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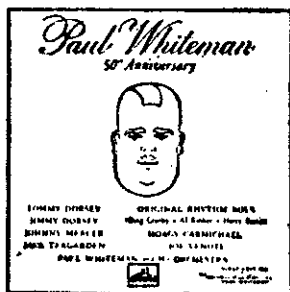
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The House That Punch Built

A SHORT but lively chapter in the history of *Punch* was closed recently when Mr Malcolm Muggeridge decided to resign the editorship. He is said to have told the proprietors (when he was being appointed) that he had never cared much for the journal: he thought it "stuffy, weakly collaborationist in politics, muffled in comment, handicapped by fear of causing offence." The proprietors were not intimidated, and Mr Muggeridge entered cheerfully upon his revolution. But *Punch* is old, and has absorbed many shocks; it may well be that, whatever his personal reasons for wanting to escape from Bouverie Street, the editor was influenced a little by the realisation that his revolution was over.

As the author of a recent history of the journal pointed out, *Punch* after three years of Mr Muggeridge was more like the old *Punch* than it had been after three months of him. A magazine that has been published for 116 years has a massive resistance to change. "I tried in my five years," said Mr Muggeridge, "to make *Punch* a kind of radical, unrespectable, impish paper with no inherent respect for the established social order." This sounds very much as if he were trying to make it over in his own image. True, *Punch* had been radical before. The *Oxford Companion to English Literature* describes it as "an illustrated weekly comic periodical, founded in 1841; at first a rather strongly Radical paper, but gradually coming round to its present attitude." The "present" in this context was 1932, when the *Companion* was first published; and the description, although sadly imprecise in a book of such authority, indicates the peculiar status the journal had reached. *Punch* was a national institution: its "present attitude" was common knowledge, and needed no explanation.

Yet it is surprising to discover how many people find *Punch* not to their taste. There must be large

numbers of supporters: even a national institution, if it uses newsprint, must make money to survive. But *Punch* has always had a flavour of its own which could not please the million. It is not, as some have said, a social history; too many aspects of life have found no place in its columns. For many years its appeal was directed to the upper middle class; and today, when the middle classes are fallen upon hard times, it helps to preserve an illusion of gentility which gratifies the innate snobbishness of the English. Even the satire is slanted delicately towards readers who may like to feel that they could not enjoy it without some training in the graces of living. The English are most baffling to the rest of the world when they seem to be laughing at themselves. What really happens, however, is that they laugh at other people a little outside their own class or circle; and this trait, which gives them a reputation for urbanity and tolerance, has helped *Punch* to prosper.

Under Mr Muggeridge's editorship the illusions faded a little. The laughter took a cutting edge, and sometimes—especially when it was raised against Sir Anthony Eden—became savage. There were complaints, too, that the cartoons were often unfathomable. But the influence of the *New Yorker* could be detected before Mr Muggeridge arrived; the economical drawings which tell the story, with little or no need of a caption, are as much of this age as is the music which upsets our more sedate correspondents. The odd thing about *Punch* is that these drawings, some of them nearing the edge of lunacy, have been absorbed into the journal without affecting its character. In spite of Sprod and Ronald Searle, it remains a national institution. The nation changes; editors come and go; but the need of an institution remains, and it still seems to be English even (or perhaps especially) when it is least comprehensible.

—M.H.H.

N.Z. LISTENER, SEPTEMBER 20, 1957,