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“ELECTION-TIME IN AMERICA”: AN ENGLISHMAN’S VIEW OF POPULAR POLITICS DURING THE 1860 CAMPAIGN

By Matthew Noah Vosmeier

British readers who sat down to the April 13, 1861 issue of Charles Dickens’s weekly *All the Year Round* could choose from among a number of literary offerings. For example, they could read the latest chapters of Dickens’s novel *Great Expectations*, a geographic study of the “Arctic and Antarctic Lands,” an analysis of the origins of the story of Robinson Crusoe, or finally, on pages 67-72, an article entitled “Election-Time in America.” This last article was apparently part of a short series written by a British traveler who had toured the United States in 1860. If readers who turned to this last article had regularly perused *All the Year Round*, they might have followed this Englishman’s extensive journey from New York through the Mississippi Valley to New Orleans, the South, the Atlantic Coast, and finally, back to New York City.

In many ways, his account was similar to others the readers had likely encountered. As were most contributions to Victorian periodicals, it was published anonymously; and as in other nineteenth-century travel stories, the author commented on

American society, culture, and modes of travel, often embellishing his stories with dialogue. The article might not even have seemed timely to British readers. When “Election-Time in America” appeared in mid-April, they already knew of Lincoln’s election and had turned their attention to America’s deepening sectional crisis.

What makes this account fascinating reading for students of Lincoln’s America is its rich description of popular politics. During the fall of 1860, the traveler was staying in New York and reported that “the Lincoln men and the Douglas men are in a seething state of excitement.” He told of a parade and ox roast given for Stephen A. Douglas, and later,

at a Republican parade, he watched with awe the Wide Awakes’ procession, its “moving forest of torches advancing toward me from every point of the compass.” He not only recounted lively campaign stories, but spoke of displays and of sales of political ephemera and described campaign buttons, ribbons, songsters, and prints with such clarity that the items he refers to are recognizable to modern readers.

The article has a Dickensian feel, for it is full of detail, exaggeration, and humorous caricature. As an eyewitness account, the article poses some interesting problems; either from slips of memory or to improve the narrative, the author took some liberty with the chronology and details of the events he described.

It is possible that some of the credit for this lively



From the Indiana University Library, Bloomington

Abraham Lincoln as he appeared in *The Illustrated London News* December 8, 1860. This woodcut was based on G. W. Nichols’s lithograph of Charles Alfred Barry’s charcoal portrait, which emphasized “General Jackson firmness” in the Republican candidate. Barry’s portrait is discussed in *The Lincoln Image*, pp. 50-56.

account belongs to Dickens himself. According to Ella Ann Oppenlander, who compiled an index to *All the Year Round* and discovered some of the names of its anonymous contributors, Dickens exerted great influence over the style of the periodical. He selected writers who had first-hand knowledge of a subject and who could tell their stories in interesting and intelligible ways, using "illustrative anecdotes, allegory, dialogue, and similar devices." The *All the Year Round* staff respected "the Chief," as they called Dickens, and hoped to learn from him. Oppenlander also writes that, because Dickens "accepted responsibility for what was printed anonymously, he exercised total control over the contributor's text, and felt not only at liberty, but morally obliged to reject what he disagreed with or to change it to suit himself."¹

Whatever Dickens's influence on the traveler's tale, the result is a captivating view of the 1860 campaign as it neared the height of its excitement. The story is told as seen through the eyes of this Englishman who sought to relay his view of American popular politics to an audience (like us) unaccustomed to nineteenth-century American "hurrah" campaigns, and much of it is worthy of extended quotation.

If the Englishman's audience appreciated reading this description of American campaign fever, it was perhaps because British political culture was unlike that of the United States. In fact, in mid-nineteenth-century England, only one adult in five was enfranchised, elections were held irregularly, and incumbent Members of Parliament often ran uncontested. The result was a political culture without widespread participation, excitement, or vigorous competition. By contrast, America offered near universal white manhood suffrage, and eighty-two percent of enfranchised Americans voted in 1860. In Lincoln's America, "politics seem to enter into everything," as William Gienapp explains in his article of the same name; men's lives were shaped by partisan political participation, and many Americans responded to the party call with loyalty and enthusiasm at rallies and at the polls.²

The English traveler's audience might have been both fascinated and shocked by the American style of popular politics. He began his article with a description of its more unruly side:

All the political clubs are sitting day and night. The "ROUGH-SKINS" are clamorous, the "PHIZ UGLIES" are vociferous, the "DOUBLE PUMPS" of Baltimore are marching in procession, the "REVOLVER HITTERS" and "DEAD RABBITS" of New York are unfurling their banners, the "WIDEAWAKES" are trimming their lanterns by day and carrying them about all night. The Wideawakes are as potent in the America of the pre-

sent day, as the "KNOW-NOTHINGS" — those foes of the Irish and German emigrants — were a few years ago.

