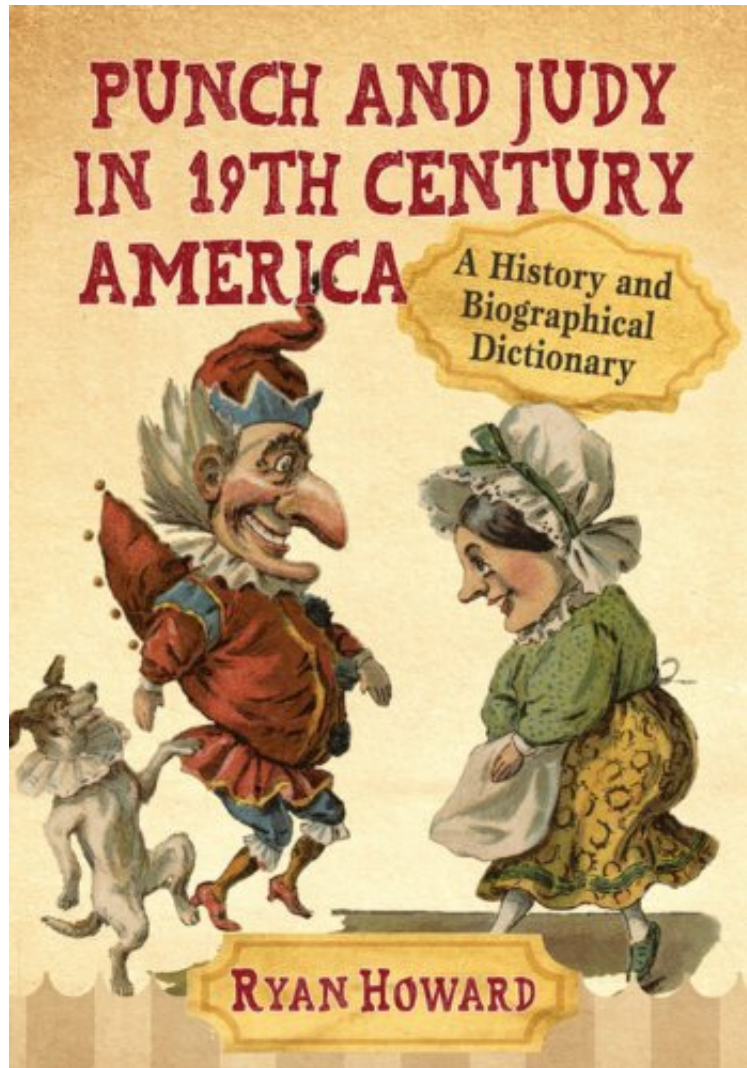


## Punch and Judy in 19th Century America: A History and Biographical Dictionary

Ryan Howard

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**Ryan Howard : Punch and Judy in 19th Century America: A History and Biographical Dictionary** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Punch and Judy in 19th Century America: A History and Biographical Dictionary:

1 of 2 people found the following review helpful. GOOD BOOKBy john m. atkinsonIF THIS IS YOUR STUDY YOU ARE STRANGE BUT IT WORKED FOR ME. GOOD BOOK4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. Old Red Nose is Ready for His CloseupBy Mark A. LevensonHis past is murky and his future seems uncertain but, for most of the past 350 years, he's had quite a run. Not that he looks like much--or, rather, he looks like too much: a big

