalers yet professed to be shocked by Walt Whitman’s verses. Pro-labor but anti-union, its anti-union prejudices were perhaps heightened by the annoyances created by the many strikes of 1877, 1885–6 and 1892–4. Its columns abounded with stock jokes about farmers and local types, Jewish pawnbrokers, clothing dealers and *nouveau-riche*; Negro servants and lightfingered chicken- and watermelon-thieves; Irish politicians, nationalist agitators, domestic servants and laborers.

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2 L. Draper Hill, ‘What Fools These Mortals Be’. *A Study of the Work of Joseph Keppler, Founder of Puck*, Harvard Honors History Thesis, Cambridge, 1957. Mr. Hill corrected a number of errors in the draft version of this essay, allowed me to read and quote from his unpublished History Honors Thesis, and lent materials from his collection. I am pleased to be able to thank him here for his repeated courtesies.
The majority of its Irish types were ignorant but harmless drudges, given to drink and emotional excesses, loving a fight, and not above a lie or a bit of minor thievery. As Paddy and Bridget, these lower class Irish were the staple of *Puck*’s Irish cartoons and jokes. In 1888, a representative selection of them were assembled as the thirteenth issue of *Puck’s Library*, special issues devoted to topics like ‘Sassiet’, ‘Hayseed Hits’, ‘Our Foreign Fellow Citizens’, ‘Brudder Shinbone’, and, in this instance, ‘Help’, or ‘*Puck’s* Best Things About the Great American Servant Girl’.

As Queen of the Kitchen, this latter figure appeared in endless variations on the theme of the funny, disorderly, hardworking but unpredictable servant girl. Incorrigibly Catholic, often deluded by scheming, selfish advocates of Irish Home Rule, independence and ‘green’ political power, she lords it over her employer’s family, fellow domestics and various hangers-on who frequent her kitchen for generous, unauthorized handouts and favors. Her relatives and acquaintances are other domestic servants, common laborers, gardeners and hod carriers, policemen and saloon keepers, many of them inhabitants of squatter shanties swarming with children, horses, pigs, goats and chickens and clinging precariously to refuse-strewn Central Park hillsides.

In front of these leaking, tumbledown shacks sits the Hibernian male, clay pipe sticking from a large, baboon-like mouth in an underslung jaw. Putting on airs despite his dirty, unpromising condition, he is ever ready for a good fight, eternally hostile to Great Britain; prepared to send his and Bridget’s hard-earned dollars to support lazy relatives or harebrained, landlord-murdering, dynamite-happy compatriots in the Emerald Isle or the United States.

Pat’s crushed hat always sports a shamrock. His amusements are the wake and the St. Patrick’s day parade, both likely to end in lively brawls as the potent Irish dew begins to work on his fickle brain. ‘The Marching of the hordes on St. Patrick’s Day’, *Puck* informed its readers in its serialized ‘History of Oireland’ in 1879, ‘has been typical of the Oirish people’.

In a second category, frequently encountered during the first decade of *Puck*’s history, were the riotous Irishman and the dangerous, reckless Irish agitator or Fenian fanatic. There are three classes of Irish, a Colonel Blather O’Blunderbuss confided to *Puck* in a serio-comic piece entitled ‘The Great Fenian Movement’ in May 1878. The first or thriftless ‘crowd the roadways and beg—and curse’. The second or thrifty classes ‘live at home, contented and cheerful’. The third or enterprising class ‘emigrate to all quarters of the globe, and, in default of other capital, they speculate on the Wrongs of Ireland’ and, as organizers, live off ‘the generous, self-denying, sacrificing spirit of the stupid Irish servant-girl and trusting Irish laborer’.

Joseph Keppler in particular had a penchant for drawing the Irishman
as rioter and for including Irish priests as symbols of Irish voting power in his frequent anti-Catholic cartoons. One of his covers dealing with the Irish (August 1877) reminded *Puck*’s readers that fourteen years earlier, New York’s Irish had sacked Negroes’ houses, destroyed their orphan asylum, and lynched, maimed and molested many more during the draft riots of 1863.

Other Irish subjects of *Puck*’s full-page cartoons from its first appearance to the late 1880s included Father Edward McGlynn, supporter of Henry George’s economic and social reforms; Denis Kearney, bigoted leader of California’s anti-Chinese Workingmen’s Party; O’Donovan Rossa, militant orator and irresponsible administrator of the so-called Skirmishing Fund to support anti-British terrorist actions; John Kelly, former Congressman turned Tammany Hall leader; Patrick Ford, nationalist editor of the New York *Irish World*; and Charles Stewart Parnell and his supporters of the Home Rule party.

