

100 Years of Gay Assurance: Punch, a British Institution



Americans have long questioned the British brand of humor, frequently finding it droll, but more often dull. But they cannot question its longevity as exemplified in Punch. That internationally famous humor magazine observes its 100th anniversary this week, still the same capriciously boisterous publication—in the British manner, of course.

Punch, or The London Charivari, personified by the happy-go-lucky little hunchback who, together with his sad-faced dog, Toby, decorates the cover each week, is more than just a quip catchall. And therein probably lies its greatest attraction to the Britisher. Disrespectful of many customs and conventions, Mr. Punch tends to act as a liberalizing and leveling influence with his satire, ridicule, jest, caricature, and cartoon. But his capabilities go still farther, for on occasion he has reached the literary heights, touched the bottoms of the country's hearts, and even sown the seeds of national reform.

That has been the Punch tradition since July 17, 1841, when the magazine's first issue was published. And that same tradition has been followed down through the years by such a galaxy of Punchsters as William Makepeace Thackeray, Douglas Jerrold, Thomas Hood, Lord Tennyson, George du Maurier, Sir John Tenniel, W. S. Gilbert, and Sir Owen Seaman.

In humor, Punch's early contributors set the pace with such famous quips as: "Advice to persons about to marry.—Don't!" and "What is Mind? No matter. What is Matter? Never mind." Yet, as a true chronicler of the times, Punch's volumes read more like a century-long history of England, and the magazine is never more on its mettle than during periods of crisis. Its present display of fortitude, amid raids and threats of raids, is no exception and is epitomized in the words of E. V. Knox, the sixth in Punch's 100-year parade of editors. The 59-year-old Evoc, as the magazine's chief is known, told NEWSWEEK's correspondent last week: "Since its earliest years Punch has been attacking the Prussian bully as he turned on Austria, Denmark, and France in 1870, 1914, and again to-

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day. . . . We hope the day will come when this century-old theme can be dropped.”

To execute his traditional task in the present emergency, Mr. Punch has had to surmount more difficulties than ever before. Luckily, Nazi bombs have shattered no more than a few windowpanes of his London home at 10 Bouverie Street. But many of his staff are absent on war duty; a few have been killed. Wartime restrictions on paper have cut Punch's size and limited the near 150,000-copy circulation to 100,000. Even the staff's weekly luncheons, descendants of the old Wednesday English-beef-and-beer dinners at the ancient Punch table, have been switched to short morning conferences. The table itself — Thackeray's "Mahogany Tree," which is really only plain deal, or pine—embellished with penknifed initials of Punchsters back to the founding days, has been removed to the country for safe-keeping.

By the same token, Mr. Punch's birthday party this week was limited. What with food restrictions and the blackout, the jolly little hunchbacked centenarian could have neither cake nor candles. But a commemorative half-hour BBC radio program was planned for this Saturday night.

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