

## Politics Personified: Portraiture, Caricature and Visual Culture in Britain, c.1830-80

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Over the past 30 years a growing body of scholarship has sought to analyse the visual and material dimensions of British politics in the 18th and 19th centuries. The contributions of John Brewer, Malcolm Chase and Katrina Navickas, to name only a few, have stressed the role played by objects and images in forming and disseminating political allegiance.<sup>(1)</sup> In *Picturing Reform in Victorian Britain* Janice Carlisle addressed the conjunction of art and politics by way of the heterogeneous images of the period's illustrated journalism.<sup>(2)</sup> Henry Miller's *Politics Personified: Portraiture, Caricature and Visual Culture in Britain c.1830–80* also weaves together political and cultural history and breaks new ground to argue that likenesses of politicians played a significant and under acknowledged role in the political modernisation of Britain.

The careful wording of the book's subtitle lucidly sums up the wide range of visual sources that Miller addresses, these include prints on paper and silk, caricatures, photographs, sculpture, medals, ceramics and paintings. Indeed, one of the great strengths of this book is Miller's sensitivity to the specifics of media production, particularly his close attention to emergent printing technologies such as wood engraving and lithography. His detailed consideration of the meanings and contexts of these political portraits, that is how they were produced, circulated and received, is partly motivated by the recent attention scholars have paid to political language and rhetoric over visual culture. Miller's book aims to redress this balance, eschewing focus on only individual politicians to produce a thorough account of how contemporaries 'saw' the political system before and after the 1832 Reform Act. These ambitions are aided by Miller's clear and precise style, quickly established in his introduction and maintained by means of signposting and efficient usage of subheadings.

The book's comparative approach to images of politicians is guided by both the wish to resist an exceptionalist argument and the need to acknowledge the common conditions for printmaking and publishing in this period. Miller explains that a narrow focus on one politician's representation over time may make an individual appear unique, while obscuring the large numbers of major and minor politicians in circulation. At the same time, the book convincingly argues that the new serial form of political likenesses necessitates comparison to fully understand how images were repeatedly viewed in concert with one another, both sequentially or in half-yearly bound batches. To this reviewer's mind, Miller is successful in arguing

that the political likeness can not only shed light on how political and party identities were represented and engineered but can also 'illuminate the nature of the relationship between parliamentarians and constituents that was recast after 1832' (p. 5).

To achieve this aim, the book's first chapter acts as a building block. Miller contextualises the transformation of political caricature and satire from the late Georgian period until the 1830s, provides an outline of the 1832 Reform Act alongside its historiography and sketches the visual culture of reform. This last section is the most enlightening. Miller presents the caricatures and political satires of artists including HB (John Doyle) as a key minority which critiqued reform, while most producers of reform-related prints and commodities applauded the Act's assumed ability to counter the 'Old Corruption'.

The book's second chapter compares two steel-engraved portrait series to explore how portraiture established and reinforced party identities after the 1832 Reform Act. Miller argues that Henry Thomas Ryall's *Portraits and Memoirs of Eminent Conservative Statesmen* (1836–46) and John Saunders' *Portraits and Memoirs of Eminent Living Political Reformers* (1837–40) helped to familiarise local supporters with the authoritative faces of the emergent two-party system. While ably acknowledging the complexities and local variations within each party, the chapter demonstrates that the growth of partisanship inspired printmakers and publishers to exploit a potential new market of supporters eager to demonstrate their allegiances. Particularly useful is Miller's account of how Ryall's series was used, primarily to decorate local Conservative party gatherings, and more generally to affirm collective identities. Saunders' series was the considerably cheaper Reformer countermove to Ryall's successful initiative. Miller's analysis of how these prints were used to convey Conservative values is incisive and abundantly supported by a range of newspaper and periodical commentaries. He states that involving the successful painter George Hayter was a boon to Saunders' publication, and acknowledges that both series 'relied on the cooperation of politicians either to provide access to original paintings or sit for new portraits' (p. 68). However, a closer consideration of how the reputations of the artists, such as the late Sir Thomas Lawrence, who created the paintings and sculptures from which the engravings originated, might have been valuable here. Miller dwells on the press' assessment of quality of the prints as likenesses, not as the products of specific artist studios. What impact, if any, did the reputation and standing of the artists and engravers involved have upon the success or failure of these series?