He later related having read in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* a "sad story of a poor woman at Baltimore being shot in an accident during a fight between two political clubs, 'The Rough Skins' and 'Double Pumps' before mentioned." Other newspapers, he wrote, are "full of reports of political meetings, and rumours of intended disruption in the South, and of the people of Carolina drilling 'Palmetto Regiments,' and buying powder and rifles."

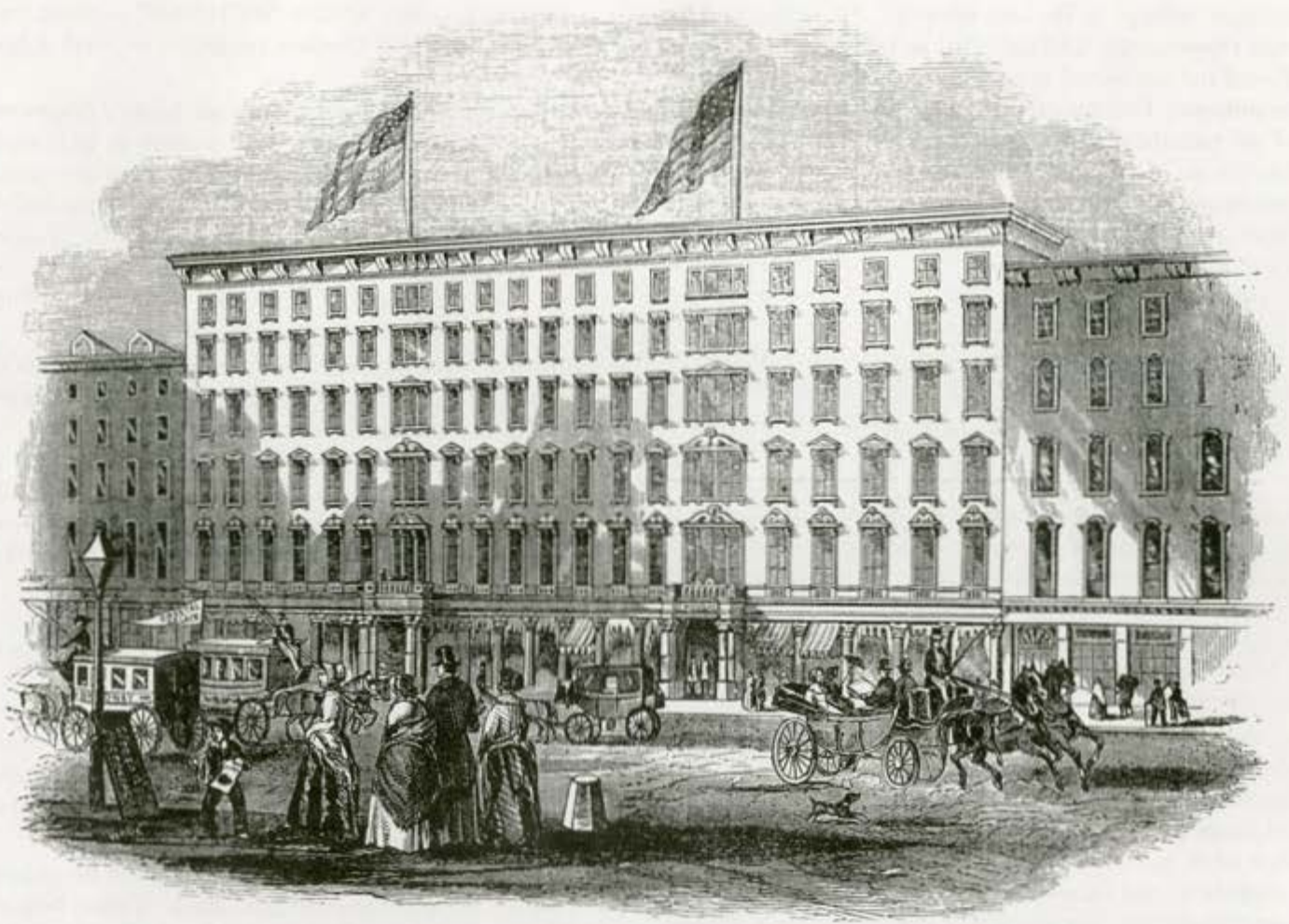
Not all of his story is this grim, however. In much of it, we see an observant traveler wandering New York attempting to take in a bewildering amount of activity:

"Election banners flaunt in the air of every street in New York; vermilion-lettered placards on the walls entreat you to buy pure procession fireworks — if you are a Wideawake — at 'Ezekiel Whitman's, Twenty-fourth-street, Third Avenue.' If I take up the paper I bought at a street-stall just by the St. Nicholas Hotel, I find the leaders all about 'the Grand Mass. Ratification Meeting,' in the Eighteenth Ward...to be held to-night.

