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Thomas Nast

Date: 1936
From: Dictionary of American Biography
Publisher: Gale
Document Type: Biography
Length: 986 words
Content Level: (Level 4)
Lexile Measure: 1230L

About this Person

Born: September 27, 1840 in Landau, Germany
Died: December 07, 1902 in Guayaquil, Ecuador
Nationality: American
Occupation: Illustrator
Full Text:

Nast, Thomas (Sept. 27, 1840 - Dec. 7, 1902), cartoonist, was born in Landau, Germany, where his father was a musician in the 9th Bavarian Regiment. In 1846 his mother took him to New York, where four years later his father, who had left Germany for political reasons and had enlisted in the French navy, joined them. The elder Nast, whose name is given in the city directory as Thomas, became a member of the Philharmonic Society and of various theatrical orchestras, while the boy attended the public schools. A gift of crayons by a neighbor led young Nast to develop a passion for drawing. After attending a class taught by the artist Theodore Kaufmann, he entered the Academy of Design, receiving also much personal instruction from Alfred Fredericks. At fifteen he showed some of his sketches to the publisher Frank Leslie, received a trial commission to draw the Sunday-morning crowd at Christopher Street Ferry, and was promptly engaged by *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* at four dollars a week. The office, frequented by some of the best illustrators of the period, was an excellent practical school. Sol Eytinge of the staff gave him invaluable technical training, while Nast carefully studied the methods of the English illustrators, Leech, Gilbert, and Tenniel. When in 1857 *Harper's Weekly* began its career he resolved to contribute, and his first important drawing, a page savagely satirizing a current police scandal in New York, appeared in it on Mar. 19, 1859. When later that same year the *New York Illustrated News* was established he left *Leslie's*, and covered important assignments for the new periodical, including the funeral of John Brown. The great Heenan-Sayers fight in 1860 drew him to England, and Garibaldi's revolt of that year led him to extend his tour to Italy, whence he sent pictures of the fighting to both London and New York periodicals. He returned to America on Feb. 1, 1861, with a dollar and a half in his pocket, and on Sept. 26, 1861, the day before his twenty-first birthday, he was married to Sarah Edwards. It was characteristic both of his self-confidence and love of music that his first purchase was a \$350 piano on credit.

Following the outbreak of the Civil War, Nast quickly found his true rôle. He hurried to Baltimore and Washington, publishing his drawings at first in the tottering *New York Illustrated News*, then briefly renewing his connection with *Leslie's*, and finally contributing sketches to *Harper's Weekly*. In the summer of 1862 he became a staff artist for the last-named journal. Fletcher Harper, who was in charge of the *Weekly*, perceived his talent, and encouraged him to follow his own bent, making pictures with ideas rather than illustrations of events. By 1863 he was recognized as one of the pillars of the journal. His spirited drawing, "After the Battle," on Oct. 25, 1862, aimed at those who opposed vigorous prosecution of the war, his touching double-page Christmas picture of that year, his pictorial arraignments of guerrilla warfare in the border states, and his "Emancipation" of Jan. 24, 1863, depicting negro life of the past and the future, all produced a powerful impression. Several pictures of 1864, notably his spirited "On to Richmond" on June 18, and his sardonic sketch, "Compromise with the South" on Sept. 3, just after the Democratic Convention (showing a triumphant Southerner clasping hands with a crippled Northern soldier over the grave of Union heroes), were circulated in tremendous numbers. Lincoln declared near the close of the war: "Thomas Nast has been our best recruiting sergeant" (Harper, *post*, p. 188). The Reconstruction cartoons expressed a bitterness which often became intemperate, notably in the portrayal of Andrew Johnson as a bully and dictator, and of Southerners as engaged in outrages upon the defenseless negroes; but they marked an advance in the art of political caricature. In 1866 he began his very effective use of Shakespearian situations as vehicles for his ideas. Ablest of all were the fierce attacks he maintained in the years 1869-72 upon the "Tweed ring," to the overthrow of which he contributed as much as any single man. Caricature has seldom if ever been more eloquent and impressive than in his drawings, "The Tammany Tiger Let Loose" (Nov. 11, 1871), "Who Stole the People's Money?" (Aug. 19, 1871), and "A Group of Vultures Waiting for the Storm to 'Blow Over'" (Sept. 23, 1871). His final triumph was the apprehension of Tweed in Spain through a cartoon which made him recognizable even in that country.

Throughout the 'seventies and until 1886 Nast remained one of the greatest influences in American journalism. While the policies of

Harper's Weekly were dictated by G. W. Curtis and Fletcher Harper, Nast's pen was the most distinctive element in the journal. He made Greeley ludicrous in the campaign of 1872, mercilessly ridiculed the political hobgoblin of Grant's "Caesarism," defended Hayes against Tilden, and forsook the Republican party only when Blaine was nominated. The Tammany tiger, which he had popularized, was borrowed from the Americus Club emblem, but the Democratic donkey and Republican elephant were his own inventions, both becoming fixed in his pictures in 1874. Following his own inclination as well as that of the editors of *Harper's Weekly*, he staunchly upheld sound money and currency reform and was a devoted adherent of Grover Cleveland. In 1885 and 1886 his contributions to the *Weekly* grew fewer, he chafed under restrictions which he felt robbed his pen of its old slashing vigor, and his Christmas picture of 1886 was his last. For a time he contributed to other journals and in 1892-93 briefly managed a sheet called *Nast's Weekly*, but his great days were over. He had lost most of his savings, amassed in lecturing as well as journalism, by the Grant & Ward failure. In May 1902, Theodore Roosevelt appointed him consul at Guayaquil, Ecuador, where he succumbed to the climate.

FURTHER READINGS

[A. B. Paine, *Th. Nast: His Period and His Pictures* (1904), is an exceptionally interesting biography, fully illustrated, but sometimes lacking in definite facts. A few details are supplied by J. Henry Harper in *The House of Harper* (1912). A son, Cyril Nast, published "Thomas Nast as I Knew Him," in the *Am. Art Student*, Feb. 1927. A three-volume scrapbook collection of Nast's pictures is available in the N. Y. Pub. Lib. He illustrated a number of books, but the indispensable repository of his work is the files of *Harper's Weekly*. Obituaries appeared in *N. Y. Times*, Dec. 8, 1902; *Harper's Weekly*, Dec. 29, 1902.]

Source Citation (MLA 9th Edition)

"Thomas Nast." *Dictionary of American Biography*, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936. *Gale In Context: Biography*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/BT2310006848/BIC?u=mlln_m_winhigh&sid=bookmark-BIC&xid=7ff983d3. Accessed 16 Feb. 2023.

Gale Document Number: GALE|BT2310006848