Introduction

The Nineteenth Century and Beyond

The Editors

If comic art were to have its equivalent of the *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes* ['Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns'],¹ it would be the polemic that developed in 1996 as an 'add-on' to the centenary celebrations of the invention of cinema of a year earlier. Following the assertion that the first comic strip was R. F. Outcault's *Yellow Kid* of 1896, French reaction was indignant. Speaking at a high-profile conference in Angoulême, Yves Frémion, media personality and Euro-politician, made a lengthy tongue-in-cheek attack on perceived American usurping of credit for key cultural creations (cinema, science-fiction, blue-jeans, AIDS, the Olympics...) before arriving at the following conclusion:²

Il me revient l'honneur, en commençant ce colloque, d'orienter le débat clairement pour éviter qu'il ne dévie vers un résultat mitigé, et pour que cette imposture soit démasquée sans ambiguïté. En réalité, tout ce que nous pouvons fêter cette année, c'est le cent-cinquantième de la mort de l'inventeur de la BD, Rodolphe Töpffer. (6)

[In opening this conference I have the honour of setting the debate clearly in the right direction so as to avoid it going off on a dubious tangent, and in order for such impostures to be well and truly outed. In truth, all that is to be celebrated this year is the 150th anniversary of the death of the inventor of the BD, Rodolphe Töpffer.]

Frémion's tirade, for all its humour, nonetheless underlines an important point: at a time when the *bande dessinée* was consolidating its cultural legitimacy, it was seen as paramount that it should have an authenticating lineage, and the birth of that lineage was to be assigned to the French-speaking world in the early years of the nineteenth century.

Thirteen years later the debate has moved on. Töpffer remains a key figure in the medium, but not necessarily as a *terminus post quem* marker. It is now gener-

1 I.e., the seventeenth-century literary debate on the relative merits of the Ancients as compared with those of the creators of the time of Louis XIV.

2 Frémion's paper has been published as 'Inventions, inventeurs et inventards: Un Inventaire, une aventure' ['Inventions, Inventors and Inventing Types: An Inventory, an Adventure'], *Les Origines de la bande dessinée*, ed. Thierry Groensteen, *Le Collectionneur de Bandes Dessinées* 79 (1996), 6–10. The conference was part of Angoulême's international festival.

ally accepted that his strips were part of a wider text/image current, and that the label of ‘inventor of the comic strip’ could equally be applied, depending on definitions, to William Hogarth, Jacques Callot or indeed many others. Previous scholarship – specifically David Kunzle’s two-volume *The Early Comic Strip: Narrative Strips and Picture Stories in the European Broadsheet from c. 1450 to 1825*,³ and *The History of the Comic Strip: The Nineteenth Century*⁴ – had pointed to a Europe-wide phenomenon, as was also to be the case for *Forging a New Medium: The Comic Strip in the Nineteenth Century*, edited by Pascal Lefèvre and Charles Dierick.⁵ Nonetheless, Töpffer remains of interest as an exemplary figure in the spread of image narratives at a time of new mass technology, and, in terms of reception history, as a key figure in a comic strip canon.

The re-evaluation of the Töpffer/Outcault debate does lead us to assess the nineteenth century (and its aftermath) as we might assess the ‘Golden Age’ of the 1930s or the underground era of the 1960s and 1970s. In all of these cases, technological changes, social circumstances and national specificity have moulded the development of graphic storytelling. These are the very concepts under consideration in this volume.

We open with a contribution in which David Kunzle presents an artefact that returns us to the 1996 debate, and the puzzle of the origins of comics: a little-known autograph manuscript by Töpffer, the Gourary manuscript of *M. Jabot*. Kunzle’s article helps us to reflect upon creation and distribution techniques for the comic book (or *roman en estampes* [‘novel of engravings’], as Töpffer called his books), its relationship to caricature, and the role of new technology, in this case auto-lithography, in the development of the form. Kunzle evokes a world of to-ing and fro-ing between author, audience and publisher, for a form that was still very much dependent on private distribution, almost akin to the *salons* of the pre-Revolutionary era.

