

## Book review\*

**Slater, Stefan and David Macfadyen (2023). *The Political Cartoons of Derso and Kelen: Years of Hope and Despair*. Lund Humphries.**

Just when it looks like there is nothing left to be said about mid-twentieth century political cartooning, a new and innovative study appears to disabuse the notion. With *The Political Cartoons of Derso and Kelen*, Stefan Slater and David Macfadyen have broken new ground, emphatically, exploring the life and work of little-known Alois Derso (1888–1964) and Emery Kelen (1896–1978), as they chronicled the life of the League of Nations and the emerging United Nations, c.1920-1946, caricatured the statesmen of inter-war Europe, and fostered a cartooning internationalism of remarkable creativity.

As with all ‘forgotten’ geniuses, one always must ask ‘why’ the work of two such talented and prescient individuals has largely been lost to the historical record. In providing a brief answer, and without labouring the point, Slater and Macfadyen put their finger directly on two major historical and historiographical points that have escaped many of the most dedicated of comic art and cartoons scholars to date:

It may be that their transnational careers led no one country to regard them sufficiently as its own to document their lives and work. Like many Central European artists with extraordinary careers in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, they fell through the cracks of art historical narratives (p. 15).

That the lack of a *national* ‘home’ is a great impediment to the understanding of Derso and Kelen is an indictment of the way the scholarly field has been dominated by the *Imagined communities* (Anderson, 1983) underpinning so much comic art history since the very period of the two cartoonists’ greatest contribution. It was the assumption that nations were naturally occurring entities that inspired President Wilson’s naïve belief that a League of Nations could prevent war and ensure peace; something that the Austro-Hungarian-born Derso and Kelen could probably have helped him approach more critically. Derso and Kelen’s Magyar-German-Jewish heritage – the former born Alajos Dezsö-Deutsch; the latter Emerich Klein – is redolent of the late Habsburg dual monarchy, where ‘nation’ was a fluid category, imposed to a considerable extent by a bureaucratic state that was based paradoxically on a dynastic and local, not national, principle, something that is now so apparent in the best scholarship of that multi-ethnic empire (Cole, 2007; Judson, 2016; Reill, 2020). Both loyal servants of the emperor during the Great War, they departed the new, post-Trianon Hungary “in all likelihood to escape the persecution of Jews that followed political upheavals in the country” (p. 16) – upheavals that saw the toppling of the Habsburg crown, the establishment of a democratic republic, a period of Soviet communist government, and a violent right-wing reaction under Miklós Horthy’s ‘Regency’, all within the space of sixteen months in 1918-1920.

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Slater and Macfadyen place this context in a very finely crafted chapter on “Introducing Derso and Kelen”. Readers are given a real impression of the cosmopolitan cartoonists’ subsequent peripatetic careers, in Munich, in Bavaria for Kelen (hardly more stable than Hungary at the time), and then Paris, where Derso had been living; before the two Hungarian expatriates eventually met-up in Zurich, in the press bar in Lausanne in 1922. That this was a conference convened to determine the fate of the post-Ottoman Republic of Turkey, held in Switzerland, and attended by French, British, Italian, Japanese, Greek, Romanian, Serbian, Croatian, Slovenian and Soviet delegates – and that the two cartoonists were contributing to papers in Paris as well as Budapest and Zurich – makes the transnational context for Derso and Kelen as clear as it possibly can be.

That the pair were also ‘duettists’, who worked simultaneously and symbiotically on the same cartoon, underscores the lack of easy categorisation for Derso and Kelen, in an age of great heroic *individuals* like David Low, Jehan Sennep and Rollin Kirby. Indeed, it is possible that – with the exception of the Soviet ‘Kukryniksy’ trio, that is, Mikhail Kupriyanov, Porfiri Krylov, and Nikolai Sokolov – Derso and Kelen constitute the only example of a cartooning/caricaturist collective active “in the history of art” (p. 18).

With the essential context of the cartoonists established, the chapters that follow present a captivating story in vivid prose and even more vivid imagery. The political and diplomatic context for Derso and Kelen’s commentary are well fleshed-out, as are the essential cultural touchpoints for their work. In Chapter 2, “Political puppet show in Lausanne”, it is hugely gratifying to see the *Guignol* tradition of puppetry in France, as well as the British *Punch* and the Turkish *Karagöz* forms linked to the cartooning work under analysis – these kinds of trans-media linkages have been crucial to the best scholarship of recent years (Harder & Mittler, 2013; *Ridiculosa*, 2022).

The collective nature of the Derso and Kelen imagery in Chapter 3, “Keepers of the peace and purse”, is marvellous to behold, as statesmen (and women!) appear perfectly caricatured in imagined séances (p. 31), battues (p. 33), boxing-matches (p. 33), dances (p. 36), and exhibitions (p. 37). The contemporary delight in identifying key individuals amongst crowds of top-hatted types is palpable, and we can imagine the enjoyment of inter-war readers being almost on a par with more contemporary enthusiasts for Martin Handford’s *Where’s Wally?* work. It is quite remarkable to see how the twin cartoonists managed even to make financial matters entertaining (p. 39 and Chapter 4, “From Adam and Eve to the promised land”, in particular), given so much of the international scene was dominated by tariffs, trade, currency, and other concerns.

