



City Research Online

City, University of London Institutional Repository

Citation: Priego, E. (2014). Comics Unmasked: A Conversation with Adrian Edwards, lead curator of Printed Historical Sources, The British Library. *The Comics Grid*, 4(1), doi: 10.5334/cg.an

This is the published version of the paper.

This version of the publication may differ from the final published version.

Permanent repository link: <https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/14642/>

Link to published version: <https://doi.org/10.5334/cg.an>

Copyright: City Research Online aims to make research outputs of City, University of London available to a wider audience. Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the author(s) and/or copyright holders. URLs from City Research Online may be freely distributed and linked to.

Reuse: Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge. Provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

City Research Online:

<http://openaccess.city.ac.uk/>

publications@city.ac.uk

INTERVIEW

Comics Unmasked: A Conversation with Adrian Edwards, lead curator of Printed Historical Sources, The British Library

Ernesto Priego*

Keywords: British Library; libraries; comics; comic books; UK; Comics Unmasked; exhibition; art



Jamie Hewlett design for Comics Unmasked at the British Library © Jamie Hewlett 2014.

Ernesto Priego [EP]: *You have worked at the British Library for 25 years and are the lead curator of Printed Historical Sources at the Library. This exhibition [Comics Unmasked: Art and Anarchy in the UK; The British Library, 2 May – 19 August 2014] wouldn't have been possible without your collection...*

Adrian Edwards [AE]: Paul Gravett and John Dunning from COMICA had been thinking of an exhibition on the history of British comics, and they'd been thinking this for a long time. Because the Americans are very good at talking about their history of comic-making, as are the Belgians, the Italians and the French, but we don't do it very much here, and we tend to buy into the American history. And yet there is a very long history here. Paul and John had been thinking for some time about making something that's about British comic-making and celebrates it. They really wanted it to be in a national institution, to give the exhibition a serious focus, to take it away from the kind of exhibitions you get quite a lot - of comic artwork in an art gallery setting - and show it in a different light. I think they had come to the British Library a few times, trying to suggest how that might work. Although they have lots of ideas - since they're experts on comics - they didn't really have either the knowledge of the collections here nor what it was we do when we're trying to build an exhibition, which is actually quite a complex thing.

There are lots of reasons why we do exhibitions, and there are reasons we do them in particular ways. That's why I got pulled in to work with them. My role covers from the invention of printing - I manage people who look after 15th century printing and antiquarian books - right through to British printing today, and I've done exhibitions in the past in that space. I did 'Evolving English' [12 November 2010 – 3 April 2011] which looks at the history of the English language, and unusually here I've worked across the Library in different places, so I know the collections that are currently here at St. Pancras, and I knew them when they were at the British Museum; but I also know the collections that were, up until recently, in Colindale at the Newspaper Library. Which for comics is important because lots of things were there. And I also know the material up in Boston Spa, where I also worked; and there are very few people in the British Library who have worked with the collections in all three sites, and know how they fit together. So I was brought in to work with John and Paul to make this happen.

* Department of Library and Information Science, City University London, United Kingdom
Ernesto.Priego.1@city.ac.uk

So, in terms of who was curating the exhibition, John and Paul are the guest curators whose ideas are behind the exhibition and who as comics experts will be the public face of the show to the outside world. They're writing most of the labels and they have suggested most of the material. But I'm also there as the Library's internal curator, also suggesting material, drawing together the interpretation, and providing the internal links to exhibition build and design, marketing, communications, our learning programme, and so on.

EP: *Right, but they had to have access to the material to know what's in there.*

AE: And know how it all fits together, yeah. So once the three of us came together we then started working on the scope of the exhibition, so that's where we start, with the objectives, what we're trying to achieve. Each of us can have a different preference as to which is most important, but they're really to celebrate the history of British comics and British comic creators, and to highlight the British Library as a place to do research into comics and graphic novels by showing just the range of materials we have here. And to really help, from the Library's point of view, engage with the creative industries, which is something we want to do now.

In the past we've engaged very strongly with the arts and humanities researchers. Other parts of the Library engage with business people, there's science areas and patents engaging with the whole world of science and technology. But at the moment we're trying to focus on building links with the creative industries, so that kind of fits well with comic-making. This thing of inspiring people to look at our materials, to look at things we've got here to get them thinking and creating, is an aim of the exhibition.

The interesting thing is, it's the right time for the British Library to be doing an exhibition on comics. It's the right time generally because people are very interested in them at the moment, and you see comics everywhere, in a way you didn't perhaps five years ago. It's the right time for the British Library because of the closure of the Newspaper Library at Colindale. Historically, weekly periodicals and newspapers were sent to the Newspaper Library at Colindale, and they had been since the 1930's. This led to this situation where, if you were studying something like the *Beano*, you would've had to go to Colindale in North West London to look at the weekly parts and then the British Museum or the new British Library to look at the annuals and any special issues. So for the first time ever since the 1930's, you're able to actually see everything, in one place.

EP: *Does that mean there's no central physical location where all the comics are collected?*

AE: No, the collections of the Library aren't arranged in that way for the most part. There are some historic collections that are kept together, for example the King's Library, the library of George III, is kept together, but generally speaking, as materials come in they're sorted into vulnerable and not vulnerable, then it's arranged by size, so that you're making effective use of the shelf space.