Irish attacks against British supremacy in Ireland seemed to *Puck*’s editors a demonstration of ‘the sublime confidence of utter ignorance’ they regarded as ‘typical of Irish nature’. If Pat would forget about independence and go to work, *Puck* advised, he would soon be prosperous and happy.³

True to its motto to show without fear or favor ‘What Fools These Mortals Be’, *Puck* promptly made fun of those American Irish who had apparently taken its advice to heart and profited from it. In the late 1880s and early 1890s, its cartoonists added the upward-striving, socially ambitious contractor and other newly-rich American-Irish types to the irresponsible Irish servants and laborers, scheming politicians and unruly agitators who had predominated on *Puck*’s urban Irish scene until then.

Joseph Keppler’s double-page cartoon ‘Uncle Sam’s Lodging House’ was the perfect visual rendition of one aspect of *Puck*’s evaluation of the American Irish from the magazine’s inception in 1876 to about 1894. Keppler’s depiction of the Irish as the most unruly element in the nation reflected a then common American resentment against the inflamed temper of certain Irish and the ‘rebel note’ sounded by some of their leaders. This reaction, Professor Thomas N. Brown has pointed out in his excellent account of Irish-American nationalism, was comparable to white middle-class ‘backlash’ against American Negro militancy in the 1960s.⁴ Furthermore, a recent study of hostility to Irish in Victorian England and America allows us to carry the necessarily inexact but nevertheless striking analogy between stereotyped American reactions to Irish and Negroes one step further. In his study of anti-Irish prejudice in nineteenth-century England, *Anglo-Saxons and Celts*, Professor L. P. Curtis, Jr., has pointed out that except for Bridget’s fiercely defended chastity and one or two other traits not

³ *Puck*, May 11, 1887.
usually ascribed to the Irish, most of the following stereotyped beliefs widely held by whites about Negroes in the last thirty years were in the nineteenth century applied to Celts at home and in the United States. Of the eighteen traits ascribed to Negroes by whites studied in the 1930s, the majority were by Puck's contributors and editors also seen as typically Irish qualities.

1. inferior mentality  
2. primitive morality  
3. emotional instability  
4. oversassertiveness  
5. lazy and boisterous  
6. religious fanaticism  
7. fondness for gambling  
8. gaudy and flashy in dress  
9. close to anthropoid ancestors  
10. given to crimes of violence  
11. susceptible to bribery by politicians  
12. high birth rate threatening to majority  
13. occupationally unstable  
14. superstitious  
15. lazy  
16. happy-go-lucky  
17. ignorant  
18. musical

Some time after 1894, the note of condemnation in Puck's treatment of the Irish is sounded less often. But Puck's editorials during that year, the period of peak political influence for the secret, anti-Catholic American Protective Association, still belied its announced impartiality in the contest between the A.P.A. and the Catholic church. For instance, when the Apostolic delegate Satolli arrived in the United States, the editor announced that Satolli's actions had confirmed Puck's worst fears: 'We have a Pope, and it is just a little more impossible than ever for a man to be a good Catholic and a good American.'

Nevertheless, within a few years criticism of the Irish declined sharply even if that of the Catholic church did not stop altogether. Keppler's death in 1894 and the decline of anti-Catholic and anti-Irish sentiment in general probably influenced this changed position. Keppler, though born to Catholic parents, throughout his career had been highly critical of the Church and had frequently attacked the papacy and the Church as un-American, medieval and undemocratic. Like Thomas Nast, whose anti-Irish and anti-Catholic cartoons for Harper's Weekly Keppler knew well, he attacked the Irish for supporting the Church and for what he and Nast repeatedly pictured as its attacks on the public school and democratic, representative government itself.

Whatever the immediate causes for his decline as an object of graphic satire, the violent Irishman appears only infrequently after the turn of the century while the Irish maid and the Irish laborer continue as staples of Puck's ethnic humor.

For example, in an 1881 editorial, Puck called the Irish braggarts a discontented, idle, debt-owing lot who have 'rarely done any work, even in this free country, to improve their social condition'. Useful for building

Plate 1.
'Uncle Sam's Lodging House.' Joseph Keppler, *Puck*, 7 June 1882. This cartoon is typical of Keppler's crowded compositions. The bricks thrown by the Irishman call attention to demands that the American minister, James Russell Lowell, be recalled from London and replaced with an American-Irish representative who, *Puck* intimates, could be relied upon to defend Irish-Americans in British courts as Lowell had refused to do after British courts indicted Irish-Americans for various offenses against British law.