The relatively playful period of Derso and Kelen in Switzerland is shown up by Slater and Macfadyen for what it truly was: a gilded age that solved few of the underlying issues affecting the likelihood of an enduring peace. “But will there be peace in our time?” is the title of Chapter 5, “But will there be peace in our time?”, and is itself linked both to Neville Chamberlain’s declaration of 1938, and Kelen’s 1963 autobiography *Peace in Their Time*. This was the period when the “years of promise and hope” were replaced “by anxiety, disillusionment and despair” (p. 59). But as so often, what the authors demonstrate is that moments of crisis are perfect fodder for the great cartoonists, and Derso and Kelen’s ability to make play of modernism (pp. 69, 72) as well as grand history painting (pp. 70-72), indicates their talents as artists as well as comic artists. Slater and Macfadyen also deploy cartoon work by other contemporaries in a very considered fashion. This is true throughout the book, with examples by David Low (p. 14) and Will Dyson (p. 9) appearing early-on, but is particularly notable in Chapter 5, as Sir Bernard Partridge’s *Punch* work and Sydney Strube’s for the *Daily Express* sits very well alongside the Derso and Kelen comments on the events of the day.

The 1938 move of Derso and Kelen to the United States – to Chicago, and the new magazine *Ken*, founded by Arnold Gingrich (1903-1976) – happens part-way through Chapter 6, “War

again” (p. 91) and is drawn-out as the pair begin by sending material across the Atlantic, and then relocate to America themselves. As Jews, the two men were particularly aware of rising antisemitism in Europe and the US, and the crisis unfolding in the British Mandate of Palestine, and the Biblical themes of much of their early wartime work (e.g. pp. 110-111, 121) is well handled by Slater and Macfadyen. With the birth of the United Nations (Chapter 7, “‘Uncannily like the first’, The United Nations is born”), the style perfected by Derso and Kelen in Switzerland was allowed to shine. The multi-character cartoons and watercolours of the new era being just as effective as those of the old.

The final chapter – Chapter 8 – is a conscious return to the very purpose of the book in the first place, and is titled appropriately “Appreciation”. This is where Slater and Macfadyen the scholars shine best, I think, having largely functioned as editors and companions to the genius of Derso and Kelen for the majority of the book. Their appreciation for their subject is truly laid bare, and they answer in comprehensive fashion their self-posed questions: “What makes them special, and, in some respects, unique as cartoonists and caricaturists? Did anything influence their work beyond their innate ability? Was their work influential? What were they like as people and what else did they accomplish?” (p. 128). Thankfully, the authors answer all of these questions without resorting to jargonistic language (of the kind one finds in a lot of comics studies work), and instead state their case clearly and in straightforward fashion. The cartoon as “a force for public good” (p. 134) is an attractive assertion that definitely has continued weight and was quite apparent to the cartoonists’ contemporaries. That the work of Kelen, in particular, attracted the attention of the historian Barbara Tuchman is enough to recommend it to posterity.

Mention of Tuchman is useful as a point of broader emphasis about the importance of *The Political Cartoons of Derso and Kelen: Years of Hope and Despair*. As with so much of the foundational literature on, e.g., *Puck* (Kahn & West, 2014), the *San Francisco Wasp* (West, 2004), Joseph Keppler (West, 1998), and more besides, this new perspective on Derso and Kelen comes not only from outside the academy, but from outside the usual suspect disciplines of History, Literature, or Media Studies. Slater and Macfadyen are medicos (I’d say ‘retired’ but does one ever really ‘retire’ from such a vocation?), with a very distinguished background in aspects of practice at the general and international level. Their sophistication as scholars and authors, and their particular attention to matters international, are well evidenced in *Derso and Kelen*, giving the book a nuance not often seen in cartoon studies. Moreover, as they themselves point out in gracious “Acknowledgments” and “Preface” sections, authorship is built upon the hard work of a great many others whose names do not appear on the front cover. It is instructive for the aspiring historian of cartoons and comics to go through just how many archives – on both sides of the Atlantic – form the basis for this study. Materials from Princeton, Lausanne, Canterbury, Geneva, Appleton, and other sites make the book the in-depth and comprehensive study that it is; exemplary in terms of the serious business of analysing comic art. The names of the archivists and private individuals who have supported their work are duly noted as they should be, not only out of courtesy, but as a signpost for future students of the Derso and Kelen *oeuvre*.

Because, as Slater and Macfadyen make clear throughout, this is not meant to be the last word on these cartoonists. It may very well prove to be the definitive study, but their purpose in rescuing Derso and Kelen from the condescension of posterity is to inspire further work on their lives and careers, and the events they sought to chronicle. With *The Political Cartoons of Derso and Kelen* as a model and a guide (and the superb production values of Lund Humphries and the designers as a model), we can look forward with confidence to what is yet to come.

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