EP: *Is this the size of individual items?*

AE: Yeah. In the past it would've been that all issues of periodicals, as they came in, all went together on shelves that were the right size for that periodical. But now we've moved to the situation where they don't even go together. This means that issue 20 isn't next to 21 which isn't next to 22. As they come in they're going into high-density storage, and everything has the unique barcode so it can be retrieved.

EP: *Some times researchers are not really aware of the challenges that a library would face in organising or deciding the criteria to collect, classify and order comics...*

AE: There are a lot of collection items in the Library - about 150 million items - and when you're talking in those terms, even if you put things on a shelf standing up with a 3cm gap above them, all those 3cm gaps add up to an awful lot of storage space when you're talking about millions of things. We're always looking at more efficient shelving all the time.

EP: *It must be particularly challenging with comics that come in different formats, and then throughout time the physical dimensions of individual titles might have changed...*

AE: Absolutely. But historically things were kept together. The British Museum Library did different things at different times, but there are places in the collection where comics come together historically.

For example, all of the material that went to Colindale, to the newspaper collections, all the weekly comics were dispersed among the collections originally, arranged by year. You went to the shelves for 1969, and everything that came out in 1969 was arranged by title. But if you were to follow the same title for 1970, you've got to go to the 1970 area.

As people became aware of material at Colindale becoming more collectible and valuable, things were taken out of sequence and put into a strong room. They did that for early newspapers, so for all the pre-1830 newspapers. But they also did it for the big comics, because comics were becoming collectible. So it just so happens that because of that, all of the weekly comics were moved, at Colindale, into an area that includes newspapers, but is basically 95% comics in one place, for weeklies, which is quite nice. You could walk the shelves and see not only the famous titles but all the children's comics, which were coming out weekly all through the 20th century, in one place.

Elsewhere, during the Second World War, most British Museum Library staff went off to fight, and they had to put in emergency arrangements about what to do with material that continued to arrive. And after the War, you had a situation where you didn't have any staff. The priorities were rebuilding an economy, not staffing libraries. What was done was, with material that arrived through legal deposit that publishers sent in automatically, some were catalogued and put on shelves in the normal way, but with other things, for quite a long time they said they didn't have the resources to do this, because of the effect of the War. So they just arranged it all by publisher on the shelves. In doing that, they in effect created an area

where there were loads of comics again, because in the late 1940's and all through the 1950's, they didn't think that cataloguing and describing comics was important enough to justify staff resources when there was hardly any staff. They all ended up going in one place.

We've actually got another area where we've got shelves and shelves of things that arrived in the 1940's right through the 1950's, which is almost all comics again, and they're all legal deposits, published by UK publishers. Also, at that time, it was still the British Empire, and material being printed in the British dominions sometimes came in, depending on the legislation in that country. But within that there are some of African comics, which you might not see easily outside.

EP: *Were there cases of British comics being reprinted, say, in India...*

AE: I haven't seen India, but I've seen West Africa, for Nigeria and the Gold Coast...

EP: *And they were in English, obviously. And maybe some local adaptations...*

AE: It's something people need to do some work on.

EP: *Yeah, absolutely.*

AE: There's a nice group of things there. For materials that weren't weekly, there's also the British Museum Library, where they had an area for vulnerable materials, which they call "the Cupboards", which have shelf-marks which begin "CUP" today, and these cupboards were shelves with lockable doors on the front originally, and that's where they put pornography - well, it was erotica really. That's where they put lots of things like...

EP: *Cards and postcards...*

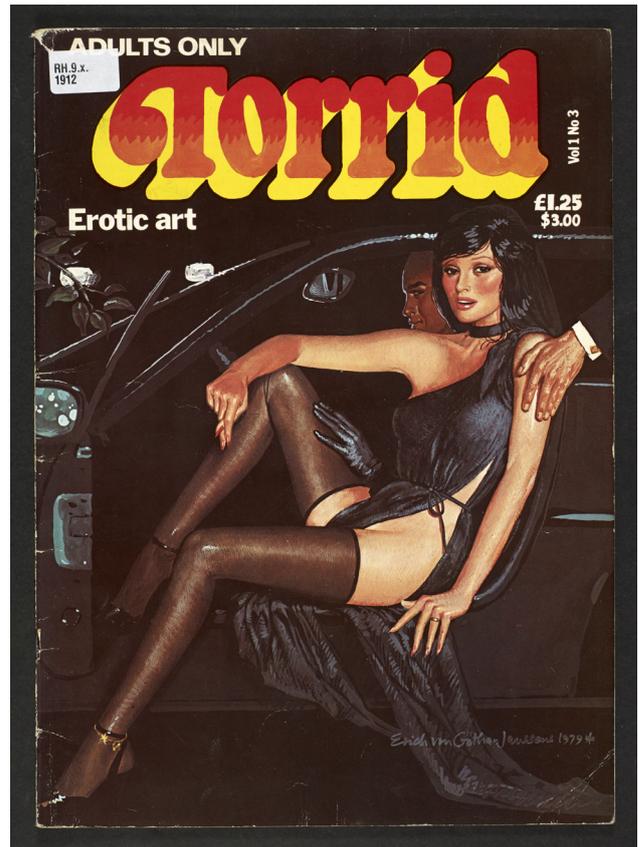
AE: Yeah, odds and ends, really. Things that they didn't know what to do with. But there were quite a lot of comics. So that CUP sequence carried on right up until the British Library came along and started managing the collections differently from the 1970's. If something started in the 60's and 70's it may still be using CUP, so you can walk through these areas where the shelf-marks begin with CUP, and most of them are here below this building at St. Pancras. And amongst other things, and they are amongst other things, you can say "oh, there's a comic" on that shelf, and there's another one there, and there's another comic there, and then there's runs of things. There's a little concentration, a whole mixture of things there. Sometimes people could purchase, on the book market, a small collection of comics, and they would've been put into boxes, and they'll be on the shelves there. But I have to say they are mixed in with a lot of 'top shelf' magazines of naked men and women...