Plate 2.
'The Bugaboo of Congress.' *Puck*, 4 January 1885. This cartoon by the English-born Bernard Gillam represents the Irish Vote as an ape-like creature. Patrick Ford, editor of the New York *Irish World*, directs the efforts of his henchmen who pull the rope inflating the bellows of Demagoguery. Various Congressmen offer bills expressing support for Irish nationalist aspirations by showing sympathy for the Fenians, denouncing England and tearing up legislation proposing to restrict the manufacture of dynamite.

Plate 3.
'Looking Backwards.' Joseph Keppler, *Puck*, 11 January 1893. 'They desire to bar to the newest arrivals the bridge over which they and theirs arrived'. The original picture from which this photograph was made appeared in the German edition of *Puck*. Both English and German editions used the same lithographs, but captions differed, as did editorial content. A comparison of the contents of the two editions would undoubtedly provide useful data for gaging German and immigrant influences on American journalistic practices in the 1880s and 1890s.

Plate 4.
'What Fools these Forefathers Were! Shades of the Forefathers: How proud we are! We never dreamed when we arrived in America that we would father such aristocratic offspring.' *Puck*, 26 September 1894. Opper here makes fun of the propensity of Americans in the 1890s to found exclusive hereditary and patriotic societies and to trace descent to noble European families. The impulse was, of course, related to the desire of 'old' immigrants to distinguish their group from the 'new' immigrants who were already classed by some American proponents of immigration restriction as less desirable. Hence the line of Forefathers' Shades at the top of the picture consists of those generally considered as making up the 'old' immigration: Hollanders, Irish, English, Germans, Scots, and others.
railroads, digging canals and laying sewer pipes, 'whenever they have risen above this level, it has been only to maladminister the government of some hapless town or city that had fallen into their clutches'. They are too lazy and too 'lacking in pluck' even to fight, 'except from ambush', editor Bunner finished, praising President Arthur for his perception that the English were, after all, 'the nearest, and dearest, the cleanest-handed and truest-hearted, [people] that America will ever know'.

That same year, four 'Irish industries' according to Puck were the manufacture of votes and infernal machines, the collection of money for the lazy, and landlord killing. Six years later, in an editorial of 1887, Puck admitted that 'we used to laugh at the Irishman who came to America to pick up the gold in the streets', but that by comparison with 'inferior' Bohemian and Russian immigrants of the later 1880s, the 'energetic' Irishman was to be preferred. When he 'awoke from his dream', he went to work, and he never became an anarchist who fleeced honest workingmen.

In 1884, a 'Patriotic Duet Performed . . . on the Late Glorious Anniversary of the Birth of St. Patrick' ended

We've got the power, we've got the min,
We've got the whiskey free,
We've got the Boss, begod, and this—
We've got the Treasury Key.

Also in 1884, Puck pictured St. Patrick as a Catholic Bishop with a large bottle of rye whiskey in one hand, snakes underfoot, his miter askew on a bearded, ape-like face. Within twenty years, for St. Patrick's Day of 1904, he became a whimsical leprechaun, a friendly, pixie-like creature rather than the drunken, pliable tool of a foreign power.

By 1895, even a session of the Clan-na-Gael, in Keppler's hands usually associated with Irish militancy and unreasonable anti-British agitation, was pictured by Opper as the meeting of mirth-provoking, harmless, bibulous Irish-American lodge brothers. Of course Bridget still lords it over the kitchen and the distinctive brogue remained a hallmark of Puck's Irish-American ethnic humor until well after the turn of the present century. But the stereotype had lost its sting as better dressed, sometimes dandified 'lace curtain Irish' and thoroughly urbanized Irish maids and cooks share the pages of the weekly with the usual lower class hod carriers, coachmen and simple laborers who still provide the bulk of Puck's Irish types.

The changed climate-of-fun is unmistakable. Clean, well-scrubbed Irish children at dancing school and Irish-Americans who establish claims to membership in ancestral and patriotic societies reserved for 'old' Americans are distinctly new subjects for Puck's graphic humor. So are the verses,
not infrequently apostrophizing fashionable Irish girls like ‘Maggie Moran’ or growing sentimental over ‘Shanahan’s Old Shebeen, or The Mornin’s Mornin’ by Gerald Brenan.9 Puck’s cartoonists, several of whom, led by Opper, were among the first to draw the daily newspaper comic strips which contributed to the eventual demise of Puck and other comic weeklies, had begun the still mildly condescending but basically friendly treatment of the American Irish that survives today in the social-climbing antics of ‘Maggie and Jiggs’.

