



*Poor Richard to Doonesbury*

ALTER BLAIR  
HAMLIN HILL

# *America's Humor*

*From Poor Richard to Doonesbury*

**WALTER BLAIR**

**HAMLIN HILL**

**OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS**  
*Oxford New York Toronto Melbourne*

Oxford University Press  
Oxford London Glasgow  
New York Toronto Melbourne Wellington  
Nairobi Dar es Salaam Cape Town  
Kuala Lumpur Singapore Jakarta Hong Kong Tokyo  
Delhi Bombay Calcutta Madras Karachi

Copyright © 1978 by Oxford University Press, Inc.  
First published by Oxford University Press, New York, 1978  
First issued as an Oxford University Press paperback, 1980

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Blair, Walter, 1900-

America's humor: from Poor Richard to Doonesbury.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. American wit and humor—History and criticism.

I. Hill, Hamlin Lewis, 1931- joint author. II. Title.

PS430.B495 817'.009 77-23829 ISBN 0-19-502756-6 pbk

Printed in the United States of America

## *Preface*

MOST "AUTHORITIES" AGREE that laughter is a highly subjective response. So writers who are foolhardy enough to discuss the humor which does or doesn't produce it are an endangered species. Usually they are kicked around for allegedly proving that they themselves have no humor whatever. It is customary to complain that they are unamusing nitpickers. Often they are scolded for saying too much about minor authors—or minor works by major authors—because those authors or their works tickle the funnybones, not of normal readers, but of the commentators. Again, they are sneered at for leaving out a long treatise on somebody's favorite comic. (Loving admirers of Will Cuppy are forewarned: This is the only mention of him in this book.) So, even though we expect to be unjustifiably abused, in order to dodge as much flack as we can, we want to say at the start what we have tried to do in this study.

Our aim, stated modestly, has been to trace American humor—high-falutin and low-falutin; rustic, frontier and urban; white, black, blue and parti-colored—from colonial times to the present.

Although at times our prejudices influenced our samplings and our evaluations, we have tried throughout to do justice even to humor that we think unfunny, provided it was influential, typical or widely enjoyed. This is because we believe that for two reasons humor, loved as well as loathed, unfashionable as well as fashionable, merits detailed consideration:

- 1) As probably the most popular creative achievement of our countrymen, our humor reveals a great deal about America's history.

- 2) Much of it, whether forgotten or still admired, is fine enough as literature to justify critical analysis.

So our study has been of comic works as historical documents, artistic achievements, or both.

Yielding to our interest in the ways historical events shaped humor in this country, we have written about the comedy that

crossed the Atlantic Ocean and the “localizations” and “Americanizations” of it in its new environments during changing times. We trace the effects of our free—and at times polluted—air on several eternal laugh-provoking types who came here lugging trunkfuls of age-old jokes. We monitor the changing qualities, fortunes, and appeals of funny pedants and ignoramuses, prissy prudes and rascally cheats, braggarts and self-deprecating men and women, as they were pictured by our comic writers. We argue that many mutations were both profound and revealing.

Cultural influences fascinate us, so we describe the almost immediate and often long-lasting reactions in humor to social, political, and intellectual events—the exploration and settlement of the New World, the Revolution and subsequent wars, the westering frontier, widening education, expanding suffrage, the aftermaths of the Civil War, urbanization, scientific developments, the new psychologies, the proliferation of mass media, and the growth of the counter-culture. We also suggest a few interrelationships between these phenomena and their impacts.

Aware that individual humorists, like more reputable writers, are unique, or at any rate have reasons for being impatient with historians who pigeonhole them too neatly, we have done away with some old labels and stressed neglected kinships and individual traits. We have also taken a new look not only at common qualities and skills but also at unusual ones. To make sure that at least some individual works were done justice, we analyze several at length—Benjamin Franklin’s war satires, “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” “Rip Van Winkle,” “The Big Bear of Arkansas,” “Parson John Bullin’s Lizards,” “Jim Baker’s Blue-Jay Yarn,” “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty,” *The Great American Novel*, the Doonesbury comic strips, *The Bank Dick*, and Lenny Bruce’s standup assaults and batteries. Though we know that these won’t get everybody’s vote for the funniest or most important comic American writings, we believe that each, as a representative of a time, a place, and an outstanding artist, deserves a close look.