EP: *And some of those publications might contain comics as well...*

AE: They might be comics as well, and in the exhibition we'll pick up on some of that. We'll be looking at how the mainstream magazines, whether they're the ones of women for straight men, like *Penthouse*, often contain comics, or the gay men's one contain comics as well.

EP: *It's interesting that the exhibition seems to have an orientation to a grown-up readership.*

AE: Yes it is, absolutely.



Torrid Erotic Art, 1979, © Erich von Götha - Robin Ray.

There are comics everywhere else, they're all over the place, you just have to find them. At the beginning I did an awful lot of looking through bibliographies and catalogues saying 'have we got it?', and invariably, yes, we have got it. But they're just by themselves, here, there and everywhere, most stuff is all over the place.

Aware of this huge amount of material, we had to develop a theme. We had the idea that it is celebrating British comics and creators, but we needed a theme, we needed to focus in more. What we decided to focus in on was sedition, the idea that comics do things such as push boundaries, challenge authority. They show things that are not usually shown, they're a thorn in the side of authority sometimes. And that whole idea of being a bit naughty: it can be from the very gentle, such as showing children doing things that they shouldn't and getting away with it, and at the other end you've got public protest comics. So we've got that whole range there. And in-between we've got things that depict things that you wouldn't, at that time, be seeing very often elsewhere.

Within erotica we'll have gay sex pictured, which is not that common, and if you think of the heroes and superheroes, we will have them, but we'll be showing where British creators have done something a bit unusual, and made these all-confident, white, muscular, powerful superheroes vulnerable in some way, like showing Superman crying. And usually it's been British writers and artists that have introduced these vulnerabilities to American comic book heroes. So that's the whole idea, and the link with things that are just a bit naughty. I've mentioned erot-

ica, but we've got links with drugs... and sort of pushing boundaries technologically as well. You mentioned earlier webcomics, so we will be looking at how comics expand beyond the printed page and they engage with other media. The obvious things are movies and videogames, but we look at gallery art as well, and music.

EP: *Is this something that the Library is collecting as well?*

AE: Not everything is from the Library's collection. With any exhibition we do we bring in materials. We bring in material that's not within our collection, because obviously every institution has a collection development policy, as to what it collects. One of the things we decided we wanted to do early on in this particular exhibition was to show a bit about how comics are made, to show some original scripts, some artwork at different stages, just to show how this all goes together. We wouldn't have that kind of material in the British Library. The national institutions that collect scripts and artwork are more likely to be the Victoria & Albert Museum, or the Tate, depending on the period and subject. It's not really something we would collect. We need to borrow things in, but we're always keen to borrow things in anyway, because an exhibition that's just of the printed page could be a bit boring.

EP: *Have you borrowed from private collections as well?*

AE: Yes. There are lots of issues in that, what tends to happen with material in libraries, periodicals especially, is they get bound up into bigger volumes, and that means that if you want to show several things from the same title but different years, sometimes you find they're actually bound together and you can only have one opening. Those openings might be too tight along the gutter, and you can't really read what's there. There's a lot of instances where although we have copies in the Library, what we're actually going to show is something we bought in basically, or we borrowed from John Dunning or Paul Gravett. It's just easier. So there's a lot of that. It's just easier to show something that's not our copy, although we have them here for researchers to use, it's about what works in the gallery space; especially when we're mentioning the same title more than once.

We're borrowing material from the Victoria & Albert Museum, from the British Cartoon Archive at the University of Kent, from the Warburg Institute - we're borrowing materials linked to Aleister Crowley from there, because we're quite interested in this link between drugs, the occult, black magic and comics that several people have explored. I think Alan Moore describes himself as a magician these days, doesn't he? So we're really looking at that link there. And to do that we had some materials here that we can show - we'll show what people often call grimoires, these books of spells by John Dee, Elizabeth I's magician. We've got those here so we'll be showing one of those. Aleister Crowley's such an important character, but we don't really have anything like that, but it's at the Warburg, so we're borrowing some of his manuscript spell books, and we're borrowing one of the tarot cards that he designed, which features in comics and graphic novels actually!