Interestingly, the basic features of the earlier Irish stereotypes changed little while the intent of the image shifted from not infrequent disapproval to still condescending but usually not at all invidious caricature. Frederick Opper used the basic features of the stereotyped Irish face almost from the start of his career with Puck for the depiction of humorous, even sympathetic Irish-American characters and temperament. When his versatile pen created the ‘Happy Hooligan’ series, the transition from the troublesome fighting Irish of Puck’s first decade to the approval and sometimes even glorification of Irish scrappiness and fighting qualities was well under way. It was almost inevitable, therefore, that Opper would be asked to supply illustrations for Finley Peter Dunne’s immensely popular Mr. Dooley series when these humorous newspaper essays were issued in book form after 1898.

Since we live in an age which is rightly highly sensitive to the negative, even destructive potential of ethnic stereotyping, the transformation and eventual decline of the Irish stereotype in Puck raises questions concerning its origins, relationship to ‘reality’ and role in the teaching of American history or the creation of better understanding between various ethnic groups.10

Paddy as a humorous, emotionally unstable, ignorant, dirty, superstitious, childish, half-civilized, violent and vengeful yet, at times, fun-loving and amusing type was ‘an invention of the early Victorian imagination’.11 The word Paddy goes back at least to the eighteenth century. There is a Gillray cartoon, ‘Paddy on Horseback’, dating from 1779, which seems to represent its earliest recorded usage, replacing the formerly common Teague. And the ‘wild’ or barbarous Irish are already described in twelfth-century reports to King Henry II by Giraldus Cambrensis. Caricature from Hogarth to Cruikshank includes the ruffianly Celtic petitioner and rioter armed with bludgeon, dagger and pike.

The pioneer genre which pictured the Irish with the faces of subhuman ‘Celtic gorillas’ were probably George Cruikshank’s illustrations for

9 Puck, February 28, 1912; September 6, 1905; December 4, 1907.
11 Curtis, op. cit., p. 52.
William H. Maxwell’s *History of the Irish Rebellion in 1798*, published in London in 1845. Frederic George Stephens, hardly a partisan of the Irish, in his *A Memoir of George Cruikshank* (1891) said that these etchings represent the natives so utterly brutalized and revoltingly savage in aspect and act that we wonder some irate Celt has not, *more Hibernico*, settled the question with the artist by knocking out his brains with a bludgeon, or furtively shooting him from behind a hedge.

These ape-like, prognathous features became the hallmarks of the stereotyped Irishman during the second half of the nineteenth century. In England, Sir John Tenniel drew him for *Punch*. In the United States, no one surpassed Thomas Nast, cartoonist for *Harper’s Weekly* from the Civil War to the mid-1880s, as creator of violent Irish with projecting jaw and mouth, curved noses and armed with shillelaghs, whiskey bottles and dirks. This ‘orang-outang Celt, all jaw and no brain’—*Puck*’s description of Nast’s brutalized Irishman—also appeared in *Puck*, most frequently in Keppler’s cartoons. But the comic Irishman outlasted him, and his pugnacity, stripped of its sinister and anti-social undertones, became acceptable and even admired as Irish pluck and fighting spirit.12

In short, it is not so much the qualities ascribed to the violent Irishman in caricature that mattered in the long run, as the interpretation of these characteristics by the cartoonist and his ‘readers’. What counts is the meaning imparted to stereotypes, whether they are seen as menacing, harmless or neutral. And *Puck*’s Irish stereotypes remind us that such meanings are subject to change and relatively speedy reinterpretation.

Behind the stereotypes of the Irish there was of course a kernel of reality along with a highly selective ascription of traits, some based on fancy and malice aforethought, typical of all stereotyping. The stereotype was faintly reminiscent of Irish-Americans’ sometimes painful struggle for jobs and adjustment, and their presence in large numbers in unskilled occupations, labor and domestic service. Many Irishmen were dairymen, gardeners, dray and nurserymen, coachmen and, the women, principally in domestic occupations. They loved a drink—alcoholism even today is a disease more frequently encountered among descendants of the Irish than among other European immigrant groups—were prone to fights, and ruled ‘over the low life of American cities’.13 Their discontent and burning nationalism, though no more strident than the temper and warnings of the organized opposition to them, became the special concern of many Americans and were promptly registered in *Puck*’s stereotyped images.