Walking down Broadway, the Englishman seemed to see political cartoons everywhere, printed in illustrated newspapers and in large, single sheets, and apparently displayed as political statements and as items for sale:

All the way up Broadway the windows of the palatial shops are full of election caricatures. Yankee Notions shows us a rowdy in silk hat, and boots over his trousers, taking boxing lessons ready for polling-day. Nick Nax presents us with Abe Lincoln spouting from a platform of rails, under which grins a half-concealed [slave]....At the print-shops we see lithographs of Douglas being flogged by his mother for associating with the naughty "Nebraska Bill," and on the other side of the door-post, a gaunt Abraham Lincoln trying to ford the Potomac and get into a very small "White House."

Here, the traveler has observed illustrative examples of the cruel, racist, and rough-and-tumble nature of nineteenth-century political cartoons. According to the Englishman, two of the caricatures mentioned here appeared as woodcuts in *Yankee Notions* and *Nick Nax*, which were published as humorous illustrated papers in New York from the 1850s to the 1870s. Such papers could be "cheap, and even vulgar," writes Frank Luther Mott in his history of American magazines. *Yankee Notions*, for example, was "cheaply printed...its wit was usually cheap also," and its woodcuts were "rather crude."³



From the Indiana University Library, Bloomington

The St. Nicholas Hotel on Broadway, where the English traveler lodged in New York in 1860, as it appeared at its opening in 1853. From Gleason's Pictorial Drawing Room Companion, March 12, 1853. Note the newspaper seller at lower left with his copies of Gleason's Pictorial.

The traveler also noted lithographs hanging in print shops. In Lincoln's day, there was popular demand for prints with political subjects. In *The Lincoln Image: Abraham Lincoln and the Popular Print* (1984), Harold Holzer, Gabor S. Boritt, and Mark E. Neely, Jr. explain that "an industry peculiar to the nineteenth century grew to meet" that demand: "the commercial publication and distribution of lithographs and engravings of political figures."⁴

Although many prints were hung in family parlors, political caricatures like the ones the traveler saw were far less likely to be displayed there. Produced as lithographs, these "poster cartoons" also carried "savage or ephemeral" themes that newspaper woodcuts did. They could be sold to individuals, but more often this political ephemera was produced and sold in large quantities for purchase at a party's newspaper offices.⁵

The traveler and his readers were probably not familiar with the issues behind the lithograph showing "Douglas being flogged by his mother." In this Currier & Ives print

entitled "Stephen Finding 'His Mother'" [Figure 3], while Uncle Sam encourages her, Columbia punishes Stephen A. Douglas for being "a bad boy...ever since you had anything to do with that Nebraska Bill." According to Mark E. Neely (who studied the cartoon closely in *Lincoln Lore* Number 1622, April 1973) the cartoon concerned several issues important during the campaign of 1860. First, because Douglas disregarded the ideal that "the office should seek the man," he was criticized for campaigning aggressively, despite his protest that he was only giving speeches on the way to visit his mother's home. Second, in 1854, Douglas had advocated the Nebraska Bill, which effectively overturned the Missouri Compromise restrictions on slavery in the territories formed out of the Louisiana Purchase. The crisis that followed led to the creation of the Republican party. Third, at least for some Republicans, prohibition was still an important campaign issue, for Columbia is lashing Douglas with the "Maine Law" of 1851, which Douglas and many Democrats opposed. Neely points out that another