The opening of the third chapter returns to the depiction of politicians in caricatures, this time focusing first on prominent radicals such as Charles Bradlaugh and later on the striking wood-engravings of C. J. Grant. True to form, Miller's conception of radicalism is nuanced and astute. Drawing on Brian Maidment's *Comedy, Caricature and the Social Order*, Miller interprets Grant's bleak caricatures as a predominantly London phenomenon, capable of critiquing Conservatives and Whigs with equal vigour and possessing little sympathy for working-class self-improvement to boot.<sup>(3)</sup> While effective at cutting down opponents, caricature was less valuable for building political community or favourably visualising the public faces of radical movements. Organisations such as the Anti-Corn Law League endorsed steel engraved portrait series which would preserve their leaders for posterity but, as Miller shows, it was the affordability and accessibility of wood engraving from the 1870s onwards which allowed far larger numbers of political portraits to be rapidly produced. A comparative assessment of four radical portrait print series, or portrait galleries, closes the chapter. Miller persuasively argues that these series 'allowed heterogeneous movements to pay tribute to different strands, and draw in semi-detached elements' (p. 100), though, as he points out, women were still largely excluded from representation.

In chapter four the individual, serial likenesses of the preceding chapters coalesce in the form of political group portraits. Miller claims that group portraits were distinct from these series in that they could function to pictorially reinvent important political events, making them fit more smoothly into an apposite national narrative. His chief examples are the products of two imaginative painters, Benjamin Robert Haydon and Sir George Hayter. That these group portraits were monumental in size and ambition was their making and their undoing. Celebrated for capturing momentous events for posterity, these large-scale works were so expensive and time consuming to create that the market for both painting and subsequent prints had all but

evaporated by the time they were ready for exhibition or publication. This chapter contains lively, persuasive reinterpretations of familiar group portraits. In his assessment of Hayter's *The House of Commons, 1833* Miller disagrees with Janice Carlisle's reading of the painting as presenting a monotonous commons filled with men who do not resemble 'active and energetic agents of further change'.<sup>(4)</sup> For Miller, Hayter's pictorial uniformity had a specific purpose:

'Showing an orderly, sober, deliberative assembly was a visual rebuttal of the doom-laden predictions of Tory writers such as John Wilson Croker, who had argued that the new House would be unruly and incompetent' (p. 125).

Miller's examination of Haydon's Whig commission, *The Reform Banquet 1832*, is greatly enriched by the valuable information presented in Haydon's diary. Haydon's lively political and artistic debates with his sitters, the compromises made during sittings and his difficult compositional decision-making are all revealed to form a fuller picture of how the final portrait was fundamentally shaped by the interactions between Haydon, his sitters and their perceived audiences. Such detailed insights are of course not always available to the historian but here Haydon's voice highlights the importance of artistic intention. In the fifth chapter the book returns to the depiction of individual politicians. Specifically Miller looks here to the ranks of MPs, rather than the leading figures which dominated the printed series and caricatures of preceding chapters. Placing emphasis on how images fostered national political reputations between individual MPs and constituencies, Miller invokes the popularity of physiognomy as a tool used to judge character through faces and thus portraiture. Detailed likenesses appearing in *The Illustrated London News* accentuated the individuality of politicians as well as their role as independent representatives. The agency of MPs to dynamically self-fashion their representations, particularly in photographs and prints after self-commissioned paintings, is contrasted against the high cultural prestige of a public statue. As such, Miller briefly demonstrates how the hierarchy of materials, the expense of subscribers and prominent (and permanent) display in a public space meant that some forms of representation carried much greater cachet than others.