paunch in front, an equally big hump emerging like a great horn from his back, and a red nose the size of a pickle, ending a hair's breadth from the jutting chin that rises to meet it. And those are his better features. Yet, this grotesque little puppet, named Punchinello--Mr. Punch to his friends, and everyone's his friend--has been charming audiences at least since Samuel Pepys reported seeing his show ("very pretty, the best that ever I saw") in Covent Garden in 1662. While some trace his spiritual DNA to ancient Greece, his direct antecedent was the 17th century commedia dell'arte character Pulcinella. Wherever the traveling commedia troupes went, Pulcinella spawned progeny: in France, Polichinelle; in Russia, Petroushka; in England, Punch. It was in England that the character found his greatest fame. By 1800, Punch and Judy--his wife, who gives as good as she gets--began their conquest of England, first on the streets of London, then at the country's seaside resorts, and finally, by the end of the century, in the drawing rooms, gardens, and even palaces of the aristocracy. The first family of puppetry inspired Charles Dickens to write that for persons "of a reflective turn of mind" to lack an appreciation of Punch and Judy would be to "evince a peculiarity perhaps without parallel in the history of Mankind." Conquest complete. Punch's popularity in 19th century England was only rivaled--and exceeded, according to Ryan Howard--in the United States of the same era. Mr. Howard tells the tale of the little puppet who could in *Punch and Judy in 19th Century America: A History and Biographical Dictionary*. The author, professor of art emeritus at Morehead State University, is an art historian and the author of a biography of Paul McPharlin, the preeminent historian of American puppetry. Mr. Howard's history is engagingly varied. He notes that Punch entertained the troops on both sides of the Civil War--courtesy of puppeteer Oliver Lano, who repeatedly crossed the Mason-Dixon line despite the hostilities. Punch entertained the Astors, Vanderbilts, Rockefellers and their friends during the height of the Gilded Age. He was even a favorite of President Theodore Roosevelt, although a Roosevelt puppet saw the business end of Punch's stick--the stick that gives us the word "slapstick" for physical comedy--in at least one Punch show of the era. (Mr. Howard's book considers the early 20th century, as well.) In addition to shows by itinerant, professional puppeteers, Punch and Judy was a hugely popular amateur entertainment, taken up even by physicians, police officers, financiers, lawyers, and a sitting U.S. senator. Mr. Howard sets two goals for his work. The first is to share what he has learned of nearly 350 19th century Punch performers, traditionally called "Professors." Many of them are identified here for the first time, thanks to the author's research into newly digitized newspaper, census, and other archival databases. The second is "to explore the significance of the nineteenth-century American Punch and Judy show as a reflection of the attitudes and conditions of its time and place." In furtherance of the first goal, we meet an unprecedented parade of Punch Professors, including Abraham Liebshutz, a wandering Jewish Punchman whom Mr. Howard traces from Poland to England to Maryland to Texas, back again to England and Maryland, then on to California and Australia (where the trail runs cold, although one imagines Liebshutz performing still, somewhere in the Outback); Frederick Townsend Martin, "one of the leaders of New York's elite society... (who) was a serious student of the social problems of his period and also a madcap performer at the parties of the children of his aristocratic friends and relatives"; and Sig Sautelle, who enlisted in the Union Army at age 12, spent 60 years as a Punch Professor and circus performer, entertained thousands of children at once (no easy feat with hand puppets), and abandoned retirement to build and manage a traveling circus that filled 22 railroad cars. Puppeteers often complain that they're the Rodney Dangerfields of the theatre--they get no respect--and this was apparently as true back then as it is today. Many of the accounts of Punch shows that Mr. Howard found never bothered to name the performers. Perhaps it's just as well. Mr. Howard notes wryly that "the best way for a Punch and Judy showman to go down in history was to be accused of a crime"--and a good many were: for public drunkenness, for violating the Sabbath, for assault. The showmen were apparently so disreputable that when New York State passed a statute in 1819 that mandated the imprisonment of "disorderly persons," it included puppeteers--along with prostitutes, drunkards, gamblers, and derelict husbands and fathers. Indeed, Mr. Howard does an excellent job of conjuring the sordid, freakish environments in which Punch often found refuge in his adopted country. For those who instinctively associate Punch and Judy with nothing more boisterous than a five-year-old's birthday party, this will likely be an eye-opener. Punch was popular in concert saloons: "low-class drinking establishments that provided cheap entertainment and female companionship" and that were often the object of police raids. He was at home, too, in the "uniquely American" Dime Museums--contemporarily characterized as "the true underworld of entertainment"--which featured dwarfs, fat ladies, thin men, conjoined twins, double- and quadruple-amputees, "mermaids," and "dog-faced boys" alongside jugglers, ventriloquists, magicians, and snake charmers. (All of which makes Punch's appeal to America's aristocracy that much more remarkable: Punch was flexible enough to perform "blue" or "clean," as circumstance required.) It's in the context of Punch's disreputable digs that Mr. Howard seeks to make good on his second goal: to explore how Punch reflects attitudes of his time and place. Mr. Howard rightly points to casual racism and xenophobia as distinctly American aspects of Punch--"Darkies," "Chinamen," "Indians," Germans, Irishmen, and Jews were all mocked in the show--reflecting the same prejudices then entrenched in popular culture and society at large. But then there's talk of Punch as a response to "the nineteenth-century need for the experience of human solidarity" and "a yearning for unity," of "the resolution of fragmentation into wholeness" and "a time of changing feelings about what it means to be human," of "diversity studies," and a non-committal reference to racism in *Huck Finn* ("some critics have detected racist elements..."). This is the stuff of political correctness and the 21st century academy, and one can easily imagine

Punch's response, he who suffers no one's ego but his own. Put a puppet of the author on stage, and Punch and his stick would make quick work of him, just as Punch has always hobbled the authority figures of his day. There, for better or worse, is the universalism of Punch. He's the eternal child in us: silly and cruel, playful and narcissistic, constantly put upon, the puncturer of pretention, the breaker of rules. Despite this, Punch today seems past his prime. That's partly because the Professors who bring him to life are too often stuck--and have stuck him--in Mr. Howard's 19th century. Punch was never meant to be the museum piece he's become. But when showmen find contemporary ways to express Punch's essence, as some do, then his step becomes spry once more and his future seems, if not certain, then at least plausible.

The hand-puppet play starring the characters Punch and Judy was introduced from England and became extremely popular in the United States in the 1800s. This book details information on nearly 350 American Punch players. It explores the significance of the 19th century American show as a reflection of the attitudes and conditions of its time and place. The century was a time of changing feelings about what it means to be human. There was an intensified awareness of the racial, cultural, social and economical diversity of the human species, and a corresponding concern for the experience of human oneness. The American Punch and Judy show was one of the manifestations of these conditions.

"Recommended"--Choice; "engaging...Howard does an excellent job of conjuring the sordid, freakish environments in which Punch often found refuge in his adopted country"--The Puppetry Journal. About the Author Ryan Howard, professor of art emeritus at Morehead State University, is an art historian. He is the author of numerous articles and reviews on the puppet theater and lives in Morehead, Kentucky.