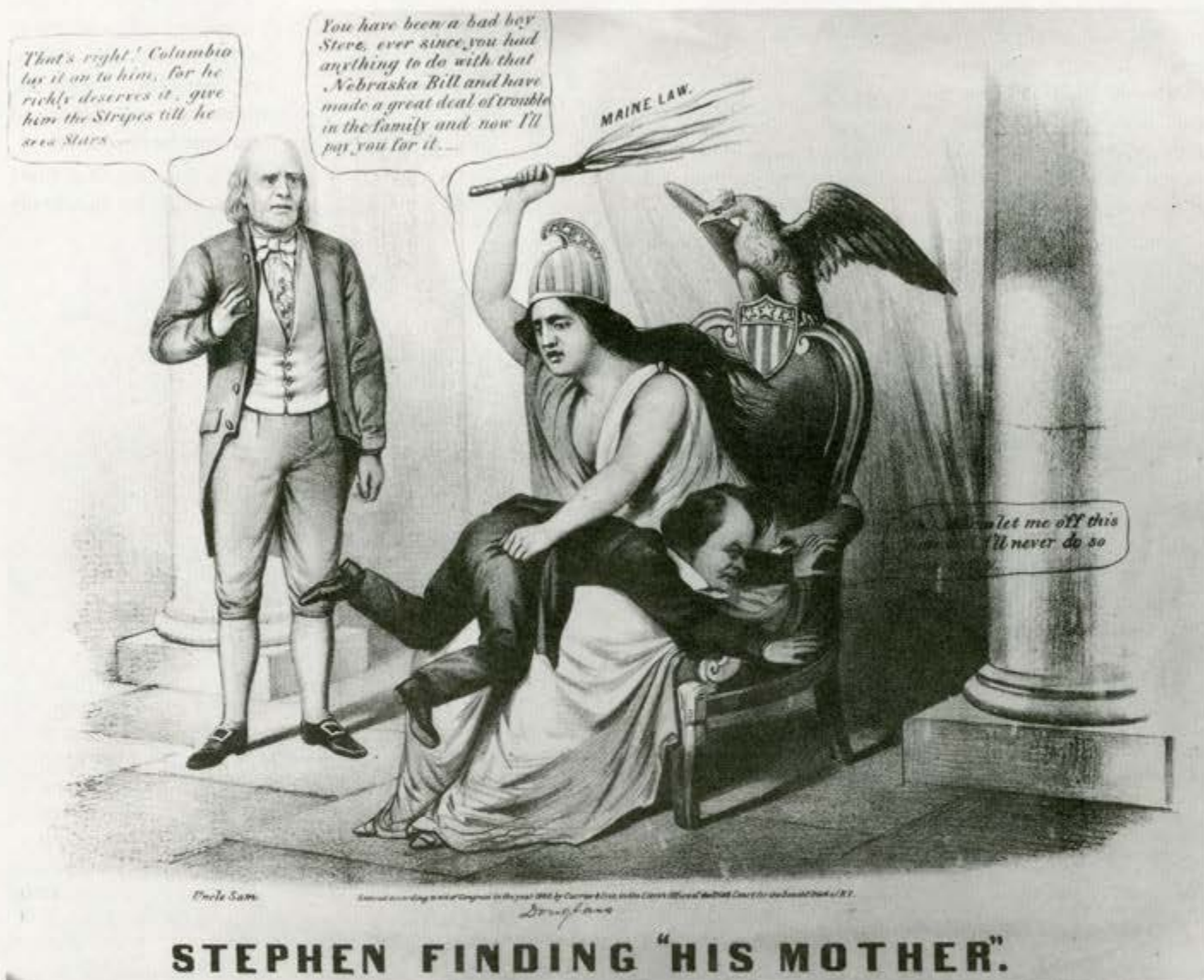


Figure 3

version of this print (with the words "News from Maine" replacing "Maine Law") appeared after the Republicans swept Maine's state elections of early September. That such cartoons lampooned candidates regardless of party prompted Holzer, Boritt, and Neely to explain that "commercialism, not political belief, was the prime force motivating engravers and lithographers" to produce political prints. 6

To be continued.

Notes

1. Ella Ann Oppenlander, *Dickens' All the Year Round: Descriptive Index and Contributor List* (Troy, New York, 1984), pp. 28, 39.
2. Harold Holzer, Gabor S. Boritt, and Mark E. Neely, Jr., "The Lincoln Image: Abraham Lincoln and the Popular Print" in Gabor S. Boritt, ed., *The Historian's Lincoln: Pseudohistory, Psychohistory, and History* (Urbana, 1988), pp. 49-50; William E. Gienapp, "'Politics Seem to Enter into Everything': Political Culture in the North" in William E. Gienapp, et al., *Essays on American Ante-*

bellum Politics, 1840-1860 (College Station, 1982), p. 39.

3. Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines, 1850-1865* (Cambridge, 1957), pp. 182-184.
4. Harold Holzer, Gabor S. Boritt, and Mark E. Neely, Jr., *The Lincoln Image: Abraham Lincoln and the Popular Print* (New York, 1984), pp. xviii-xix.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4; Holzer, Boritt, and Neely, *Changing the Lincoln Image* (Fort Wayne, 1985), p. 41.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 43



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