Today it is difficult to ‘read’ these stereotypes of Irish and other ethnic groups as they were understood in their own times. In the context of the

times, *Puck*’s humor, though crude, was not demagogic or untypical of what can be found, in slightly refined forms, in the staid, genteel journals of the period and even its serious novels. Graphic humor and its range in magazines like *Puck* was, until the turn of the century, less affected by the pressure of advertising, vocal anti-defamation groups, the necessity to consider the tastes and dislikes of a mass audience, and complicated political situations, than is the case today. It is not easy to construct an ‘average’ *Puck* reader. But he was probably a white, middle- or lower middle-class Protestant of native, ‘Wasp’ ancestry or, since there was a German edition of *Puck* until the late 1890s, a first or second generation German-American.

During the Gilded Age and for some time thereafter, comic Negroes, Jews, Dutchmen and Irish were commonplace in print and on the stage. The ethnic stereotype spoke in a funny, immediately recognizable dialect, was clumsy or tipsy or stupid. He was seldom a person with dignity, unless, like Fitznoodle, *Puck*’s stereotyped conceited, monocled, stuffy Englishman, he carried his self-conscious air of superiority to laughable extremes. Nevertheless, these images in dime novels, on the stage, in comic weeklies and even the serious novel were, as Professor Handlin has pointed out, caricatures of *real* men. One function of caricature was to ‘sort out the individuals in knovable groups’.

This of course has always been the function of stereotyping. And while ethnic caricature during the nineteenth century was paternalistic, not infrequently degrading, and sometimes clearly hostile, it had not yet become a systematic attempt to deny any group so caricatured a common humanity. Unfortunately, before long, such attempts were made by men of education and influence. The invention of an invidious, ‘scientific’ rationale for denying the worth and equality of certain groups, particularly Negroes and ‘new’ immigrants, has made us justifiably wary of comic ethnic stereotypes, whatever their original intention.

Barbara Miller Solomon has shown that the racial ideology of immigration restrictionists, which was fully developed in the period 1890–1914, built upon older, already existing stereotypes. Since *Puck*’s image of the violent, alien Irish faded during this same period while that of the clever, scheming, money-hungry Jew became more prominent, one suspects the editor of attempting, consciously or subconsciously, to bring *Puck*’s caricature into line with the less tolerant trends of the age.

The truth about stereotypes is, unfortunately, that we can no longer see them in their nineteenth-century, more neutral connotations without

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considerable efforts of the historical imagination. The very real physical and psychic damage wreaked by vicious or unthinking ethnic stereotyping has too often been reinforced by graphic images of the sort found in *Puck*. This brief survey of the image of Irishmen in *Puck* to the first decade of the present century is meant, therefore, to recapture some of the meanings attached to the earlier stereotypes: to remind us that they arose from the assumption that equality of opportunity was available to all; that the superiority of some races and the inferiority of others was biologically conditioned; that there was a correlation between a man's social status and his race, nationality and religion.

Most educated men and women today seriously question the validity of these ideas. But we should not forget that such assumptions have conditioned and perhaps continue to condition our thinking. It may be useful, too, to remember that hardly any ethnic or religious group was entirely exempted from ridicule at one time or other in the past. Or to speculate, at any rate, about the extent to which the graphic stereotype, indiscriminately lumping together for the sake of ridicule those who sometimes lacked, upon arrival in the United States, a distinct national ethos and sense of ethnic solidarity, hastened and intensified the growth of national and ethnic consciousness among those who became the targets of the cartoonist's pen.

There is also some comfort in the knowledge that the unflattering stereotype of the Irish, who have only recently come-of-age in the United States, almost completely dissolved in twenty or thirty years.¹⁷

Lastly, if *Puck*’s ethnic caricatures no longer move many readers to great mirth, they remain interesting, lively visual documents of the robust taste of their times and, now and then, are memorable little masterpieces of the cartoonist's art.

Editorial Review of Volume 13

Perception of Ethnic and Cultural Differences

JOHN J. APPEL From Shanties to Lace Curtains: The Irish Image in Puck, 1877–1910

W. R. JONES The Image of the Barbarian in Medieval Europe

ROMILA THAPAR The Image of the Barbarian in Early India

SIDNEY W. MINTZ Groups, Group Boundaries and the Perception of ‘Race’, Review Article

DENIS GOULET and MARCO WALSHOK Values among Underdeveloped Marginals: Illustrative Notes on Spanish Gypsies

Agrarian Reform: A Summary

ROBERT LAPORTE, JAMES F. PETRAS, and JEFFREY C. RINEHART The Concept of Agrarian Reform and Its Role in Development: Some Notes on Societal Cause and Effect

Books Received