EP: *So what's the main historical coverage?*

AE: Most of the materials are 19th - late 20th century; in fact, 60% of the exhibits are 1980 or later. But there's older stuff. There's a lot of background stuff, because comics just didn't arrive out of nowhere, they built on the history of popular publishing, so we'll be showing 18th century things - quite a lot of 18th century erotica, for example, to show how that informed later erotic comics.

You've got to find boundaries because you can talk about everything and in an exhibition you've only got a limited amount of space, so we're sticking with published comics, printed or web, and mostly printed because web stuff doesn't make good use of an exhibition space. People don't want to pay to go and see something they could log into their Internet to look at, so we focus on print. We go back to the beginning of print... just to show, we go back to the 1470's, to ask the question, 'this is a comic, isn't it?'. It's got some angels fighting dragons, it's got sequential panels, it's got speech balloons, it's got everything, a mixture of graphics and storytelling, and it's brightly coloured. You look at it and you think, 'yeah, that's a comic'. It's just to sort of ask the question, 'what makes a comic?' We've chosen to link that to the 1470's, and that's the earliest thing that we're showing, so we're sticking to the idea of things that are printed.

EP: *You've worked in several other exhibitions here at the Library as well. Have there been any specific challenges in this exhibition?*

AE: I think the biggest challenge really is the fact that so much material is in copyright, which means that although we can legally show it - we can show our copies to members of the public and charge people to look at them - there are creators and publishers out there who don't think that's true. They say 'this is our copyright, this is our brand', so there's an element of that, and we know what the laws are in the UK obviously...

EP: *Yeah, this is the British Library of all places...!*

AE: Yeah, we can. There's no problem about that. But that hasn't stopped people challenging us, especially from the United States, where the laws are quite different. But we're not in the United States. And also, the fact that you can't reproduce things very easily once they're in copyright. So John and Paul have jointly written a book to go with the exhibition (Gravett and Dunning 2014), but they couldn't get images of everything in the exhibition, because of clearing copyright. Sometimes it's just 'the answer is no', or 'it's too complicated because too many people have a share in that piece of work', or the publisher just wants to charge too much.

We may be a big public institution, but we don't actually have a lot of money. And exhibitions are done fairly cheaply, they're not something we get a lot of taxpayer's money to use, as we do with building a collection, or engaging with schools and universities. Exhibitions have to be slightly different, they're to one side. So that's been a problem, and that extends to creating graphics - so if you wanted to show a comic, you've got one opening in an exhibition case, but you wanted to show the title on the cover, for example... You'd do that normally by taking a photo of the cover and putting it next to a label: so

you're showing the opening, but you've got a picture of the cover. To create that picture of the cover sometimes it's just been too complicated and so we often can't do it.

EP: *I can totally relate to that. I'm not surprised the biggest challenge in this case it's been copyright and licensing...*

AE: Copyright is by far the biggest thing. Even in like press photos of what we can have in the exhibition.

EP: *Did you not have that same challenge when you had a smaller exhibition in the lobby of children's illustrated books [4 October 2013 - 26 January 2014]?*

AE: It's always an issue, but it's a bigger one for this exhibition because so much of the material is recent. You think of the previous exhibition, "Georgians Revealed" [8 November - 11 March 2014], virtually nothing was in copyright. So we were free to do whatever we wanted, you know, tweet pictures of things in the exhibition, anything like that which we can't do very easily with "Comics Unmasked". So that was the biggest one, I think.

One of the other challenges is the institutional one of us looking at adult themes. And this is a big public institution. So just on a very basic level, you can imagine how conservative newspapers could react to the British Library putting comics that display gratuitous violence or gay sex on display. So we've got to be very careful about this. Things will be taken out of context. We ask people not to take photos in the gallery, but we know they will because people have mobile phones and they do, so we know that people will take pictures out of context. So we've been very careful to say this is an example of how values were different in the 1950's, this kind of storyline was thought acceptable then, but it's not now, and balance it by looking at some things around it. But once people take a photo out of context they can create mischief.

EP: *There's research about the role that libraries played in censoring comics, particularly in the 1950's, at least in the US (e.g. Brenner 2013; Schutten 2013; Tilley 2007). This is very liberal in comparison.*

AE: I'm not aware that the British Museum Library and the British Library have ever censored anything. We've always collected what comes in via legal deposit. Even if something is borderline questionable whether it's legal or not, in the past, if it came into the British Museum via legal deposit, we would've accepted it. It may have gone in a restricted collection, over time values change, and it may not be in a restricted collection now. But that material's always been accessible, and that's why we've got so much of this material that we can show in the exhibition - things that other libraries may have felt that they couldn't keep or even buy. But it's still true though that not everything comes in by legal deposit.

We go out and buy and always have done. When it comes to buying material it's down to a) whether the money was available at the time when it came out, and b) whether the curators who were buying at the time were aware of it, and thought that it was something that they should pursue. There are things that we obviously haven't got, that for one reason we didn't get, but whilst doing the research for the exhibition, I wouldn't say there are any patterns to

that. We found feminist comics, we found gay and lesbian comics, we found comics for the black community...