Recognizing how consistently our comics whacked away with twigs, bladders, slapsticks, and bludgeons at pedagogs and pedants, we have tried not to be stuffier than was necessary, and minimized dates and titles. At the risk of catching it for slighting readers’ favorites, we have deliberately omitted mentions of some

humorists, abbreviated our discussions of others, and at several points chucked lengthy lists of names into footnotes which readers (if they like) can skip. When we treated the post-Civil War "Local Colorists" and "Phunny Phellows," for instance, instead of being exhaustive, we scrutinized only a few representative figures and footnoted many others. Recent books, articles, and even a couple of scholarly journals focus on American humor and broadcast the valuable discoveries and insights of dozens of scholars and critics. We acknowledge our major indebtednesses not in footnotes but in the text and in brief bibliographical notes at the end of the book.

Relevance, we believe, has dictated our choice of illustrations. Some show significant resemblances—e.g., the picture of *Chap-Book's* monacled dandy of the 1890's and *The New Yorker's* monacled Eustace Tilley of the 1920's. Some show incongruities that humorists played with—those, say, between reality and fantasy, between humorists and the eccentrics or clowns that they created, or between an invented character and that character's fantasy-image. Some make it possible to put side by side significantly different versions of the same comic story.

In our eagerness to avoid as many errors as possible, we have tried the patience of friends and colleagues by inflicting parts of the manuscript on them. Richard Amacher, E. W. Baughman, John Bryant, Leon Howard, George Kernodle, and Henry Nash Smith read parts of the book and made invaluable suggestions. James Raimes of Oxford University Press abided our delays and missed deadlines with amazing grace.

Each of us inflicted rough drafts on typists—Shirley Clark and Sue Ann Strickland in Chicago and Gloria Baca in Albuquerque—who struggled, survived, and even made some kind of sense out of them. We thank them.

We have incorporated passages, or versions of passages, from publications by both of us. We thank the initial publishers for letting us draw from the following:

Walter Blair: "Burlesques in Nineteenth-Century American Humor," *American Literature* 2:236-47 (1930); "Popularity of Nineteenth-Century American Humorists," *ibid.*, 3:175-94; "Introduction" to *Native American Humor* (New York, 1937; San Francisco, 1960); *Horse Sense in American Humor* (Chicago,

1942; New York, 1962); "Mike Fink in History, Legend, and Story," in *Half Horse Half Alligator: Growth of the Mike Fink Legend* (Chicago, 1956), pp. 3-40; *Mark Twain and "Huck Finn"* (Berkeley, 1960, 1973); "Introduction" to E. B. White, *One Man's Meat* (New York, 1964); "'A Man's Voice, Speaking': A Continuum in American Humor," in *Veins of Humor*, ed. Harry Levin (Cambridge, 1972), pp. 185-204; "'The Big Bear of Arkansas', T. B. Thorpe and His Masterpiece," in *The Frontier Humorists*, ed. M. Thomas Inge (Hamden, 1975), pp. 105-17; "Mark Twain's Other Masterpiece," *Studies in American Humor* 1: 132-47 (1975); and "Charles Mathews and 'A Trip to America,'" *Prospects* 2 (New York, 1976), pp. 1-23; "'Americanized' Comic Braggarts," *Critical Inquiry* 3:331-49 (1977).

Hamlin Hill: "Modern American Humor: The Janus Laugh," *College English* 25: 170-76 (1963); "Black Humor: Its Cause and Cure," *Colorado Quarterly* 17: 57-64 (1968); "The Durability of Old Southwestern Humor," *Mississippi Quarterly* 29: 119-23 (1975-1976); and "Black Humor and the Mass Audience," in *American Humor, Essays Presented to John C. Gerber*, ed. O M Brack, Jr. (Scottsdale, 1977), pp. 1-11.

We planned the book together, consulted about it frequently, and each submitted all of his copy to his collaborator for corrections and suggestions. So some of our errors were joint achievements. Some, however, we made on our own without anybody's assistance. So that the correct perpetrator of such mistakes may be identified, we list the chapters for which each of us was primarily responsible: Walter Blair—Chapters 1-13, 20, 22-32, 37, 42-44 and "Afterword;" Hamlin Hill—Chapters 14-19, 21, 33-36, 38-41, 45 and 46.

W.B.

H.H.

