

suppose this is true of experience as well—in describing a world you extinguish it—and in a book of recollection much is reduced to ruin.”

Salter’s memoir divides into two parts. A rough chronology is discernible in the first, to the end of his fighter pilot’s career—“the great days of youth when you are mispronouncing foreign words and trading dreams.” But chronology never calls the shots, and time in this book, as in Salter’s best work, does not order lives so much as it undoes them. The pages on flight (“we dropped from the sky into distant countries”) and on the meaning of heroism and comradeship are superb, in a class with the aviation books of Saint-Exupéry. Of the astronauts Virgil Grissom and Edward White, who died in an accident at Cape Canaveral in 1967 and whom Salter knew, he writes: “Over the threshold they stepped, into their sepulcher. The capsule had become a reliquary, a furnace. They had inhaled fire, their lungs had turned to ash.”

The book splits as the life does. From the air the author falls to earth and undertakes a life of celebrity, in a world of deals and maneuvers and compromise: “I was a *poule* for 10 years, 15. I might easily have gone on longer. There was wreckage all around, but like the refuse piled behind restaurants I did not consider it—in front they were bowing and showing me to the table.” Much of this life is lived in France, which Salter adores, and Italy, and the book celebrates the reality of an image Americans had of Europe in the ’50s, ’60s, and ’70s. This is not the efficient latter-day Europe of Brussels but the worldly-wise continent of Fellini and Antonioni, of Cannes and the Via Veneto, of cafés and parties till dawn, easy passion, practiced enervation, and irresistible clichés—fast drives in open cars on narrow coast roads above the glittering sea. From the “vertical civilization” of Europe, old and deep, Salter hoped to learn what he might hope, what he should do, who he was. In the end he gives up the screen for the book: “It is only in books that one finds perfection, only in books that it cannot be spoiled. Art, in a sense, is life brought to a standstill, rescued from time. The secret of making it is

simple: discard everything that is good enough.” In this book, Salter has kept only what is very good indeed.

—James M. Morris

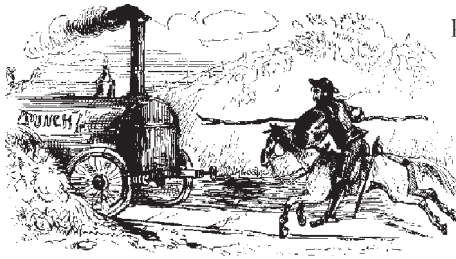
**PUNCH:**  
*The Lively Youth of a British Institution, 1841–1851.*

By Richard D. Altick. Ohio State Univ. Press. 762 pp. \$60

“Who knocked up Jerry Hall?” ran the headline on a midsummer edition of *Punch*, the satirical British weekly and dentist’s waiting-room accessory raised from the dead under new management last year, some four years after declining revenues forced its closure. Which tells you all you need to know about Mr. Punch’s sense of late-1990s humor.

Long gone are the days when the magazine was the alternative journal of record for the Victorian ruling class. Those days gave the world Charles Pooter, the long-suffering hero of that comic masterpiece *The Diary of a Nobody*, first serialized in the periodical in 1888. While Pooter was recounting his misadventures in suburban north London, *Punch*’s celebrated cartoonist John Tenniel (who drew the classic *Alice in Wonderland* illustrations) evoked the drama of Bismarck’s fall from power in the oft-reproduced sketch, “Dropping the Pilot” (1890). Shaped by an editorial board that at one point included William Makepeace Thackeray, *Punch* commanded attention. In spite of its frequently condescending view of the United States, the magazine’s American admirers included Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

In his history of *Punch*’s first decade, Altick, a professor of English at Ohio State University, recounts how the magazine covered issues as varied as the monarchy, the Irish question, the railway boom, early consumer advertising, capital punishment, and the Victorian equivalent of blockbuster fiction (memorably parodied in Thackeray’s series, “Prize Novelists”). He also charts *Punch*’s steady progress from outspoken radicalism to a more measured liberal humanitarianism, succinctly defined by John Ruskin



when he spoke of Mr. Punch's ideal of perfection as "the British Hunting Squire, the British Colonel and the British Sailor."

The great problem with this study (originally prepared for a 1991 London symposium to mark the 150th anniversary of *Punch's* launch) is, as Altick frankly admits, that topical humor so often remains rooted in time and place, inaccessible to subsequent generations. A two-line squib that

prompted hearty laughter over a glass of port in 1841 may require pages of sober exegesis for modern readers. Altick's unremittingly conscientious approach to the task at hand will probably deter the Anglophile general reader, but the wealth of social data, incident, and drawing-room gossip creates a formidably detailed mosaic of Britain's age of empire.

—Clive Davis

## Contemporary Affairs

### *DISUNITED STATES.*

By John D. Donahue. Basic Books.  
256 pp. \$25

In 1939, only one in eight Americans said he or she trusted the state governments more than the federal government. Today, three-fifths of Americans subscribe to that sentiment. In *Disunited States*, Donahue, a political scientist at Harvard University, assesses one of the more broadly accepted tenets of current conventional wisdom: that "devolving" federal power to the 50 states will improve American governance. Donahue is skeptical.

To be sure, devolution has benefits. States tend to be smaller and closer to those they govern (though not as small or close, Donahue suggests, as is widely assumed). Moreover, the states can serve as laboratories for policy reform, at least if they are willing to learn from their neighbors (which is not always the case, as Donahue shows). States can also promote diversity and choice. In the battle to attract families and businesses, New Hampshire keeps its taxes low while neighboring Vermont offers socially liberal policies.

But that battle sometimes goes too far. Donahue recapitulates the stunning string of concessions that states have offered automakers seeking new factory sites. In 1980, concessions cost Ohio \$4,000 per newly created Honda job; by the early 1990s, Alabama was spending \$168,000 for each new Mercedes-Benz job. Even Alabama may come out ahead ultimately, as economic benefits ripple throughout the state economy—but the inducements, the author notes, exemplify the rent-seeking, "industrial policy" behavior that repulses most economists (as well as the conservatives who are

especially partial to devolution). Donahue points out that education spending, which one would expect to be a high priority for competitive states, may actually suffer in a business environment that emphasizes immediate results. Governors and legislators may worry that they will bear the costs and tribulations of education reform, while their successors will reap the benefits.

Devolution has other shortcomings as well. State lines often lead to jurisdictional conflicts, which can impede efforts to track incompetent doctors, regulate air and water pollution, and control interstate crime. Donahue points out that lobbying, a key factor behind citizens' distrust of the federal government, is no less prevalent in state capitals. Indeed, state-level lobbying is often more opaque, less scrutinized, and potentially more insidious. The various interests lobbying the federal government frequently cancel out one another's strength, whereas a locally powerful interest group can hold a state hostage.

Donahue's most intriguing argument is that even if devolution did improve the quality of government, the financial gains would likely be small. "Suppose," he writes, "every last thing that the federal government does, aside from running defense and foreign affairs and writing checks (to entitlement claimants, debt holders, and state and local governments) were transferred to the states—national parks and museums, air-traffic control, the FBI, the border patrol, the Centers for Disease Control, the National Weather Service, student loans, the space program, and all the rest. Suppose, then, that the states proved able to do *everything* that the federal government used to do a full 10 percent more efficiently. The cost of govern-