EP: *It seems like the exhibition will also show a liberal and progressive view of the UK. Would you say it will do things for visitors coming from abroad? What message do you think it will bring?*

AE: People in Britain have always used comics to push boundaries. Really it's reflective of how there always has been free speech and that people have gone out there and made comics. Some of the things that we'll be showing are like --fanzines... they're things that people have made with their own resources at home, and they've found a way of distributing them some way. It's a very democratic medium in that respect.

EP: *The way you present it would make me think, for instance, as a visitor or a user of the Library or someone who lives in the UK or a researcher, that comics are also a very British expression...*

AE: Lots of Western cultures have comics. I spent my teenage years in Italy and I certainly used to read comics in Italy. This isn't about saying Britain is different, it's just about saying, hang on, Britain was doing some very interesting things too. And perhaps that's what's been missed.

EP: *Indeed. You've said it better than what I've tried to.*

AE: Shall I talk you through the sections of the exhibition?

EP: *Yes please, if you don't mind.*

AE: So there are six sections to the exhibition. That's largely dictated by there being lots of different stories we want to tell, but we're limited by a physical space that you can only divide up in particular ways. So although the gallery space is one large cube, there is an entrance area and an area that's a long wide corridor as well, so those sorts of shapes inform how you divide up what you've got on display and it's almost always true that you end up having five, six, seven sections in that exhibition space. That's just what it lends itself to and it's hard to move away from that.

So we've got six. The first is 'Mischief and Mayhem', which is sort of where we look at being naughty, right through to gratuitous violence. But we've also got blasphemy in there as well. I haven't mentioned blasphemy - that's a controversial theme that will come back to haunt us no doubt. We're showing not just comics that push these boundaries, but we've got the backlash against them. If you think of in the 1970's you've got the boys comic *Action*, which was quite violent, so we'll be showing that, but we'll also be looking at how there was a movement against these comics, how W H Smith's refused to stock it. We'll show how the Communist Party of Great Britain brought out a pamphlet against children reading these sorts of comics earlier in the 1950s. Actually, what was going on there wasn't really about comics, it was about American culture overtaking Britain... And we'll have lots of violence and gore in that bit, so we'll have things like *From Hell*, Alan Moore's graphic novel... So that's the first bit.

And then we move onto a section that really looks at how comics reflect society. We're calling it 'To See Ourselves', which is a quote from Robert Burns, "to see our-

selves as others see us". Well we're in Britain, so you have to look at class, which is where we can bring in characters like Ally Sloper and so forth, and look at diversity - so that's where we'll get race, for example... women being portrayed in comics, so we'll see some of how comics that depicted women tended to be drawn by men in the past, and then something's changed, and you look at the situation today where - I don't know what the figures are, but off the top of my head, maybe half of all graphic novels are by women and half by men, or maybe it's more by women than men, I don't know. But something has changed, And just asking questions round that and drawing it out as something to think about. And we'll look at the trend toward autobiography in comics, largely but not only in graphic novels, and you can see all sorts of experiences there. We'll look at issues like anorexia and depression. So that's the second one.

And the third section is about politics. So some obvious things about political satire, which goes back a long time in history. And then there's the sorts of places where people have tried to change policies by commenting on them in comics, for example, votes for women - we'll look at suffragette comics, which is something that's gone on from the 1910's to now really, with Mary Talbot's *[Sally Heathcote]* suffragette graphic novel coming out. So we have all of those. There's a strong movement of anti big-business in comics, so we'll be showing some of that, and we've found some examples going back to the 1880's or 1890's, where they start talking about big business through comics, and we'll follow right through to today. Also within politics is anarchy, and we're sort of focusing there really around *V for Vendetta* and the Occupy Movement.

Then we move onto sex, where we've got erotica of all kinds, and see how that's changed over time. Specifically something changed with the arrival of HIV and AIDS, where rather than just being naughty, the comics started being educational about sex. And then you got to a situation today where they're a part of everyday storytelling. In that section there's a lot of things on display that are a bit awkward, a bit naughty, and that's why that section of the exhibition has been designed so that you can bypass it if you want.

EP: Will there be some kind of warning?

AE: Yeah, the exhibition itself does have a parental advisory notice. But that's not the only place where there will be warnings. I mean, there's the gratuitous violence, and that, I think, is more offensive... And some of the racial stuff... There's an Enid Blyton comic from the 50's - a strip that she did for papers in the 1950's - it's just not acceptable to us today, but obviously it was seen as acceptable then. There's a lot of things that people might find offensive in the exhibition actually, that's what it's there to do - it's to challenge and get you thinking. Within the sex section we'll have for example the... I haven't really mentioned audio... the piece of Rupert the Bear and Gypsy Grandmother in the Schoolkids issue of *Oz*, and with that we'll have audio from the obscenity trial itself, so we can hear some of the things that were said, because unusu-



Judge Dredd: The Complete America, 2003, by John Wagner and Colin MacNeil © With the kind permission of Rebellion.

ally the judge allowed part of the trial to be recorded, and those tapes are at the British Library.