## **Contents**

### **Starters**

#### *No End of Jokes* 3

1. The Lies of the Land 3
2. Evolving Jokes 17
3. Folk Journalism 26
4. Favorite Incongruities 39

#### *"A Harmonious Human Multitude"* 53

5. Franklin: Muddied Giant 53
6. Teachers 63
7. Varied Masks 74
8. Franklin's Monsters—and Some Offspring 79

#### *Cast Typing* 92

9. John Wesley Jarvis, Storyteller 92
10. Mike Fink 113
11. David versus Davy 122
12. Davy versus Captain Fear of Hell's Gulch 133
13. Davy II, Davy III, and Mose 143

### **The Golden Age of American Humor**

#### *A National Phenomenon* 155

14. Oppositions 155
15. Ichabod and Rip 165



*The Reputables* 172

16. "To Laugh Newenglandly" 172  
 17. The Yankee and the Major 180

*Subversives* 187

18. The Profile of a Prude 187  
 19. A Gallery of Rogues 193

*Two Masterpieces* 200

20. "The Big Bear of Arkansas" 200  
 21. Sut Lovingood and the End of the World 213

*Tall Tales Go West* 222

22. The Last Frontier 222  
 23. Derby, Alter Egos: Phoenix and Squibob 229  
 24. Jim Bridger and William Wright 238

**"And the War Came"***Changes in Jokelore* 251

25. Twilight of the Comic Demigods 251  
 26. The Local Colorists 263

*Phunny Phellows* 274

27. Charles Farrar Browne/Artemus Ward 274  
 28. Shaw, Locke, and Smith 284

**Mark Twain***Mark Twain's Chestnuts* 303

29. "The Jokes That Never Die" 303  
 30. *Eiron* and *Alazon* 309  
 31. "The Art Which the Teller Puts into the Telling" 319  
 32. Mark Twain's Other Masterpiece 333

*Mark Twain Pioneers* 349

- 33. *Eirons in the Fire* 349
- 34. *Nightmares and Silences* 357

*Into the Twentieth Century**The Turn of the Century, 1895-1905* 367

- 35. *Another Transitional Period* 367
- 36. *Some Urban Humorists* 375

*Between World Wars* 388

- 37. *Mass Production Comic Demigod* 388
- 38. *The Lunatic Fringe: Colyumnists and  
Algonquin Wits* 404
- 39. *The New Yorker* 417
- 40. *Benchley and Perelman* 427
- 41. *White and Thurber* 437
- 42. *"The Secret Life of Walter Mitty"* 448

*Modern Humor* 460

- 43. *Humor in Fiction* 460
- 44. *The Great American Novel* 472
- 45. *Up from the Underground* 487
- 46. *Cinema, Cartoon, and Stand-up Comic* 507

*Afterword* 520

*References* 531

*Index* 547

## ***Illustrations***

- Old world braggart vs. new world ring-tailed  
roarer Frontispiece
- Indians as noble savages 4
- Pieter Brueghel, "Das Schlaraffenland" 15
- Old World Tricksters vs. New World Tricksters 46-49
- A humorist's caricature of Franklin 59
- Page from *Poor Richard's Almanack* 65
- Program summary for Mathews's "Trip to America" 97
- Mathews's impersonations of Jarvis's characters 101
- Colonel Crockett, beat at a shooting match 119
- David Crockett 123
- "And the cretur walked rite down . . ." 129
- Il Capitano 135
- The heroic Davy Crockett 145
- Handbill advertising a Mose play 148
- The comic Davy finds a Yankee peddler with his gal  
friend 159
- Rip Van Winkle and His Scolding Wife 170
- Jack Downing 185
- Major Joseph Jones 185
- A portrait of Simon Suggs 194
- One of Justin Howard's illustrations for *Sut  
Lovingood's Yarns* 198
- One of Phoenix's brilliant inventions 236
- Little Davy knocked Corpse-Maker and the  
Child of Calamity sprawling 260
- The idyllic South fondly remembered in 1873 269

- Joel Chandler Harris's faithful Uncle Remus 271  
Charles Farrar Browne 279  
Artemus Ward and Mrs. Ward in the Showman's  
Museum 282  
Petroleum Vesuvius Nasby 286  
Artemus Ward gives Abraham Lincoln helpful advice 288  
Calendar page 293  
Flyer advertising a lecture 294  
Indian maiden of romance vs. Indian maiden  
of humor 298  
Mark Twain, Artist, and His Art 324-25  
Jim Baker 347  
"After the Explosion" 352  
Original printing of "The Purple Cow" 376  
Two Dandies 380-81  
Archy and mehitabel 408  
Harold Ross, trying to be Eustace Tilley 425  
The Little Man quails 432  
Home à la Thurber 446  
Mr. Dooley 495  
Toilet training à la Bombeck 497  
Doonesbury's cast of characters 512  
Lenny Bruce 519

**Part One**

***Starters***



# No End of Jokes

*They tell sweet lies of Paradise . . .  
And lies—and lies—and lies!*  
—Anita Owen, "Dreamy Eyes," ca. 1894.