The final section of the book looks closely at the shifting representations of three sitters over time: Lord Palmerston, William Gladstone and Benjamin Disraeli. Chapter six is devoted to the depiction of Lord Palmerston. The central claim is that pictorial representations of this enduring prime minister presented him as youthful in an effort to stress his political and physical strength. Miller's argument derives not only from portraits and cartoons of Palmerston in isolation but also assesses how favourably this Liberal leader was presented in comparison to his political rivals. The final chapter returns once more to the now well-established theme of portraiture's role in forming party identity. Miller's account of how Disraeli transformed his youthful, dandyish reputation to one of stern statesmanship partly through guarded facial expressions in painted portraits and photographs is intriguing. However, the evidence presented provides a slightly ambiguous impression of Disraeli's views towards his own image. Miller's view is that the anti-Semitic portrayal of Disraeli in *Punch* 'must have stung' but left him 'relatively unbothered' (p. 209). Ultimately, Miller's nuanced conclusion that the strategies Disraeli used provided the Prime Minister with 'a modicum of control over his image', stands.

With 40 reproductions the book is adequately illustrated. Occasionally, the reader feels disappointed by the publisher's limitations, particularly when Miller is forced to describe rather than show a fascinating panoply of reform prints, silhouettes, banners and medals (pp. 35–9). At least many of these omissions can be mitigated by a combination of Miller's referencing and ongoing museum digitisation projects. Throughout the book, Miller is attentive to the ways in which portraits were used by their owners and purchasers. However, further consideration could perhaps have been given to how political likenesses were handled and kept. For instance, this reviewer wondered whether these portraits were ever used to extra-illustrate political texts or speeches, or placed in commonplace books. How too did the *carte de visites* of political figures appear in the carefully arranged photograph albums kept by many in this period? Analysis of these types of sources may further elucidate the relationship between parliamentarians and their constituents.

Miller commands the unwieldy literatures on Georgian and Victorian graphic satire, political reform and party political modernisation with admirable nuance and ease. As the author notes, his final chapters on Palmerston, Disraeli and their contemporaries rectifies an important gap in the literature on how political portraiture was shaped by political developments. By bringing these portraits and their important functions to light, Miller's book will fuel further interest in the depiction of political likenesses. The future plans of the National Portrait Gallery's 'Later Victorian Portraits Catalogue' hope to support such interest by comprehensively mapping all known portraits of around 300 Victorian politicians over the coming years.

*Politics Personified: Portraiture, Caricature and Visual Culture in Britain c.1830–80* skilfully reveals that political likenesses, in a myriad of forms, were the dominant mode for visualising politics in this period. Miller never loses sight of the functions, dissemination and reception of the political portraits he discusses. Such an approach takes scholarship beyond the hazy notions of an imagined reader or viewer. Instead, a greater understanding of how these portraits were 'seen' comes into view. From indoor party meetings to public squares, political likenesses were crucial for expressing complex party political and individual allegiances. Miller's conclusions have implications not only for political historians but also art historians and scholars of social and cultural history in Britain, where the book should find an appreciative readership.

## Notes

1. J. Brewer, 'Commercialisation and politics', in *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialisation of Eighteenth-Century England*, ed. J. Brewer, N. McKendrick and J. H. Plumb (London, 1982), pp. 197–262; M. Chase, 'Building identity, building circulation: engraved portraiture and the Northern Star', in *Papers for the People: A Study of the Chartist Press*, ed. J. Allen and O. Ashton (London, 2005), pp. 25–54; K. Navickas, "'That Sash Will Hang You': political clothing and adornment in England, 1780–1840", *Journal of British Studies* (2010), 540–65.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. J. Carlisle, *Picturing Reform in Victorian Britain* (Cambridge, 2012).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. B. Maidment, *Comedy, Caricature and the Social Order, 1820–50* (Manchester, 2013).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. J. Carlisle, *Picturing Reform in Victorian Britain* (Cambridge, 2012), p. 75.[Back to \(4\)](#)

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