And then we move on to a section on heroes, which we call 'Hero with a Thousand Faces', which is really a transition of two things – it starts off with looking at British heroes, so we look at what heroes were like before comics, so characters like Dick Turpin in penny dreadfuls and so forth. He's really an anti-hero, he's a criminal, and yet he's being romanticised and idolised, and that continues into early comics, and we'll look at the British comics and how their heroes have always been a bit different from the American ones. Their values have always been a bit odd, shall we say, and we've got a tradition of female heroes, whether it's Modesty Blaise or Tank Girl... So it's a bit different from the American tradition. And then we'll go onto the American superheroes, but only inasmuch as they have been reinterpreted by British writers and artists. There are some lovely things there including artwork by Frank Quietly... Frank Quietly artwork for Batman and Superman will be there, some original stuff. So you get a sense that they're doing things that are different - characters being disabled, or in *The Authority* where two characters look suspiciously like Batman and Robin as a gay couple who adopt a daughter, you know, that kind of stuff... twisting the American dream.

And then the final section we titled "Breakdowns". That's where we look at that relationship between drugs,

black magic, and comics, and then how comics really leave the page and people start playing with the panel sequence and moving into three dimensions, and difficult things with panels where you look at them and don't really understand what's happening at first... And then how they leave the page completely. I've mentioned videogames... And there's a selection of webcomics there as well.

EP: *How will you be displaying those, with a screen?*

AE: So they're going to be on screens, and you'll be able to navigate your way through them. They're not a large number - there's about half a dozen, I think. But some of them are going back in time... like *Club Salsa*. So some of these are like early webcomics that were thought lost, but some people we've been collaborating with have managed to bring together the pieces and recreate them. As well as very recent webcomics as well. And thinking digitally, we're very aware in an exhibition of things in book form... you can only show one opening. You can show the cover or an opening with a left and right page. Sometimes a story is complete in that opening, but very often it's not. So we wanted some way that people could read some of the stories in greater depth. What we're doing is at various points through the gallery there are seating areas with iPads, and with those iPad we've arranged with a company called Sequential to provide - within the gallery space only - full comics, and some of those are older comics, some of them are 1980's graphic novels and comics, and some of them are very recent. There's a selection of things that you can sit down and read in full.

EP: *Do you think this exhibition will help people not be confused about terminology, about comics and graphic novels and what that means?*

AE: What we're going to do is ask questions. We're going to say in very broad terms that anything that is sequential art that tells stories using graphics probably in panels, most often with words - sometimes in speech balloons - counts as a comic. But really we're just asking questions and showing things and asking 'is this a comic?'

EP: *That's fantastic.*

AE: I think one of the really exciting things is, talking to people who are interested in comics, one of the things they're really excited about is the fact that it's happening at the British Library. People may not know anything about the British Library, they might not come here, but just the fact that comics are being the subject of a big exhibition in a national institution seems to be quite important to people. And what's important for us from the point of view of being curators here, is making the link between researchers and comics. Now that's something that is, as a curator, is an objective for me, but these are a fabulous resource for understanding what people's values were in the past, whether it's what people found funny, what people didn't find funny, or what was considered edgy in past decades. If you're researching Britain in the 1880's or 1960's or 1970's, I think you've really got to think, well, maybe comics are something I should be looking at, because they tell me quite a lot about what was going on, what people's values were, what the issues were.

EP: *Absolutely. I'm really glad you're mentioning this.*

AE: For some people the exhibition is about contacting comic creators out there and saying 'come and have a look at stuff and get inspiration and go and make your own', but for me it's about bringing all these researchers we've got working at the British Library collections and saying 'hang on, you've not been looking at the comics! You're missing something important here!'

EP: Absolutely, that's great. Has the exhibition changed your own view of the collection? How has working on the exhibition changed things for you?

AE: I suppose the big issue that keeps coming up for us is women in comics. Because there is a sense for people that perhaps don't know comics, because they perhaps read them as a child and then didn't ever really think about them seriously again, they associate them either with children or as a sort of boy's toys. They're the sort of thing that's a very male world and in the past the big commercial comics were run as businesses, so women were at home, men were working, so it's men who are drawing the female characters, writing the female characters. All the way through we've been looking to see... we don't want to skew the exhibition by showing things that misrepresent what things are like in the collections here and what the history of comic-making is, but we have been looking to try and draw out places where women have been involved in writing and creating and publishing comics. That's actually proved quite interesting. There are whole gaps where we can't find women at work, but equally, there are places where we didn't expect to find them. People that have studied the history of comics, they're probably well aware that characters like Ally Sloper was drawn by Marie Duval; but then there's a bit of a gap for many years. But what we did find was some of the erotica that was produced in Britain in the 1950's in the mail order magazines that you used to see in an advert and you sent off these things in the post... some of these were drawn by women - we're showing one called Fads and Fancies from the mid-1950's. Which we wouldn't have expected. It's not really clear who the audience is either. Is it men or is it couples? Maybe it's couples. But it's quite interesting that.

EP: *It's also a very important point that the exhibition presents a story or different stories within it...*

AE: Exhibitions are very different from books. Books have to be comprehensive and footnote everything and try to be completely coherent, have a very detailed, deep narrative that runs all the way through. In an exhibition it's very much a lighter touch than that. You're showing a range of different things, bringing them together and saying 'these tell a story'. But we're really asking questions, 'what do you think?', that's what we're asking people in the gallery all the time. Sometimes it's actual questions, but a lot of the time it's just showing two things, explaining what they are, leaving you to think 'my goodness, what's going on here? This is interesting'.

