

Sir John Tenniel: Aspects of His Work by Roger Simpson. Cranbury, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson U P, 1994. 187 pp., 197 illus. ISBN 0-8386-3493-1, \$55.00.

This is the most exhaustive and useful study yet to appear of Tenniel's iconography and its development. By closely examining certain seemingly disparate facets of Tenniel's output, Simpson traces the evolution of a coherent satirical vocabulary that found its greatest expression in the *Alice* books. He views the artist's career "in terms of the conflict between his responsiveness to popular taste on one hand and his impulse to 'improve' that taste on the other" (35). These paradoxical motivations resulted in a widely divergent body of work. Simpson reconciles some of the apparent contradictions in Tenniel's art, showing how certain themes and images reappear in various guises, and connecting his work to a larger satirical tradition.

The didactic qualities of Tenniel's art have most frequently been examined (beginning with Cosmo Monkhouse's early study, *Sir John Tenniel, R.I.*, 1901) in terms of his famous cartoons in *Punch*. Simpson, however, rightly points out that not only does the number of the political cuts (more than 2000) make analysis difficult, but the fact that Tenniel himself rarely contributed to the choice of the subject causes any conclusions other than those based on style to be tenuous at best. At least one critic (Frankie Morris, *John Tenniel, Cartoonist: A Critical and Socio-cultural Study in the Art of the Victorian Political Cartoon*, 1985) has commented on the affinity between Tenniel's cartoons and history painting in the "grand manner" (97), stating that the *Punch* cuts "helped fill the void created by the absence of an officially sponsored, policy-oriented school of painting in England" (98). Oddly enough, however, Tenniel's own excursion into state-sponsored history painting has generally been either overlooked or dismissed as a youthful effort of little significance to his career.

Simpson provides the first detailed analysis of the iconography of Tenniel's two designs for frescos in the Houses of Parliament, the decoration of which was being supervised by the Commission on Fine Arts with the stated intent of using art to improve the moral tone of the nation. He argues persuasively that the visual allegories of "The Spirit of Justice" (1845) and "A Song for St. Cecilia's Day" (1850), as well as many details of their compositions, reappeared frequently in the artist's later work. The disappointing outcome of the project ("The Spirit of Justice" was never painted, and "St. Cecilia's Day" was eventually papered over, while both the designs and the Commission were criticized, ridiculed, or ignored in the press) caused Tenniel to lose faith in state-sponsored art as a force for moral improvement. After completing "St. Cecilia's Day," he joined the staff of *Punch*, where his penchant for neo-classical allegory served the cause of imperialism, and the heroic artisan of his fresco designs became the loutish workman ridiculed in many of his cartoons.

As a *Punch* artist, Tenniel replaced Richard Doyle, who had left the journal because of its increasingly anti-Catholic stance. His own attitude towards