## I. *The Lies of the Land*

EUROPEANS WHO WROTE OR talked about the New World during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries implied that visitors with a few minutes to spare could easily dig up or liberate from royal treasuries silver, gold, and precious jewels. And they could do this anywhere in the area between the Arctic Ocean and the Caribbean Sea. The returned travelers had good news about other attractions. During endless summers, their story went, wine, plants that cured all ailments, fruit, fish, fowl, and every sort of game were so plentiful that nobody had to stir to get them; stretch out a hand and, like love, they came a-tricklin' down. Indians were noble savages built like Renaissance nudes, easygoing about wealth, and with no sticky notions about personal property. If they were heathens, all the better; this meant they were ripe for conversion into Christians, laborers, mechanics, or perhaps slaves.

Late in the sixteenth century, John Donne showed what he had heard about lands overseas in, of all places, a rhapsody about his mistress preparing for bed:

O my America! my new-found-land,  
My kingdom, safeliest when with one man manned,  
My mine of precious stones, my empery,  
How blest am I in this discovering thee!



Indians were noble savages built like Renaissance nudes. Engravings by Theodore de Bry, based on paintings by Jacques le Moyne de Morgues. From *America* (Frankfurt, 1591). (Rare Book Division, New York Public Library)

But settlers soon found that precious stones and metals always were out beyond the edges of their settlements. The living was not quite as easy as promotional tracts advertised. Master George Percy told how it was in Jamestown in 1607:

There were never Englishmen left in a foreign country in such misery. . . . We watched every three nights, lying on the bare cold ground, what weather soever came; [and] warded all the next day: which brought our men to be most feeble wretches. Our food was but a small can of barley sodden in water, to five men a day. Our drink, cold water taken out of the river . . . very salt [or] full of slime and filth; which was the destruction of many . . . three or four in a night; in the morning, their bodies being trailed out of their cabins like dogs, to be buried.

The grim statistics: of one hundred and four men and boys in the colony, within six months fifty-one died of starvation and disease.

The experience was all too typical. A few years later at Plym-



outh, "in two or three months half their company died," often "two or three a day," victims of the New England winter, malnutrition, and sickness.

Early periods were the worst, but for decades, settling in the New World was riskier than Russian roulette. Understandably, even as things became better, rumors proliferated about natural and supernatural forces hell-bent on crushing newcomers. However bad the weather—fierce winds, tornadoes, waves, currents, hail stones the size of bowling balls, tropical heat, and arctic cold—reports predicted worse. Earthquakes, one of which gulped down a river without a hiccup, were said to be rampant. Lists of fauna included not only fierce beasts that actually were ready to prey but also nonexistent tigers, lions, crocodiles, and sea serpents. After King Philip's War wiped out a tenth of the males in Massachusetts Bay Colony and brought rapes, scalplings, and mutilations, red men were pictured as devils incarnate—torturers, murderers, cannibals. Stories had it that—even worse—hordes of fiends temporarily in human form fanned out over the countryside to horrify and harass. On one occasion, four men—all there were left of a party of six hundred colonists and soldiers—"heard much tumult and great clamor of voices, the sound of timbrels, flutes and tambourines as well as other instruments," and almost at once saw their boat teetering on a tree top—surely the work of sorcerers. A visitor to both Southern and Northern colonies in the seventeenth century wrote that the land was cursed with "witches too many, bottle-bellied witches amongst the Quakers, and others that produce many strange apparitions if you will believe report."

Howard Mumford Jones summarizes scores of travel books and settlers' accounts:

If the modern reader has . . . a feeling of a vague, rich jungle of repellent or terrifying things, animals, plants, and men, it is the impression he would have received, I suggest, had he been a literate European . . . interested in reading about the new-found land. . . . The unpredictable, the abnormal, the inhuman, the cruel, the savage, and the strange in terms of European experience were from the beginning part of the image. . . . The New World was filled with monsters animal and monsters human; it was a region of terrifying natural forces, of gigantic catastrophes . . . where the laws of nature tidily governing Europe were transmogrified into something new and strange.