You can't be comprehensive. You show what you show, and it's a real-life experience going into an exhibition, so you've got to think about pace and variety. There is a risk

with exhibitions of books, that it gets quite monotonous. So you've got to change the pace, you've got to have three dimensional things mixed in with two dimensional things. You've got to have short labels and bigger labels, because otherwise they're tiring as it is, and this exhibition has about 220 exhibits... I guarantee it will get an awful lot of comments like – 'it's too big', 'it took me too long to go round' - that'll be one of the biggest comments, because that's always one of the biggest comments, even when we try and reduce the number of exhibits. And this has fewer things than previous exhibitions. I can guarantee people are going to comment it's taken too long to get round, that there's too much stuff.

You're looking at big and small, you're looking at displaying things different ways, flat and vertical, you're looking at putting in things that support your story but just change the pace. We look at Mr. Punch as a character from the very beginning, just because he's an enduring figure that's right through comics, and he kind of symbolises the mischievous in many ways. So we've got a painting, we've got a statue. In the politics area we look at health policies, government health policies and the reaction against them. There's a point where we've got a Health Education Council anti-smoking campaign where they licensed Superman and he fights the evil Nick-O'Teen. That's nice as a poster, but in front if it we've got the character Andy Capp, another enduring character... It's a little talcum powder dispenser, a plastic thing with Andy Capp with a cigarette in his mouth... And then we've got some audio with Reg Smythe, the creator of Andy Capp, talking on the radio about how the character gave up smoking. It's just that sort of vibe - you wouldn't do that in a book, but it's about, within the exhibition gallery space, changing the pace, making things that you walk across the room to look at. If you're getting tired of reading one kind of thing you can look at something different. It's that mixture.

EP: *You are offering a glimpse into a vast collection and it also contains items from other collections as you said, so it is just a glimpse of a larger universe...*

AE: In marketing terms it's a way of driving business to our collections. Joining up...

EP: *Creating engagement with...*

AE: Our researchers, yeah. Really, researchers and people that are creating things and looking for inspiration.

EP: *...for reference... I think that's an important role still for many artists and writers, but I'm hoping that for researchers - you know, people in higher education as well - helps them see the wealth of source material there.*

AE: There's some fascinating stuff. There's so many things that are exciting about this, but some of the 19th century comics that we found, such as the ones in *The Graphic* and *The Illustrated London News*, you actually have places where, in the Christmas issues, members of the public could write in and send sketches of things, stories that happened to them. And the in-house artists would draw them up as comics. You actually get, from the 1880's, a glimpse of what a young woman on a ship going across the Atlantic felt about being pursued by various gentlemen, because she expressed this in these



"Dolly's Revenge". *The Illustrated London News*. © British Library Board.

sketches that were sent in to, I think it *The Graphic* that one.... And then they drew them up. So it's getting a glimpse into people's lives. And you think 'oh, that's quite interesting'.

EP: *You knew about these items before, or did you discover them in the process?*

AE: Well it's an interesting thing isn't it, really. One of the things I'm aware of with being a librarian-curator is how different research communities know different things. A lot of things from the 19th century are something that the comics world don't know about. So they'll be saying, 'hidden in the vaults of the British Library...' ... Okay, we can see that coming.

On the other hand, people interested in print culture in Victorian England coming from the point of view of printing, or Victorian studies, do know these things exist, but don't realise that they're important. And the two really have never come together. So quite often what we found with, say, Paul Gravett and myself going through the basements looking at things, is I sort of say 'oh, there's these of course', and he's saying 'oh my God, nobody knows about these!'... 'What do you mean, nobody knows about these?' And often he's right. Though we know about them and I know I've shown them to people who do Victorian studies and they've written about them, they've never made that leap to the graphic arts world and comics world. And one of the things I didn't realise was, for example, the

Illustrated London News, sometimes, when it's been digitised, they haven't always included the Christmas supplements, which is often where the comics are. Not always, but it's something sometimes we don't realise. Here at the British Library we think something's been digitised and people are researching it, and we don't realise we've got bits of it that aren't so widely known. That applies to lots of things like Ally Sloper - various libraries have Ally Sloper's Half-Holiday, which arguably is one of the first comics, but it seems that fewer libraries have the summer specials. That's the sort of thing we don't necessarily know. I haven't mentioned... We are showing - possibly - what was the first British comic, I don't know, it's how you define things isn't it? But we're going to ask that question around the *Glasgow Looking Glass* of 1825, which I think it is also going to be the subject of an exhibition in Glasgow next year. They're going to present it as Scotland's first comic, is what they intend to do at the Hunterian Gallery.

EP: *Excellent yes, I've written about The Looking Glass, I think it was really influential...*

AE: Have you looked at our copy?

EP: *No, I haven't...*

AE: Well, ours is just 'as published', just plain lithography, but the copy they have in Glasgow is coloured, and it looks like it may have been coloured at the point of distribution, possibly. So that's a question people are looking at now... how these copies were sold.

