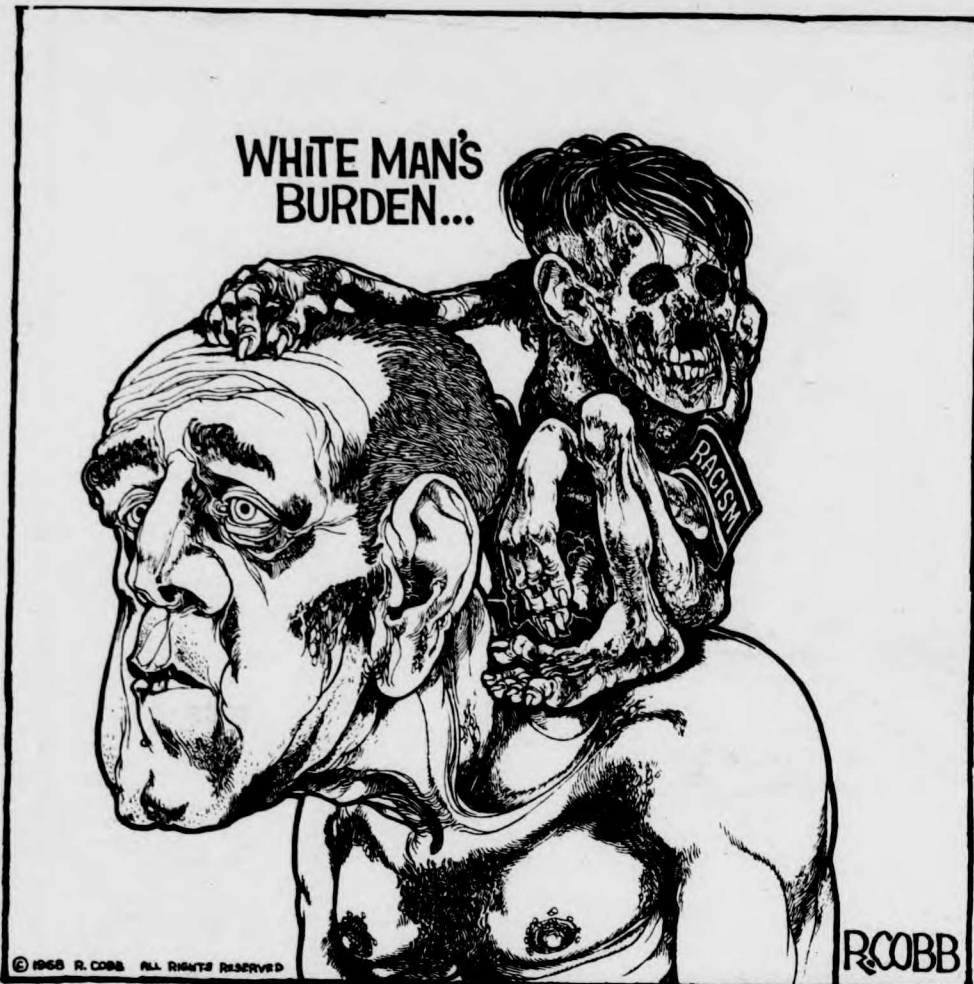


The genius of RON COBB



The art of political cartooning is to protest boldly with wit, and clearly, Ron Cobb is the best. The other top editorial cartoonists — Bill Mauldin, Herblock, Pat Oliphant, Duncan MacPherson of the Toronto Star — are older men, more liberal and less protesting, softer voices in the hurricane of outrage. To be good one needs to be firmly committed and as radical as possible, which is to say, one needs to be Ron Cobb.

Radicalism in terms of Cobb is grass roots radicalism — slicing through the crap and the decay, the institutionalized "acceptable" degree of insanity — a clear sight of our origins and how we fail them, and a return, always, to nature. Cobb is on no man's side, and on everyman's. He recognizes no political outlook as correct — some are merely more expedient in serving a necessary temporary function. But none are more than temporarily expedient, and all are bad if carried to their extremes.

And carrying them to their extremes is what Cobb does, pointing out contemporary logic's failure by extending them to the local, and always undesirable, often horrific, usually tragic outcome. Cobb does it all with a devastating sense of humour, a ghastly irony whose point one can only understand, but whose humour one can only morbidly, or masochistically, enjoy. Cobb claims to deal in fantasies, in distant projections of current trends; He fails to realize quite how true he actually is.

His technique varies — sometimes with the bold brushstrokes sharply contrasting the empty backgrounds, just as often a maze of crazy crosshatching filling every corner of his panel. Sometimes his panels take full minutes to read and to see the details; more likely they are painfully clear at a glance. The best of them are always mutely eloquent, silent condemnations that need no further explanation.

There is nothing Cobb holds sacred, save only the beauty of nature, and it is to his credit that he levels his brushstrokes against hippie and pig, gentile and Jew, black man and white, militant and pacifist. He even goes so far as to decry the artists in one cartoon, as they gather around and

paint Jesus upon the cross: no doubt he had himself in mind.

I particularly like a pair of cartoons Cobb did, that juxtaposed seem to say a great deal about man. In one 1966 drawing, he has two black kids, one perhaps six or seven, the other about four, playing together, and the older one says, "When I grow up, I'm gonna be white..." In the other cartoon, drawn in 1967, he has one businessman, about forty, say to a peer, "Trouble is most niggers want

white skin without havin' ta earn it."

Cobb explained the nature of his subject matter: "It (crisis) attracts me because man — certainly Western Industrial Man — has the ability to build walls between himself, nature and reality. We have developed the capacity to live on a chessboard where a lot of illusory values can be maintained that seem to be real — where definitions reign supreme.

"Too often, the mere fact that man has

words for things, the ability to label and categorize, begins to condition his children to view all reality, to reduce all that is true and real, to that which can be talked about, described, and categorized, and that's a terrible limitation."

I hardly think I need point out the relevance of that remark to EXCALIBUR's readers. To continue...

"But a crisis, one way or another, will bring man face-to-face with his maker, or will bring man face-to-face with his deeper nature. These moments inevitably short-circuit the human nervous system, biologically too, in a way, and put man all together. The categories have to be put aside, and you just feel something... from top to bottom!"

"And these moments, these flashing moments when he's all put together (as Jung says) are the only times when he's really sane. It may be traumatic, but in the long run I would like to see people put together more often."

Cobb dislikes the use of the terms "political" and "editorial" cartoonist, because political or editorial commentary requires a stand, and a stand is what he is against. Paradox, contradiction, the negation of stability, confrontation with the void, is where he believes sanity, and learning, lie.

"Let's not make up our minds," he said. "We can artificially make up our minds, on a functional basis, but let's not close the book. We're just starting to understand ourselves."

He is quite right, and if he may be faulted for the sweeping idealism of his black-and-white problems, let us remember too that the same idealism is the outlook most conducive to optimism. He calls his cartoons unprocessed and patriotic, a curious pair of terms to juxtapose next his cartoons. But that's Ron Cobb.

Ron Cobb's cartoons are available in two books which will soon be available in Canada. The books are Raw Sewage and My Fellow Americans, published by the Sawyer Press.

DAN MERKUR.