Roger Sabin’s article, ‘Ally Sloper on Stage’, analyses a cross-media phenomenon of the final decades of the nineteenth century, a cartoon character who migrated to the music-hall stage, and from there to circuses, magic-lantern shows and films (the latter as early as 1896). As the article shows, not only do the Ally Sloper cartoons give insights into the emergence of working-class leisure pursuits, the character also helped foster the development of an entertainment culture in which his creator, Charles Ross, was a major player. Moreover, Sabin points to curiously modern elements of the character’s career, including the development of this fictional celebrity as a brand, and the complexity of the relationship between his parallel incarnations on page and stage, which

3 David Kunzle, *The Early Comic Strip: Narrative Strips and Picture Stories in the European Broadsheet from c. 1450 to 1825* (Los Angeles: U of California P, 1973).

4 David Kunzle, *The History of the Comic Strip: The Nineteenth Century* (Los Angeles: U of California P, 1990).

5 Pascal Lefèvre and Charles Dierick, eds., *Forging a New Medium: The Comic Strip in the Nineteenth Century* (Brussels: VUB University Press, 1998).

became highly self-reflexive. Contemporary responses from the intellectual élite prefigure later debates around working-class culture: Ross's drunken, idle anti-hero was variously praised as an example of the renaissance of authentic folk culture, despised as trash, or condemned as immoral. Meanwhile, press barons took note: as Sabin argues, there are grounds for considering Ally Sloper as the forerunner of the integrated marketing that leads through Hearst newspapers to Mickey Mouse and now Harry Potter.

Pascal Lefèvre approaches the evolution of the comic strip from a formal angle, looking at the way in which publication norms to a large extent dictated the set-up on the page and, as a result, content. Drawing upon the specific example of Belgium in the years 1880 to 1929 (the birth of *Tintin*), Lefèvre presents an overview of the five formats that moulded the development of the comic strip into the form we recognise today: popular prints, illustrated magazines, magazines for children, strips in newspapers and artists' books.

Viviane Alary's article, 'The Spanish *Tebeo*', begins with the time period where Pascal Lefèvre concludes and takes us beyond the nineteenth century, but it is still historical evolution, influence and counter-influence that are at the centre of her analysis of the cultural specificity of the *tebeo*. The word is not just a Spanish equivalent of 'comic strip' or '*bande dessinée*', because the industry developed under the Franco regime, and so remains associated with it, creating an identification that, she suggests, has hindered the subsequent (post-1970s) development and legitimisation of a comic-strip culture. However, she argues that the relationship of content to official ideology was not straightforward: certain editors, by drawing on earlier traditions of Spanish culture, including the picaresque novel or the *costumbrismo* of popular imagery, avoided stifling ideological conformity and succeeded in portraying the often rebellious energy of ordinary people, even if the censors stamped out what they saw as excesses, such as challenges to paternal authority. As Alary maintains, the current context for comic strip artists in Spain cannot be understood without reference to this historical background: the *tebeo* may now be a source of nostalgia, but artists working for an adult readership have chosen to distinguish themselves from it by adopting the term '*cómic*'.

This volume of *European Comic Art*, therefore, extends our understanding of important issues raised by the 1996 debate and helps us better to understand the historical evolution of the comic strip. It recognises the contribution of great artists and pivotal works to this process, but also foregrounds a range of key factors that have historically influenced the medium and deserve investigation: the creation process and manuscript production, character development and transfer between visual forms, changes in distribution and physical format, and the global movements and cross-fertilisation of national comics traditions, heralded already in the nineteenth century by the migration of comic books, cartoonists, techniques and technology. We recognise that the nineteenth

century was a defining era for European comic art, laying the ground for the twentieth-century developments that are also chronicled here, and for subsequent evolutions of the form on into the work of present-day artists.

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