EP: *The exhibition will also show us the evolution of print technologies then, of publication, colour...*

AE: Yeah, you'll see the change in print technology. The early exhibit that I mentioned from the 1470's is woodblock printing. It's actually German; it's something we have in the collections, we just thought we'd ask the question 'what makes a comic?' against it. If you skip to the old illustrated things that we have much more in the exhibition, they're British things, you can track wood engraving... I suppose it's the big thing in the 19th century, progressing into lithography, and into chromolithography, and then all sorts of photo-mechanical processes. And lots of different processes now, with different ways of creating web comics - you'll be able to see that.

EP: *Brilliant... we could keep on talking about this for hours...*

AE: Yeah, don't get me started...

EP: *Is there something you'd like to add to conclude the interview?*

AE: It's strange, in my mind, that nobody's ever done this before. No one's ever really had a look at a whole history of British comic-making in one place, in one go. Therefore, we know we've had to be selective and choose stories which we think are interesting, you know, exhibitions have to be story-led. That means there'll be a lot of people who say, 'you haven't got this, you haven't got that, you haven't got the other'. But this is one of the risks of being a pioneer, being the first one, to make it easier for the next person who does an exhibition on comics because they'll be able to come along and see what we did that people felt was wrong. I think the whole thing is just really exciting, we're showing parts of the British Library collection

that we don't normally show, and the buzz we're getting back from the comics community is enormous. There's so much anticipation.

EP: *There's been such a long history of feeling, if not rejected, overlooked; and this exhibition feels like a seal of approval by an institution that is perceived as really cool ... a serious institution that at the same time everyone knows is doing very cool things. Well, at least for many of us in research and for those in the creative industries and business...*

AE: What we need to do is make sure that there's a legacy that carries on as obviously the British Library will be moving onto its next exhibition afterwards, which is going to be *Terror and Wonder: the Gothic Imagination...* (3 October 2014–27 January 2015). And then we've got huge *Magna Carta* celebrations coming up. So we'll be moving on, but there is a legacy here, and that's that through doing this exhibition we've got lots of uncatalogued material finally catalogued, so all of the late 1940's, 1950's material I mentioned earlier has now all been catalogued and is visible in the catalogues.

Lots of things that we missed at time of publication we've now acquired; some things that we got for the exhibition are, when the exhibition closes, going into the collections. Some things arrived early enough that we could get them shelf-marked and catalogued beforehand. But lots of other things will be going in afterwards, and hopefully we can maintain this sort of developing link with comics academics, so we're very interested in maintaining the links we've been building with Roger Sabin (1993, 2001) in Central St. Martin's [College of Arts and Design], for example, because both the British Library and Central St. Martin's are part of the development to create a Cultural Quarter here around King's Cross.

EP: *Excellent. Thank you very much.*

References

- Brenner, R** (moderator) 2013 Busting the Comics Code: Comics, Censorship, & Librarians, American Library Association Conference, Chicago, Sunday June 30 2013. Abstract available at <http://ala13.ala.org/node/11753>. Accessed 25 April 2014.
- Gravett, P** and **Dunning, J H** 2014 *Comics Unmasked. Art and Anarchy in the UK*. London: The British Library
- Sabin, R** 1993 *Adult Comics: An Introduction*. London and New York: Taylor & Francis
- Sabin, R** 2001 *Comics, Comix & Graphic Novels. A History of Comic Art*. London: Phaidon
- Schutte, A** 2013 "ALA Midwinter: The Rise, Fall, and Trends in YA Comics" *The Hub*, 29 January 2013. Available at <http://www.yalsa.ala.org/thehub/2013/01/29/ala-midwinter-the-rise-fall-and-trends-in-ya-comics/>. Accessed 25 April 2014.
- Tilley, C** 2007 "Of nightingales and supermen: How youth services librarians responded to comics between the years 1938 and 1955". PhD dissertation. School of Library and Information Science, Indiana University. Available at http://www.academia.edu/920693/Of_nightingales_and_supermen_How_

youth_services_librarians_responded_to_comics_between_the_years_1938_and_1955. Accessed 25 April 2014.

The British Library 12 November 2010 – 3 April 2011 “Evolving English: One Language, Many Voices”. Exhibition. London: The British Library

The British Library 4 October 2013 – 26 January 2014 “Picture This: Children’s Illustrated Classics”. Exhibition. London: The British Library

The British Library 2 May – 19 August 2014 “Comics Unmasked. Art and Anarchy in the UK.” Exhibition. London: The British Library

The British Library 8 November – 11 March 2014 “Georgians Revealed.” Exhibition. London: The British Library

The British Library 3 October 2014 – 27 January 2015. “Terror and Wonder: The Gothic Imagination”. Exhibition. London: The British Library

How to cite this article: Priego, E 2014 Comics Unmasked: A Conversation with Adrian Edwards, lead curator of Printed Historical Sources, The British Library. *The Comics Grid: Journal of Comics Scholarship*, 4(1): 2, pp.1-10, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/cg.an>

Published: 30 April 2014

Copyright: © 2014 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported License (CC-BY 3.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>.

]u[*The Comics Grid: Journal of Comics Scholarship* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Ubiquity Press.

OPEN ACCESS 